

Dreamwalker

By Michael Broh

Part 1

1

Life is a dream. This much we know. Epimetheus Halfstep hardly needed to teach me that. What he did teach me, well, perhaps we get ahead of ourselves.

2

The story is true. All of it. Most of it. Most of the story is true. Was true. Maybe all of it was. Or he was mad. Perhaps we both were. Are.

He told me the story yesterday. A lifetime ago. My father, Epimetheus Halfstep. A man who never lived.

I have seen the evidence, buried in a dream. Heard the evidence. Known the evidence. Evidence swirling about an empty room, buried inside a dream. In a second floor apartment, buried inside a dream. For sixty years I poured over it. For a lifetime. Dedicated a life to the study of evidence which never existed.

That was last night.

Today, he never lived.

3

Epimetheus Halfstep kept a journal. Sometimes. Sometimes Epimetheus Halfstep kept a journal. Sometimes he buried that journal in a dream. Sometimes he burned it. He burned it because a journal should be static. The words set down in a journal should remain as they were written, etched in permanence that

one might use them later to aid in memory. The words of a journal should be familiar to the journalist. Familiar enough to nudge additional memories.

Like the memories of old friends, there should be some small recognition of their inception. Perhaps no more than *I don't remember it exactly that way, but I do remember being there*. At a minimum, the journal should be written by the journalist. Sometimes Epimetheus Halfstep burned his journal because the words were unfamiliar. Sometimes Epimetheus Halfstep burned his journal because, although it sounded like him, he could not remember writing it. Sometimes Epimetheus Halfstep burned his journal because it was written by a madman.

Stubbornly, the journal remained.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep

The job is definitely turning out more pleasant than I expected. The conditions here are reasonable, and the experience feels extraordinarily real. It is almost as if I am living in a real place, with real people, but without any of the struggles and challenges that the rest of them are subject to. I dare say, I almost feel god-like.

Of course, the pressure is high. There are times when I feel The Company lays the full burden of productivity upon us. It is a burden I welcome, of course. All of us do. Still, there is only so much we can do as life therapists. There are times when I feel they expect too much of us.

There are just so many variables. It's not that I haven't been able to meet expectations. Over the course of a dreamwalk, I am always able to get the jobs done. But there is so much clean up. I keep losing sight of how much impact even the smallest variable can have.

On the one hand, I really enjoy playing around with the detailed stuff, trying to see where tiniest interference can bring about the longest impact. On the other, as soon as I succeed with some detail, I see the billions of details that I have *not* interfered with and become overwhelmed with the impossibility of it all. Or worse, make some tiny change that I can't imagine would have an impact anywhere, and it has such a huge effect that I spend years cleaning it up.

Still, there seems to be a sort of inertia that drives all these details together. When I am able to just relax and watch the rivers flow, I'm usually filled with confidence. Confidence that there *is* a greater force at work. The problem comes when I catch myself worrying about the effect of each electron in each droplet of water upon the flow of one of these rivers.

Still, I am learning to relax. See the forest for the trees, so to speak. The number of electrons may be overwhelming, but it is the mass of them, the patterns, that matter.

I do feel I am getting better at this.

4

My father's early journal entries are fairly consistent. The entries written before my own story began. Before what he called *the anomaly*. Later, the journal is all over the place and missing

so much. He tried to tell me the whole story, but even his memory was spotty and jerked, jumping from one reality to the next, never sure which truth was real.

Perhaps the story of my father and I, of Epimetheus Halfstep, a man who never lived, begins more properly in another part of the archive. Words dotted with fear hiding around corners from the rest. A carefully worded story meant to shed light and evade at the same time. Confessions.

Confessions that, like Epimetheus Halfstep himself, never existed.

From what I understand, my father had no access to his formal records, including the confessions. Formal records that, in any case, no longer exist. Yet, he remembered them. He remembered them, and I saw his memory. The bits and pieces that survived, anyway. They are incomplete at best. One sided conversations where his words were no doubt coded to keep himself out of prison. Or worse. Yet, they do help form a picture, fill out a story, missing pieces.

You see, my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, was a criminal.

And Epimetheus Halfstep got caught.

He wasn't clear about *how* he got caught. Only *that* he got caught. That one evening he reported for duty, only to find a couple of suits from Internal Investigations waiting for him. They had with them the complete collection of his reports from the last six years, as well as other data of their own. They instructed him to accompany them to their office where they might ask him a few questions.

From a confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Hubris? Oh, I don't know. Maybe, I guess. I mean, I suppose everyone has some level of that, sort of simmering below the surface, just waiting for the opportunity to show itself. I don't think I had, or, I suppose, *showed*, more hubris than anyone else would have in the same...I just, well, got a little carried away, that's all. Just, well, carried away.

The thing you can't forget, though, the thing I beg you to remember is that I never stopped working for The Company. Never. I was always, *always*, working for us. Yes, I know I took advantage, took something for myself. I said before and say again there are sorry few who would not have done so. I dare say The Company would not continue to thrive if we filled ourselves with a bunch a cowering sheep who didn't know how to take a little something for themselves when the opportunity presented itself. Not that...no, I don't mean to say that I...very well. This isn't coming out right. What I mean to say is that I thought, I really thought, *still think*, that helping myself would help The Company. The Company is my family. My life. If I succeed, we succeed. Didn't Sarah Maddy herself say that?

What I don't think you can appreciate, what no one who hasn't *walked* can appreciate, is the sheer scale of time. It just...it affects how you see everything. In the six years I've been dreamwalking, I feel like I've lived upwards of 200,000 years. No. Not just *feel like*. I *have* lived that many years. If you haven't walked, you just can't...what, yes, of course, I know. I mean, we all have the dreams. But you forget them. I mean, honestly, you kinda sorta feel like you've lived a life, but how many details can you remember? Because I can remember those walks as well as you remember your daily life. Your *real* life. And

I'm...yes? No, of course. I don't mean to...all I mean to say is that it's just different. Until you've spent a night walking, or a week of nights, until you can remember hundreds of lifetimes in less than a year, not a haze of vague memories, you understand, but true, honest to god actual lifetimes, until you've done that, I just don't think you can understand the impact.

Not that I ever minded. This job has been the greatest of my life. The most rewarding, too. I really believed in, still believe in the cause. The Company is doing good work, and life therapy is essential to keeping that work alive. I'm proud to be a part of it. Some of the things I said were just, well, you have to see them in the proper light. You have to see things from my point of view. Or at least from the point of view of another walker. The fact that I...well, all I'm saying is that anyone else would have done the same thing in my place.

Oh, yes. Sorry. So, yes, I can certainly...just...where am I supposed to start?

5

Where indeed?

My father was a dreamwalker. His proper title was *Life Therapist*, an occupation as non-existent this day as the corporation that hired him. As my father himself. Each evening, employees around the world settled in to sleep. To dream. To dream a life. Each evening, my father would navigate that world, make subtle changes to the dreamlives of the employees. Leave them to wake, their memory of the dreamlife spotty and scattered, but inspired to be more like whatever it was the corporation wanted them to be.

The archive is filled with reports. Drafts, mostly. Millions of them. They are, much like our lives themselves, largely repetitive and boring. Unremarkable. They are little more than short assessments, each comprising the reduction of an entirety of a lifetime to a few sentences. Sometimes to no more than a thought. Lifetimes of love, hate, care, pain, accomplishment, adventure, and, well, all that, reduced to what rarely amounts to more than one hundred words. Each report the story of a life simplified into a few images, perhaps one memory, a single inspiration to get the dreamer through the waking day.

Well. Life is a dream. This much we know.

Maud Reznik 734

Maud experienced several breakout moments with some degree of impact. Notably, she spent ten days taking care of her young nieces, which appeared to give her great joy. She also saw some success in helping an injured dog, which she succeeded in nursing back to health. The dog survived for many years. Even during these exceptional moments, however, she continued to question her value and mire herself in self-doubt. While the breakout moments brought with them some risk, there can be little question but that the overwhelming impact of her dream remained directed toward temperance and ongoing reduction of the arrogance that has so plagued us at home. Estimated success: 84%

Olivie O'Hannagan 9112

Olivie enjoyed a successful career and pleasant life. She was well prepared for her period of fame, and appropriately

disheartened by the inevitable frustration and dissatisfaction that followed. I think we can feel optimistic that this approach will successfully dissuade her from her current ambitions. Reuniting her with her estranged daughter later in life should, in my opinion, wake her with positive feelings toward family, and negative ones toward her ambitions. Estimated Success: 91%

6

Life Therapy. Nudges, shoves, encouragement. Reports. Such was the life of my father, Epimetheus Halfstep.

For what amounted to nearly six years without a break, he lived entire lifetimes, night after night, in the dreamworld. It is true, of course, that everyone did. Everyone at his corporation lived an entire life every night. The difference for my father was that he *remembered* it. Not just vague images and feelings, stories and visions he could not quite get hold of upon waking, but complete memories as if he had truly just added one hundred or so years to his life. Every night.

I have done it, once, and can hardly fathom the toll it would take to last as long as he did. The exhaustion of waking up, knowing the insignificance of the hundred or so years you just spent, and facing another hundred the following evening, seems to me daunting at best. That my father lasted as long as he did is a credit to his strength, his endurance.

Even exhausted, even as his mind started to slip, even as his strength began to wane in the face of the immensely high expectation, my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, showed the strength of ten.

Never once did he fail to do his work. Never once did he fail to do his best with upwards of one thousand assignments per walk. Even as he felt himself falling apart, he pulled himself together to serve his masters. Why he did so is not clear to me. He hardly had time to tell his story before I killed him. Perhaps another night might have deepened my understanding. Perhaps another night might have given me the chance to ask more questions, get to know him better.

Alas.

Yelena Treloar 6234

6234 continues to excel at their work, requiring only small nudges to ensure continued quality. To date, those nudges have largely been small confidence boosters. Yelena Treloar provided ample opportunity for such nudges. I was able to keep her buoyed with a series of minor promotions, accented by some level of athletic success of her children. A few recognitions along the way should continue give 6234 that sense of success which has served them so well to date. Estimated success 99%.

7

Even at the length of these short abstracts, the task of going through them all as a group is daunting at best. Even with sixty years of study, I hardly scratched the surface.

Whether the suits from Internal Investigations read them personally, or delegated that dreadful task to their subordinates, is something I don't know, though I suspect the latter. They should

have. Had they had any interest in my father's work, they would have.

Adam Fertig 3110

My efforts today with Adam Fertig largely involved the struggles of poverty, in an attempt to temper the ongoing arrogance that has followed the promotion of 3110. Adam suffered a succession of painful experiences, sometimes as a result of his own actions, and sometimes at random. I saddled him with a fairly difficult childhood followed by a series of missed opportunities, ultimately culminating in a life of dissatisfaction and struggle. I am hopeful of a sense of humility upon waking that may well last several weeks. A few more reminders over the coming weeks should have lasting effect. Estimated success 78%.

8

Perhaps because they had skipped the reports, or maybe because they just did not care, the investigators hearing my father's confession seemed woefully uninitiated in the job duties of their subject.

It mattered little.

The suits from Internal Investigations didn't really care about how well Epimetheus Halfstep did his job. They cared about two things and two things only: How was the anomaly created, and could it be duplicated? For, if some subordinate could change his reality accidentally, what was to stop his masters from doing so with impunity?

For them, the reports were merely background. And tedious background at that.

From a confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

How did I...well, I'm not sure I *did* know at first. At first it was just sort of a, well, sort of a *feeling*, I suppose. Like I felt a connection.

Sorry?

Oh, yes, connection to the...well, I was going to say to the kid, but really, that first feeling, if that's what you're..., then yes, the first feeling of connection was with my...*the* mother, woman, the child's mother. Not that...you see, even in a single night you can feel serious connections with your assignments. I know it's only one night, but it *feels* like a hundred. You spend that much time around somebody, and you're bound to feel some sort of, well, connection, I suppose. So, the feeling is pretty normal, I think. I've talked with other walkers about this and... sorry, what? Oh, yes, of course. I didn't mean to...in my *own* experience then, I have found that some feeling of kinship with my assignments is fairly predictable.

What was unusual in this case, memorable, if you will, was that I was sure I had never seen the woman before. It was one of those odd connections like...let's see...have you ever, no sorry, I'm doing that again. Alright. From time to time, in my life, my waking life, I have met someone for the first time and felt as if I already knew them. Even before my work as a life therapist, I sometimes felt a connection with a stranger for no apparent reason. I suppose their face reminded me of someone, or their

voice, or demeanor, but it was unconscious. At least, I always thought so at the time.

That was how I felt with this woman. I did not know her, did not recognize her, but felt as if the two of us were connected somehow. It caused me to stare somewhat, I'm afraid. And the girl, too, though, perhaps to a lesser extent. At the time, I simply assumed they reminded me of someone. Someone from home, or perhaps another assignment, someone I had met in my years as a walker. Not that I ever would have remembered...honestly, I've spent hundreds of thousands of dream years as a life therapist. I'm sure I've met millions of people in that time. The idea that I would remember all of them is, well, I don't mean to be insulting, but the idea is preposterous. I just assumed she was similar to someone else, someone I had an experience with and had just forgotten.

What I must say, however, what I suppose is more important, is that, as I stared at her, them, the two of them, I felt a sense of....perhaps it was happiness. I'm not sure. Maybe it was hope. Something in that moment stayed with me, made me feel different, made me feel...well...instead of going home tired and worn out after a particularly hard walk, I went home feeling energized, with purpose. Not a specific purpose. Not yet. I had not yet...well...I just felt a sense of...well being, I suppose.

9

There was the journal, of course. Sometimes there was the journal. Sometimes, it had been burned. It was not much help in any case, written, as it was, by a madman. A madman that I killed. A madman who never existed.

When there was a journal to be read, it distinguished itself from the reports by focusing on Epimetheus himself. He talked of his assignments, it is true, but never in a way meant to record data. That was for the reports.

He knew not why, he knew not how, and yet Epimetheus Half-step was troubled. Something in the midst of his consistent and predictable work had changed. True, it was only a feeling. True, he had met so many so-called people in his thousands of years wandering the dreamlife that he was bound to suffer from confused memories, feelings of intimacy that crept from nowhere as a result of a forgotten friend, the eyes of a lover, the scent of nostalgia. Yet, the feeling increasingly took over his thoughts.

He did his best to put the trouble aside, of course, just as you and I do. He dismissed it as *déjà vu*, as little more than a *funny feeling*. He got back to his work. Surely a feeling repressed is a feeling destroyed.

Surely.

Laura Raphael 7438

7438 should be effectively realigned. As disappointing as their setback in engineering is, I believe I understand the underlying causes and have effectively mitigated them. Previously, we had believed that their vigorous interference was a result of a creative mind with insufficient outlet. I now believe their methods are rooted in the training of their youth, and am actively working to undo it. Today, I built their dreamlife around a series of lucky incidents, many of which were undermined if she attempted to affect change or dive deeper into the underlying causes. As a result, I believe they will have a new solid base of

trust in existing paths, and a reduced desire to interfere with successful processes. There may be some loss of creativity as a result. We should revisit soon. Estimated success: 83%.

10

Although the suits from Internal Investigations seemed to care little for the reports themselves, they are not without insight. He had been told with no ambiguity that his reports must be clear, concise, and to the point. *Who was it, what did you do, and will it work?*

Yet, even in the short abstracts that served as the entire record of his work, Epimetheus Halfstep was not always able to fully separate himself from his assignments.

Taro Acquafredda 451

451 has been a significant challenge. We've been trying to get them a little more focused on their work. Previous efforts to show them a life that was only successful as a result of focus and hard work have brought disappointing results. Reports consistently showed 451 waking up feeling pleased at the memory of the great life, and spending the day reminiscing over the dream, losing even more focus on their work. A new tactic may bring some moderate success.

Today, I focused on the negative impact of distractions within the dream. A missed train meant a missed wedding and lost love. A distracted bout of daydreaming resulted in the tragic death of a friend. Sadly, an inherent optimism tempers all of my attempts. Again and again, throughout the dreamlife, I let his

distractions lead to tragedy. Again and again, Taro recovered swiftly with a wink to the fates, and smiled his way through the next day. For every teachable moment, there was a contrasting moment of apathy to undermine it.

I've concluded today's dreamlife with a car crash leading to many weeks of his own physical suffering before finally succumbing to death. His final thoughts before the dream concluded were of his killer's apology. The hapless driver had stopped by his hospital room to beg forgiveness. She had been watching the moonrise, she said, and been distracted by its beauty. Taro was unforgiving as the unbearable pain finally took him to the end. Estimated success: 47%

11

When asked to push forward until you collapse, of course, you must ultimately fall. So it was that my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, tired, stressed, nearly exhausted, at last paid the toll for his years of service.

Epimetheus Halfstep met himself in a dream.

He did not realize it at first, did not realize he had met himself. He merely spoke to a woman with whom he felt a connection. He introduced himself and made small talk as she watched her daughter play in the park. Not until later, until he had finished his reports, until he was lying in bed, in the real world, feeling for the first time in weeks that he might be blessed with a good night's sleep, did he wonder if the daughter, the little girl playing in the park, might have been he.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Today was hard. One failure after the other. It took nearly everything I had just keep the poor sots stable. The whole day I felt as if I was struggling to keep up. Not that everything I tried failed. Almost everything I tried worked to some degree. It was just that none of those things had a big enough impact. Like I was trying to keep the water from rising, but only had a teaspoon to work with. I kept the water from rising much, but I was scooping so hard and so fast and could hardly see the impact.

970 assignments, and I don't think more than 40 cracked 70%. The whole walk felt like a slog. Like dragging my feet through muddy fields, never sure I would make it across.

Before I left, I had this long moment, just sitting. I sat in a park, thinking about everything that had gone wrong, thinking that maybe I'm not cut out for this. I don't know. Everything today was so hard. I just don't know how long I can do it. As I sat in the park, though, contemplating my failure, I saw a mother and child walking to a playground. The woman was beautiful in a way I find hard to describe. Comforting, I suppose. As if I had known her my whole life. And the girl filled me with hope. I can't quite explain it, but it was as if, even as I poured over the failures of today, this girl was filled with hope for tomorrow. I suppose children will do that. Coming home I felt a renewed sense of optimism. Perhaps tomorrow will be better.

12

Though dreamwalking be tireless work, dreamwalkers are not tireless themselves. Like you and me, they tire, they wear down, they exhaust. It wasn't that the work itself became more difficult. Over six years, the work of Epimetheus Halfstep remained unremarkably stable. Some subjects were easily altered, some were greater challenges. The balance between the two, and those in between, was as consistent as it was predictable.

That should have been a blessing. It should have been comforting to understand his workload, to have a fair expectation of what was waiting for him night after night, week after week. And it was. A blessing. His mind was not troubled by boredom or consistency. Epimetheus Halfstep was not stuck in a rut, dreaming for adventure while feeling tied down by his career. He valued the consistency in his work and knew it was that, as much as anything, that kept him sane.

Until it didn't.

When the hard days began to outnumber the easy ones, my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, fell victim to an hallucination. He imagined that one of the imaginary creatures in the imaginary world where he worked was no less than the imaginary version of himself. He imagined that he had somehow managed to split himself. That while he was navigating the dreamworld, performing life therapy on his subjects, he had somehow become a subject himself, a subject he could meet, could talk to, could *affect*.

Madness, of course. And yet, if life is a dream, as surely it is, what can we trust but our own minds?

From a confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I don't sleep well. I don't imagine that surprises you. I suspect none of us do, though we don't like to talk about it. It just comes with the job, I suppose. When you sleep for living, so to speak, sleeping for pleasure becomes, well, let's call it a sort of busman's holiday. There are moments of relaxation, of course. And I *do* sleep outside of work, but it is a light sleep. It isn't what you would call *restorative*. I suppose you have slept too much from time to time in your lives. Attempted to sleep when you were not tired. Maybe you lived through a period of boredom...no...of course, I understand. I did not mean to suggest...yes, of course. Speaking only of myself, then, without *projecting my thoughts or feelings onto others*, I say that there were times in my own life, before my promotion to dreamwalker, rare but existent, that I chose to sleep out of boredom rather than exhaustion. Over the last few years, my sleep, my off-time sleep, has been much like that.

I started to...why did I bring that up? Why did I...oh, yes. You had asked for me, how did you put it? My *best estimation for how one might cognate the subconscious from an induced state of awareness*. The best answer is, I suppose, that I don't really know. I was just overtired, and my mind did things I had not invited it to. Not to say that...I don't mean to abdicate my responsibility. Once I became aware of the situation, I took full advantage. I do not deny the accusation. I ask only for some small consideration of the circumstances. You see, when I finally asked...oh, yes, yes, I'm sorry.

Easily distracted.

Cognate the subconscious form...I think I was just overtired. Dreamwalking rests the body even as it tires the mind. After a

night that feels like a century, the mind needs rest. I did all I could to provide that rest, but with little success. I followed the exercise regimens with precision. I created a quiet, cool, dark, and comfortable space for sleep. I used meditation techniques to calm my spirit as well as my body. Yet, I would, day after day, sleep fitfully, with little dreaming and less rest. If you truly want conjecture, I suppose it was that my mind became addicted to the induced sleep state and could not effectively sleep without it. Then, when it became desperate enough, it stole rest while it was under the effect.

What's that? *How* did...oh, I see. You're right of course. I'm not sure I am the right person to speculate about that. I have significant experience with dreamwalking, but I've not studied the physiology of...I think what you are asking is whether I was able to do any of this on purpose. If it is repeatable. That's what I would be wondering if I were you. Not that I would ever be in a position to...no...no...I'm sorry...of course...no, I don't think I could consciously *cognate my subconscious*. I took advantage of an opportunity, it is true, but I would not begin to know how to create that opportunity. My mind created it of its own accord.

That is the truth as I understand it. If there is more, my mind is unwilling to share it with me.

13

Epimetheus Halfstep did his best to push through. He put a new focus on his work, closed his eyes to the hallucinations, and put more attention than ever on his subjects. He reminded himself of the importance of his work and scolded himself whenever he found himself relaxing his efforts. He had dedicated his career to The Company and had never stopped believing in it. Now

was not the time to rest. Now was the time to work harder than ever.

If The Company was to continue to succeed, its people must continue to improve. Such improvements were only possible with efforts of life therapists like himself. He knew this. Had always known this. The hallucinations were merely distractions, ones which must be suppressed for him to continue to succeed in his work.

He closed his eyes.

Thera Vencel 0199:

0199 continues to seesaw between extremes. As a result of previous over-corrections, they have become docile to a level not conducive to productivity. I have attempted bring back some of the energy natural to them, without once again taking them to a level that incites negative activity. I kept Thera in relative comfort, with little need for strife. Alongside, I provided her with a best friend who was, with great consistency, mildly more successful in all endeavors. I believe the feelings of envy associated with this should once again encourage 0199 to strive a bit more, without once again falling into the ambitious disruptions of the past. While I am confident of change, I also fear having gone too far. Estimated success: 65%.

14

Of course, a feeling repressed is rarely a feeling destroyed. Those feelings fester and bubble and await only the slightest encouragement for growth. My father taught me that. Even as

they are repressed, the feelings grow stronger. If Epimetheus Halfstep had not known this before, he knew it now. For the harder he shut his eyes, the stronger the hallucination became.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Another tough night. Successful, but tough. The good news is that I'm exhausted, and maybe I'll actually sleep today. The bad news is I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. It was as if nothing I did would stick unless I gave it constant attention. It's like the higher up the chain my assignments are, the more stubborn they are. No surprise there. I suppose one doesn't move oneself up the chain without a certain obstinacy.

I'd like to think I have some of that myself, though I suppose I'm not so much obstinate as persistent. For me, I think it's more a sense of inertia than anything else, as if I'm just finishing a job I started because that's what you do. You finish. With the climbers, it's more like their main goal is to push everyone out of the way. It's a wonder they ever serve the greater good. I'm starting to wonder how we can thrive so well when so many of our up-and-coming leaders seem to put themselves before The Company. I dread the day I would ever be assigned an executive. It would probably break my heart.

Still, I brought success probabilities up significantly, so I suppose there is nothing for it but to call it a good day.

And something else.

I had another encounter today. A feeling of connection. Like that moment with the woman and child at the playground. This time it was for several years in the midst of my night, and I was

able to study the sensation more intensely. The connection was with an adult male. He managed a coffee shop where one of my assignments spent much of her days for a while. The manager was beleaguered, usually by insufferable employees he was desperate to keep around, and who regularly quit.

I can't say what it was about it him that so attracted me, but I found myself giving him almost all of my attention whenever I visited my assignment in the coffee shop. It was as if he was an old friend, or someone I recognized from a show. Maybe he just had one of those faces, the sort that you feel you've known all your life, though you've never met. Each time I looked at him, I would wrack my brain, trying to figure out why he seemed so familiar, why I had this immediate sense, not only of trust, but also something more fraternal. As if we two had spent a lifetime looking out for each other. As if I had some responsibility for him.

I thought, perhaps, I had simply run into an old assignment, someone I haven't seen in a while, unassigned and dreaming away between life therapy sessions. Strangely, there was no obvious trace back to The Company. Honestly, I'm not even sure there *was* a trace. Not in the usual sense of the word. More like some old label from another era that we don't use anymore. I certainly don't think he's one of ours.

Wherever he's from, though, he made me contemplative. I could not watch him without thinking of myself, of my own life. I thought about this beleaguered man and wondered about my own beleaguered life. I thought about how my assignments kept running away from me, how everything I tried seemed to almost fail, and it seemed just so with the coffee shop manager. He never failed to replace his constantly quitting employees, but he also felt constantly worried that failure was just around the

corner. In some ways, I found it inspiring, the way seeing someone lose can fill you with fear and drive you to work harder.

Enough. It's been a long night, and I'm hopeful for a good day's sleep at last.

15

Epimetheus Halfstep was not ready. Not yet. He was not yet ready to accept the hallucination. He was ready to watch it. To study it. Perhaps even talk to it. Accepting it, however, meant madness. Accepting it meant accepting that he was more than one person.

Of course, this is a truth we know. We are all more than one person. We are monsters and lovers. We are selfish and generous. We are masculine and feminine. Mars and Venus. Compassionate and heartless. Logic and love. Like us, Epimetheus Halfstep knew this to be true.

That those people could meet each other, however. Address themselves. Affect one another's lives in a direct and measurable way. For Epimetheus Halfstep, such an idea could be no less than madness.

Ricky Spellmeyer 3122:

3122 evaded me entirely, though I hold out some hope for improvement. Addressing the self-aggrandizement which remains their primary obstacle for otherwise impending promotion, I had formerly addressed this assignment with humiliating experiences, generally with poor result. For today's approach, I have

embraced hubris instead. I made Ricky wildly successful, but always through luck and happenstance. His life, even as he rose to the top echelons of business, was always filled by what appeared to him as random acts of luck, with just a smattering of minor failures when he truly had no one to assist him. Ricky retained a serious case of imposter syndrome, which may carry into the coming days for 3122. Estimated success: 38%

16

What the suits from Internal Investigations wanted to know was this: Had Epimetheus Halfstep really interfered with his own dream, had it changed him upon waking, and could he do it again? Of course: he had, it did, and he could not. For Epimetheus Halfstep, these answers were not complicated.

What they did not ask, and Epimetheus Halfstep feared to tell them, was whether interfering with his own dream merely changed his view of the world upon waking, or changed the world itself, perhaps even the entirety of all existence. That was something he feared to ask himself. The question alone was terrifying.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

How did I... yes, of course. I'd skipped over...yes, yes, let me go back to that. Let me see...it was about, yes, perhaps as much as a month ago. A fortnight perhaps? The days really do...I'm sorry. We agreed I wouldn't... specifics, yes. My reports should be clear about...very well, eighteen days. Thank you.

Eighteen days ago, on a fairly easy dreamwalk, and a resoundingly successful one, I might add, I found myself with a little more...let's call it *space*, than usual. What I mean by that is, by and large, my assignments were all right on track, and needed little attention. As a result, I spent more of that walk relaxing. Don't misunderstand me. I never forgot my assignments. All of...*this*...notwithstanding, I do take my job seriously. And I've proven myself. I hope you won't let this incident...yes...yes, of course. The *awareness*.

Where was I? Oh, yes. A relaxing walk. One with *space*. I had been watching a boy grow up from almost the moment I arrived. Something about him attracted my attention. Odd subjects and dreamers from other divisions, what we sometimes call *the noise*, often do. Honestly, I can only spend so much time staring at the same people day after day...that's *dreamday* after *dreamday*, you understand, within the same *walk*, is what I... oh yes, of course you understand. My apologies.

In any case, as usual, I had been observing any number of people unrelated to my subjects, the way you might people-watch on the park walks. Just letting my mind wander, wondering what sort of lives they led, wondering where their bodies might lay, or if they had bodies at all, background noise, so to speak...can I what? Oh, yes, of course. All employees are tagged, of course, but checking the tags is a slow process and mildly invasive. It is easy enough to do when necessary, easier if they are in our own division, but it makes no sense to do it on every person I see...yes...yes, that's right. I wondered without caring enough to...yes, of course. Where was I? Oh, yes. The boy.

This one boy, soon enough a man, attracted my special attention. I thought perhaps he just reminded me of someone, a

former subject perhaps, but I could not determine who it might be. As it was of no great importance, I simply continued to watch him throughout his so-called life, occasionally interacting with him, though never with purpose.

Late in the walk, I did take a closer look to see if the man had a tag. I don't know why I had not thought of it previously. It seemed like overkill, I suppose. But before I gave up altogether, it seemed wise to at least find out if some employee had fallen into the wrong dream. Rare, I know, but these things do happen, and I wanted to be vigilant. Perhaps it was the *familiarity* that drove me to check, that sense that I recognized the man, that he was somehow...and I don't mean to say I realized this right away, but...you see...by the time the walk was coming to a close...by the time I came around to checking the man for a tag.... what I mean to say is...I felt a... *connection*.

It sounds obvious, now, but at the time, it was a completely new sensation. Unique, really. I think it was that, more than anything, that drove me to investigate. Just a feeling. An instinct. *Curiosity*. It can be cured of course. I have a long history of success with tempering curiosity and am happy to go over my reports with another therapist, if you think dream therapy would be helpful in my case.

Once I found the tag, I was completely thrown off. It is, of course, unheard of to see a Company tag without a dream stamp, though some divisions are admittedly less...rigorous than ours. Yet, there it was. An employee, somewhere back in our own barracks, asleep, officially tagged, a known variable, wandering an officially sanctioned dream without official sanction. An employee, I supposed, who had clandestinely hacked into the system solely for the purpose of partaking in the dream without permission. It was a violation of protocols, of course,

though we know it is done. I often wonder, why does anyone do it? What is the point? Why spend the night in an artificial dream when a natural one would be better in every way?

This was what I was thinking as I noted the tag info for further study. At the time, it was my intention to bring the incident to my supervisor. I'm sorry, what was...oh, yes, that would be Moller. Transitional, I believe. I'm not sure the position has been permanently filled, yet.

Of course, once I got back and cross referenced the data, once I knew who it was, I...no, that's right. I failed to report the incident. Let me be clear about that for the record. I failed to report what I had learned. I *intended* to. I *planned* to. I just...I just needed a little more time.

17

Of course, my father was no fool. He could see what was happening to him. Madness was creeping upon him. A comforting and welcome madness, but a madness, nonetheless. To do nothing, surely, was the easiest course of action. Yet, he knew enough to know that letting madness fester would only lead to its growing stronger. At some point, if he did nothing, it would be too great to stop.

How to stop it, however, and whether he wanted to if he could, those were questions he was not yet ready ask, let alone to answer.

Yuri Kahler 8456:

In an attempt to temper the increasingly aggressive instincts of 8456, I embedded them in a lifetime of hopeless regional conflict. I started Yuri in a small village ravaged by decades of civil war, living at the edge of starvation, until ultimately bringing him to join local insurgents in what appeared to be a hopeless fight. I believe his righteousness waned as he continued to see the horrors of war, ultimately dying as a still young man. I'm particularly hopeful of results from his final days where he was able to witness the results of atrocities he was personally responsible for. Estimated success: 74%.

18

As Epimetheus Halfstep hallucinated with greater frequency, his mind increasingly turned toward eliminating the hallucinations altogether. He spent more time watching the hallucinations, addressing them, studying them, even as his official assignments languished.

Corinna Van Hautum 65:

65 remains stable as they near retirement. Given their age, there is little hope for change, but I have continued to encourage industry as a primary value. I continue to rely on tried-and-true methods, specifically the fear of things left unaccomplished. I filled Corinna's life with half done journeys, always taken from her before she could bring them to completion. This approach has been mildly successful in the past and led to quality work in the morning. Sadly, the values typically wane with the day,

and they continue to become inefficient and sluggish in the late afternoon. Estimated success: 41%.

19

My father was not worried. Not about his work. Epimetheus Halfstep had spent six years as a life therapist. Over two hundred thousand dream years. He was as experienced as any of his colleagues, with a record to prove it. He worried little that his subjects would suffer if he took a little more time for himself along the way. If he spent a little less time with them and a little more with...well...with whomever that was that attracted him so. With his hallucinations.

With the anomaly.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I saw him again today. Him? Me? What do I even call them? Today he was Victor Savidge. I recognized him immediately. Not by sight, but by something less tangible. Once again, I could feel his presence, was *drawn* to him. To me. Drawn to me. What a strange thing to say.

I checked the tag again, and there can be no mistake. Either I have seen my own dream, or I am hallucinating. Either way, I'm not sure I'm ready to make any official comments. How could they let me keep my job in such a state?

He seemed harried again. A life of mild but continual stress. This time he grew up to be a builder. A sort of contractor type, changing focus from one trade to the other throughout his life,

always put upon. Sometimes it was his clients, sometimes inept supervisors, and sometimes just forces beyond anyone's control, so to speak. He would feel put upon by the weather, by lumber prices, by poor aesthetic choices, by traffic. Everywhere he went, throughout his life, with rare exceptions, he allowed himself to be dominated by stress. Is that who I am? Is that how I see the world?

The problem is that taking him seriously, accepting that this dreamer is actually me, means accepting I can be two people at once, which I refuse to do. I've been tired, yes, and I cannot deny *some* level of stress from the long hours, but I'm certainly not so far gone as to be broken in twain. The alternative, though, to this dreamer being who he appears to be is for him to be an object of my imagination, a thought equally terrifying.

Either way, I'm in trouble.

I think Victor's life of stress likely holds an important lesson. Or clue. Or guide. One way or the other, my subconscious is focusing on stress. One way or the other, I need to reduce that stress, or at least the *impact* of it, to avoid utter psychological destruction.

Although I spent a fair amount of time tonight watching Victor, I also spent a fair amount of time *not* watching him. I tried to refocus on my work, ignore the strange hallucination, for it can be no less, and gather some sense of accomplishment. Clearly, I'm not sleeping well. Clearly, I need this sense of closure to put my mind at ease, to find some peace.

It did not go well, of course. All of my assignments came out fair to middling, in the high forties to low sixties. Each time I would be close to getting my head fully back into my work, I

would be distracted by Victor, showing up when he was least expected, certainly least wanted, to fix the roof of one of my official assignments, or remodel a kitchen, or repair a flood prone basement. He was everywhere, constantly distracting me from my work. I am at a loss.

Tomorrow, should another one arise to plague me, I shall give them the full force of my focus. I shall attempt to treat them like a full-on assignment, give this chimera the attention it apparently desires. Ignoring it doesn't seem to help. Maybe if I can allow myself to face it head on, I can come to terms with it. I can't think of another way to get this distraction out of my work, something I must do. For if I fail, there will no longer be work to be distracted *from*.

20

So it was that Epimetheus Halfstep watched and waited, waited and watched. This wasn't because he was particularly thoughtful, or careful, or was meticulously planning his assault upon the anomaly. Epimetheus Halfstep was none of these things. He was, quite simply, hesitant. Nervous. Indecisive. He wanted it to go away. Wished it to go away. Imagined it would go away.

It did not.

My father, Epimetheus Halfstep, exhausted, beaten down, unable to fight what he could not understand, conceded the battle. He accepted the hallucinations as well and true. He welcomed them as friends. He consciously acted upon their lives as a life therapist, even knowing such acts would affect his own. He knew not where such actions would lead.

Not at first.

Perhaps not ever.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

The opportunity. Yes, I thought we would come to that. Really, the walk started out like any other. A handful of kids that didn't need a lot of attention from me as I warmed into the walk. Those first few dream-years, I mean...well...they're important, of course. I don't mean to say...well...you see, every year, *dream-year*, is important, every day, really...it's just that, well, they don't remember every day, now, do they? It's the formative events from their youth that...what I mean to say is...you see...the closer they get to the end of their dream, the more likely they are to remember it, and therefore be affected by it, yes? Yes. Fine. And as we move back in time, as we go back, because, well, that's what we all do. We look *back* upon the dream, meaning the further back we go, the more substantive a memory needs to be to have lasting effect.

Yes...of course. Rambling again. Sorry. I'm just trying to put this all in perspective. You mentioned that I was, *perhaps*, a bit lazy in my work...yes...you did, you said...very well. All I'm trying to say is that after a reasonable amount of experience, as a dreamwalker...yes, fair enough...I, with a reasonable amount of experience, learned to focus my efforts late in the walk, using the early walk, the *youth* of my assignments as catalysts for the life to come. Catalysts that, by their very nature are rare.

I say all this to help you understand that the early years of the dream walk are casual and quiet, more thoughtful observance than aggressive action.

It was, then, at such a time, that I took my first opportunity with the...what did you call it...yes, of course...the *anomaly*. While the first action was not precisely premeditated, I absolutely had gone into the walk intending on affecting the anomaly in much the same way as I would any other assignment. My theory was that the anomaly was born of stress from my work, and that the best way to reduce that stress was to find more joy in my work.

I don't mean to say I did not enjoy my work at that time. I did. I do. It was simply an educated assumption, as if I were looking at myself from the outside, as an assignment. I concluded that the anomaly was the result of stress, and the most likely cause of stress was work. I imagined how I would address such an issue with one of my assignments and easily concluded that such an employee would feel dread, either from too great a workload, or perhaps fear of failure. While I did not directly feel these things myself, they seemed like reasonable assumptions based on what little evidence I had. With that in mind, I chose a standard approach of assisting an employee in finding more joy in their work, and attempted to execute it with the anomaly, even as I addressed my official assignments.

As you know, there are lots of ways to go about such a task, but the simplest and most effective is typically a dream of great success. Let an employee dream of a successful life born of their own efforts, and they will wake with optimism for the day and for their work to come. In many cases, the positive moments in their workday become reinforced, while the negative ones are more easily dismissed. The approach is not foolproof, but it does have a significant history of success.

I wasn't sure how well such an approach would work with my own self knowledge of it, but as it turned out.... what.... oh, yes...of course. The opportunity.

It was really no more than a good game of tag. A perfect game. A game to give the child confidence as he basked in the admiration of his friends. Sorry...? Oh, yes, of course. Children run about while one tries to touch one of the others. Simple but ubiquitous within the dreamworld, at least among children. Does that...great. Well, in this case, the child played especially well and gained confidence as a result. It led to other moments, of course. A strong essay publicly applauded before his fifth grade class. A series of home runs in his little league baseball. Putting down a bully in support of a weaker child. I gave the child no end of positive feedback which led to further success. But it was the tag game above all that etched itself into the dreamlife and drove the anomaly on my desired trajectory.

21

Epimetheus Halfstep had done what no dreamwalker had ever done. He had knowingly and with purpose performed life therapy upon himself. He had actively attended to his dreamself, served as his own therapist, with no concerns for the repercussions.

And the repercussions were grand.

Well, life is a dream. This much we know.

Adele Solos 2711

I suspect 2711 remains a lost cause and may never have the temperament for repetitive and focused work. I suffused Adele with the need to accomplish, mixed with the pervasive feeling that her accomplishments were poor, and the absence of

ambition. Her unsated desire for perfection led her to management, where she was consistently overwhelmed with the tasks before her. Both in her personal and professional life, she found herself always behind, and lacking the peace that comes from patient accomplishment. While I am hopeful this will leave her with a new passion for the quiet focus we so desperately need to see from her, my previous failures lead me to expect the worst. Estimated success: 12%.

22

Last night, a night that lasted a lifetime, I was a dreamwalker, like my father before me. I should not have been. I had no business in there. I had no idea was I was doing.

Had my father and I spent more time together, had I found the patience to learn under his tutelage rather than leap, headstrong, into a tempest I knew nothing about, perhaps he would be here today. My father. Epimetheus Halfstep. A man who never existed.

How my father plied his trade remains to me largely a mystery. True, I have gathered some insights from the archive, but there was always a sort of underlying assumption that the reader either already understood his methods, or did not need to.

Yet, it cannot be denied but that he plied his trade with expertise. He did it well and consistently, reporting his actions and results daily without fail. And he learned from both his successes and failures. In his six years of professional work in the dream trade, his tactics improved, and his results along with them.

It should come as no surprise then, that when the time came to attempt the greatest task of his professional career, he was well prepared for the task.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

The usual struggles today with 2711. Honestly, I can't figure out why they're just not shifted to another job, or, I hate to say it, but maybe they're just not suited for our division. Their mind is just too active. I can't imagine that they will ever be focused enough for the blue line, or any line for that matter. And management is out. They wouldn't last a day. I feel responsible, but honestly have no new ideas. I think they're just not wired for this place. Not that I would ever want to give up on one of our own, but there must come a time for everyone.

Even still, I feel terrific. As if I've really accomplished something. Like the mistakes I make today will fall away tomorrow. As if I will finally get some quality sleep. True rest. I feel as if I will close my eyes shortly and wake up tomorrow more refreshed than I have felt in years. We'll see.

I found the stranger again tonight. His parents, *my* parents, named him Pavo. He grew up on a farm of mostly corn and soybeans. I smothered him with luck and led him through a life of joy and adventure. Such an approach can be detrimental, but I was desperate. I only wanted the chimera to disappear. Ignoring it had done no good, so I was determined to give it everything it wanted.

The luck made him lazy, of course. It always happens that way. Yet, if this had been an honest avatar, the person behind him

would have woken happy and sated, feeling for all the world that they had earned a day of vacation. Perhaps two.

And I do feel that way. I feel as if I have taken on the world and won. As if my own work is a waste of time, and that I have accomplished all I ever need. The feeling will fade, of course. It always does. Yet, here I am, now, feeling at long last like I have arrived at the finish line. I can't remember the last time I felt this way.

All that makes me sad is that I shall never have the opportunity again. Now that I have given the chimera what it wanted, I fear it is gone forever. I'm better for it, I suppose, but I did enjoy giving the poor thing, giving *myself*, such a treat tonight. I feel good for the giving, and good for the getting.

I shall remember this night for many years.

23

The morning after Epimetheus Halfstep met himself in a dream, after he mentored himself, performed therapy upon himself, addressed, nudged, prodded, and cajoled himself, he felt good.

He sat down with his journal to talk to himself about his night in the dreamworld and felt, for the first time since he could remember, unburdened. Like many of us, he did not know he had been carrying the burden until it was lifted. He had been walking through his real life with a weight upon his back as if such weights were carried by everyone. As if such weight was the natural state of all people. When the burden lifted, it was a gift he knew not could exist.

He was as you and I, accustomed to the strength of gravity upon our world, suddenly and pleasantly finding ourselves upon the moon, leaping where we had formerly trudged, free at last.

Richard Cookson 5430:

5430 was standard maintenance. They have been producing consistently good work since earlier interventions, and have not yet fallen back into distraction. Richard lived an early life of poverty, followed by an adulthood marred by divorce and a variety of unsatisfying jobs. Throughout his life, I gave Richard tastes of joy from detailed technical work, which he was never able to turn into a career. Good associations with such work were strong throughout the dream. Estimated success: 94%.

24

Joy is ephemeral. This much we know.

For my father, what euphoric feelings came of his experiment faded soon enough. For, when there was only the reward with no apparent cost, the reward was sweet. When the true cost became apparent, however, the taste turned sour. And the cost was great.

My father, Epimetheus Halfstep, a man who never existed, explored that cost nightly. It's all in the journal. When there is a journal.

The suits from Internal Investigations longed to see the journal, of course. To read it. To use it to their advantage. To their great disappointment, however, they found that there was no journal

of Epimetheus Halfstep. How could there be? He burned it. Often.

He dived into his own dreams, nipped, cut, tugged, pushed, cajoled, and by all the means at his disposal caused his own life to change. His life, his world. The world. The only world. The only world there is, was, is, changed. Has always changed. Will always change. As he tinkered with his dream, he tinkered with his world. Our world. *The* world. And the journal changed with it.

Well, life is a dream. This much we know.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Well, yes...no...I mean, I'm not sure I understand the question. I mean to say...if I could control the one reality, as you say, surely I wouldn't...you see, why would I even be here? I don't mean to denigrate your work, *our* work, I'm sure you understand. I only mean to say that, well, if I had some sort of godlike power to...well...I just mean to say that even the most reasonable person would surely not let himself get into a situation like, well, like this.

Yes, very well, that's simpler, I suppose, but it still suggests that I have some innate ability to...let me try again.

Before I leave a dreamwalk, I collect and edit my reports, after which I go home, where I make further notes for myself, a sort of journal, I suppose. It is no more than a way of clearing my head from the exhaustion I often feel following the walk. For a long time, I never revisited the journals. They were a tool to get things out of my head so that I might sleep without fear. The

idea of putting those things back into my head felt, well, anathema, I suppose.

The...I'm sorry, the journals? Well, yes, I do. I am certainly willing to share but...yes, of course. What you cannot yet appreciate, however, is that they are not, at least I *think* they are not, well...stable.

This is what I'm trying to say. When I started to question my reality, when I became concerned that...well, that perhaps my work had induced some level of, well, *madness*, I suppose, I went back to my journal to read some passages. I wanted to refresh my mind, to understand what had happened. To remind myself how long it had been going on. To see if I could undo the *cause*, rather than continue to alter the *effect*. It seemed harmless. Perhaps even wise.

What I discovered, however, filled me with terror. What I read in my own journal, in my own words, was so unfamiliar that, at first, I thought I must be properly asleep, imagining it. The words sounded like things I would say, thoughts I would have, but with no memory of having said them. It was as if someone had set out to copy my style into a fictionalized memoir of my life. The thoughts were familiar, but I had no memory of the events. Of the facts.

As if they were from a different reality.

And so, I burned it.

At first, of course, my father had no idea what he was doing. Epimetheus Halfstep merely thought he was exorcising a demon. Shooing away an hallucination that was troubling him, but that surely caused no trouble for anyone else.

After all, dreamwalkers interfered with dreamers every day. Epimetheus Halfstep himself had done so thousands of times. Millions. Life therapy changed your outlook, your attitude, your instinct and intuition. Good life therapy anyway. But to change your own memory, or worse, the world upon which that memory was based, was unthinkable.

And if it were true, unconscionable.

Alexa Tracy 401

401 continues to plague me. Their work at home is strong, but they continue to fail to live up to their potential in the last few steps of their work. I have taken a new approach to neutralize the *done is good* tendency, though my confidence is low. I gave her three major incidents across her life, all of which ended in tragedy as a result of her carelessness working in automobile assembly. The final incident led to a legal battle that troubled her for the last years of her life. There may be some hope that self-criticism over these failures will lead to greater attention here at home, where she might finally begin to live up to her potential. Estimated success: 23%.

My father was in trouble. His experiment had gone out of control, and he could see no remedy. He needed his own version of *attention to detail* but could not move past the overwhelming task. My father, Epimetheus Halfstep, did what so many of us do when we are overwhelmed.

He tried to wish it away.

For when the world becomes unstable. When the day that was becomes the day that was not. When there is no truth. When evidence disappears with the sunrise. When there is only who you are and never who you were. When there is no was. When who you will be is as ephemeral as a passing rainstorm...

What is there left to do but burn?

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I met myself again today. I had hoped that my previous, and if I might say, successful encounter, with my avatar would have put it to bed for good. Instead, there he was again, or rather, there *she* was again. She was born to a poor family, and effectively left an orphan at twelve, when her mother died of leukemia and her estranged father failed to return. I tried to fill her life with love and fulfillment, but continued to fail through what I can only blame on sloppy work. She died alone, and I can still feel the emptiness in my heart.

The rest of my work fared just as poorly. 401 will be another failure, I have no doubt, perhaps even because of my work, rather than in spite of it. I'm losing my touch.

After I returned, I inquired after 2711. I wanted to see how they were coming along, hoping my work had shown some small effect. Largely, I was interested in whether I was likely to see them again this week, to help myself mentally prepare, though I suppose part of me hoped to see some improvement that might temper my self doubt. My inquiries, however, were met with the oddest reaction. At first, I thought they had been transferred, which would not have surprised me at all. I know The Company does everything it can to help and support our family, but even at the highest levels they must understand that there are some lost causes. Of course, I immediately became concerned for my job, as any failure of one of my subjects is a direct reflection of my own failure to improve them. Yet, not everyone can be saved. It might even be said that I did my best by them.

My larger concern, naturally, was the immense amount of paperwork that always follows a departure. My reports have all been clear, of course, but the idea of digging through them and writing a detailed account of our experiences together did not fill me with joy. When I mentioned this to my supervisor, they just talked to me like I was hallucinating. They said 2711 had been an unused number for over a year, and that I must have been thinking of someone else. They asked me if I needed to move on from my position, but I suggested I was just tired after a long walk and must have had the name wrong.

After accessing my official report records, though, not only did I find no record of 2711, I found no single report of anyone *like* 2711. My memory of them was clear, but there was no record. I'm not ashamed to say that led to what can only be a paranoid thought: that they had somehow been erased. It would not be too difficult for someone with appropriate security access to remove, to *expunge* specific records. I've never heard of it being done, but it is certainly *possible*.

To satisfy my mind, I went back to my journal. This journal. The one I am writing in now. The journal that no one has ever seen, or even knows exists, perhaps the only thing in my life that is fully unknown to anyone else. And they are missing. I remember them, remember writing about them, just last night. Yet, there is no mention of 2711 or anyone like them. It is as if I erased them myself.

Or imagined them entirely.

27

Epimetheus Halfstep was learning the hard way that it is easier to teach others how to live, than to teach yourself. I say the hard way because, when you fail with others, you merely have to observe their suffering. When you fail with yourself, you must live it.

Epimetheus Halfstep met herself in a dream. She spent her life lonely, without friends or family, and attempting to obscure that loneliness with hard work. She gave to her community, fought to reduce the poverty there, fought for reform, and was, throughout her life, praised for her work. No doubt, her funeral was filled to capacity with those her saw her as a local hero. With colleagues. With acolytes. With fans who shed tears for the vacuum of charity and hope left in her absence.

But without friends.

And when Epimetheus Halfstep awoke from his work, he was troubled.

Patton Granville 3942:

To aid 3942 in speed and efficiency, I have once again attempted to make his life sluggish. I had moderate success with my previous attempt, and so have attempted to replicate those results. I filled Patton's life with physical ailments that kept him from any meaningful work. Patton spent most of his mid and later life stagnant upon his couch, waiting for each day to end, then ultimately his life. This should leave him with a craving for action which should translate into increased speed and efficiency in his work. Estimated success: 87%.

28

The way my father remembered it, the suits from Internal Investigations were losing patience. They had been sent to question an insignificant dreamwalker with a level of urgency they had not imagined possible. True, they were, by nature, not very imaginative, but they had grown to have a certain level of expectation in their work, an expectation which was not so much exceeded as exploded into irrelevance by the perceived urgency of their current assignment.

And what they lost in patience, they gained in fear, as they began to see themselves reporting back to their own supervisor without the desired information.

Their supervisor, of course, cared as little for them as he did for Epimetheus Halfstep. Their supervisor only cared about *his* supervisor, and she cared only to know how to get her hands on this immense and unheard of power. The power to jump from one timeline to another. Or to change the world. Or to jump

from world to world. Or to do whatever the hell it was this guy was doing.

And keep all the goodies for herself.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

It sounds to me like you want to...no...no, of course not. I do not mean to question your motives...what...yes, of course. Yes. I can't imagine the responsibilities you have up in Internal Investigations. I have always believed, and continue to believe, that your branch is the ultimate core of our institution. If you did not effectively investigate our work at every level, explore every anomaly, we would begin to fall apart, chip by chip, until we were nothing but a pile of dust. I am, we all are, grateful for your work, and have always trusted you to have the best interests of our institution at heart. Please forgive any insinuation to the contrary.

Yes...thank you. I mean every word. No... yes...of course...I'm sorry, I've forgotten where we were...yes, of course. *Measurable impact from intercession*. I'm just not...how does one measure what one cannot see?

I did consider a methodical record, a way of, as you say, *creating a metric against which to measure the impact from intercession*. I have no doubt such a record would be useful if it could be made reliable. My experience with the journal, however, my clear memory of dreamers who do not appear in institutional records, led me to lose confidence that any record, including the required nightly reports, could have any value.

I continued to write in my journal, of course, if only as a method of catharsis, to help ease my increasingly troubled mind. And the journal continued to change, at least compared with my own memory of events. I wrote about both the real world and the dream world. About myself and the anomaly. I made my notes each morning before settling down to sleep. Over the day, as I slept, it never changed. Each morning upon returning home, however, it would be upside down, twisted, distorted into a memory I never had. Sometimes I burned it. Sometimes it was there, unburned, upon the next dreamwalk.

Did I...? I'm not sure I understand. You want to know if I...a memory archive. Well...I can't say that I...you see...I have heard of such things, but I did not think they were...I'm not sure I would know how to...yes...no, of course...even if I had the clearance I...yes...I understand.

I wanted to measure the change. I wanted to confirm the change. I was desperate to prove the change, if only to myself. But the only constant was my memory, which as you know, is not only subjective, but utterly malleable to the point of complete unreliability.

No, I neither have, nor know how to create a metric against which to measure the impact from intercession. I cannot prove what I say. In the end, it may be no more than madness.

And yes. I tried my best to make change. Positive change. For myself.

With disastrous results.

29

Yes, my father kept a memory archive, and yes, he lied about it. It didn't help.

Epimetheus Halfstep was not good at planning. Simple life therapy plans for dreamers, those were easy. With limited instruction in his assignments, he could comfortably create a dreamlife that would have a decent chance of meeting his goal. But to plan his own life, to plan successive dreams before even beginning the first, to understand the cumulative effect of a series of dreamlives upon himself, that was completely beyond him.

Instead, he took each dream as it came, usually with a plan for that night, that dreamlife, but never able to plan three nights ahead. As a result, he became scattershot in his results, sometimes happy, sometimes motivated, sometimes depressed, sometimes so filled with apathy he could hardly enter the dreamworld the next night.

If he had planned better, he might have avoided notice. If he had been more attentive, he might never have been caught. As it was, however, he increasingly leaned toward easy, happy lives for his dreamers, that he could spend more time and attention on himself. It was, I'm afraid, an approach that soon enough garnered him unwanted attention.

Gloria Hewitt 1133

This was fairly straightforward. 1133 is mildly distracted by back pain, which the infirmary believes is psychogenic. I gave Hewitt an untiring physical life filled with the joy of achievement. As an athlete turned trainer, she spent her dreamlife in

good physical condition, and absent the pain that troubles them at home. An early end to their dreamlife from a vehicle collision should leave 1133 with belief in their body, and without the fear of the debilitation that comes with age. Estimated success 79%.

30

Had my father merely garnered attention for making dreams too pleasant, his story might have been little more than a few reprimands and a reminder that it is our nightmares that drive us the hardest. That hard dreamlives lead to aspiration, and easy dreamlives lead to apathy. Had Epimetheus Halfstep merely been sloppy, and, well, a little lazy, if I can be honest, he might have turned himself around without his crime coming to light.

As it was, however, Epimetheus Halfstep did a thing which could not be ignored. Nor was it something that could be avoided. It was his responsibility, his job, and he did it with an appropriate amount of attention. He did it with honesty, clarity, and transparency. At the time he did it, he could not possibly have predicted the trouble it would bring him.

Epimetheus Halfstep wrote a report for a person who never existed.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I burned this journal yesterday morning. I remember it clearly. I remember ripping out a passage I had never seen before. I remember rolling up the page. I remember laying on my stove until the coils made it hot enough to burn. I remember placing the burning page in the kitchen sink. I remember ripping out

each page, one at a time, to add to the small fire. I remember failing to burn the cover. I remember looking at the charred bits that hadn't burned all the way through. I remember soaking the remnants in water before wiping them up and tossing them with the refuse.

These pages. This journal. Burned.

Yet, if it were only the journal, I might rest easy. The dreamwalk last night was one of my nicest in recent memory. Much of me feels stronger and more resilient than ever. I gave myself, my dreamer, my avatar, a relaxed and comfortable life with good friends and little stress. The so-called *good life*, which saw me wake with a smile that might well have carried me through the rest of my morning. The madness of this journal alone would not be enough to steal my newfound contentment. Alas, it is not only the journal. Not hardly.

Six years ago, after my second promotion, I was credited with color freedom at my apartment. For six years I have enjoyed a variety of shades upon my walls, most recently summoning the sensations of late afternoon sun in early autumn and a streak of warm blue across the northwest corner. Am I mad? This morning, upon returning home, my walls were all standard taupe.

And worse.

I have been called for an interview before a subsector that calls itself Internal Investigations. I assumed they were either so secretive no one at my level would know of their existence or...

I could hardly bear to think it.

I researched immediately, of course. Apparently, they serve as security for The Company, and report directly to the highest levels of the organization. From what I can gather, they thrive not from secrecy, but rather from the open knowledge of their presence. Not only have they been watching all levels of the organization for decades, but they do it so openly that stories of interactions with them are nearly ubiquitous. For decades.

Decades.

Tonight, I shall burn this again. And the next night. And the night after that.

And I shall confess my sin.

And absolution shall free my mind.

31

Epimetheus Halfstep confessed. He bore his soul to two strangers who could hardly understand half of his words. They pushed and they prodded, and my father did half his best to make them half understand.

For without full understanding, the confession would take days with full nights between. One full night between each full day of confession.

And Epimetheus Halfstep only needed one night. One dreamwalk. One highly suspect, forbidden, and without question illegal dreamwalk. And it would all go away.

Burkhard Palmer 671

671 has been struggling with dexterity, and it was believed that greater confidence in their physical ability would result in quality improvement. I focused Burkhard on piano career, ending his life early with a heart attack from which he never recovered. His success as a pianist was middling, but the dreamer enjoyed speaking with his fingers, which should leave 671 with new confidence in their ability to use their hands more effectively. Estimated success 82%

32

Epimetheus left his illicit dreamwalk refreshed. He felt certain everything had settled, gone back to normal. Upon waking, there were no messages, no beckonings from Internal Investigations, no threats, no fear. Just a few strange messages from names he did not remember, names he wondered if he might encounter at home.

He quietly took himself from his chamber and walked back to his residence, nervous about what might await him, yet strangely confident at the same time. With each step he smiled to himself at his cleverness. He had walked into the dream with danger at his heels, and walked out into a world where the danger had never existed. Had this been his plan, he might have said that his plan had worked.

But this was not his plan. He had no plan. He was simply running, jumping through doors, vaguely hoping that the next one would provide his escape. That this door was the right one made

him happy. That his success was no more than a touch of good fortune gave him pause.

Upon arriving home, however, he was surprised to find it not only larger than he remembered, but more populated. For, though he expected to enter an empty abode, he was ambushed with a bounding hug from an eight-year-old girl shouting, "Daddy!"

Part 2

Epimetheus Halfstep loved his daughter. This much we know.

That Epimetheus Halfstep neither recognized nor remembered his daughter mattered not. He acknowledged her. He accepted her. He believed her. From the moment Epimetheus Halfstep met his daughter, the eight-year-old motherless Metameleia Halfstep, the girl who remembered eight years of life with her father, he trusted her. He trusted eight years of love, hugs, kisses, presents, punishments, lessons, and increasingly eccentric meals that he could not remember. He became a father of eight years in an instant because he could see it in her eyes. Hear it in her voice. For, the moment Epimetheus Halfstep met his eight-year-old daughter for the first time, he knew he had known her from the day she was born.

The thought that she would go on to kill him, that she would grow up to erase his existence altogether, never entered his mind.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Who is this beautiful child? This Leia.

I'm not sure I have the heart to tell her. To tell this beautiful child. This clever, feisty, and joyful child that, before this morning, I had never imagined her existence, let alone met her.

I am filled with questions I am too afraid to ask. How can I ask her who her mother is? Or where? Or how old she is? I could hardly figure out how to fix her breakfast. And yet...what kind of person am I if I don't?

She's at school now. Walked there herself. Next to my sleeping quarters is small room that looks like home. To her. Looks like home to her. Home to a young girl. Ten years old maybe? I must find out.

The end of the work night, the dreamlife, was comforting. No investigators waiting for me, no questions. I put the final touches on my reports as usual, turned them in and came home. Home. A strange word for a strange place.

The dreamlife was nothing special. I'm getting reconciled to the anomaly. This time she was a little girl who dreamed of being a hero, I supposed. She was always playing at firefighting, or police work, or fighting in war. I was a little lost as to how to help her, but I must admit that my thrusting love upon her thwarted her dreams. I can't say whether for the better or not, but she spent her grown up life as a stay-at-home mom and then grandmother. She did some charity work, but never really found the inner hero that she craved. Did I help? Did I temper my own frustration at never quite living up to my dreams? Or did I simply give myself new dreams? Dreams of love. Of family.

Family.

And there she was. Is. When I came home. Waiting for me. Just awoken from sleep in the next room. A room that looks like home.

And my own room. This room. Strange and familiar in the same breath. The bed is large enough for two, but it is worn only on one side. The desk, the furniture, the lights, all of it seems like me, but there is something *not me* about it as well. Something a little bit feminine. *More* feminine, perhaps, than my usual taste. Yet, there is no evidence of a partner. The drawers, the closet,

the nightstand cabinet, they all have my things, or things *like* my things. There are no dresses, no skirts, not even a separate wardrobe of men's styles unlike my own. This is the room of one man, and one man alone. Yet...it is a room informed by a woman. Or another person who isn't me, who isn't entirely like me.

Though the world has changed, it appears to again be one without images. What I would give for some pictorial history. Some visual story of my life here, something to help me get oriented. I hardly know what to do next. When does she return from school? Will she expect me to be awake?

I shall not rest well today.

34

My father, Epimetheus Halfstep, had built himself a family. A small family, but a family nonetheless. He knew not how he had done so, nor how to hold onto it. He assumed the girl, his daughter, would be gone soon enough. That his life, his world, the universe itself would change once again, perhaps as soon as his next walk, and the girl would become no more than a memory only he could recall.

The bond of love, however, is more easily forged than broken. We tell ourselves that love is built step by step, day by day, growing stronger with age, only to be destroyed with single act, a harsh word. We tell ourselves lies. For love is thrust upon us as the intense heat of a welder, and must be torn from us molecule by molecule as the moisture and rust conspire to break our bonds over time.

So it was with the Epimetheus and Leia. My father and I. The bond of love was too strong to tear us apart with a single nap.

35

I, too, kept a journal. A diary. Sometimes. Sometimes I kept a diary. Sometimes I did not. Unlike my father, however, I never burned it.

Not yet.

My father knew many Leia's. Each morning when Epimetheus Halfstep returned from work, he met a different one. A different me. For, although I am only one person, I am also many.

Like all of us, I suppose.

Unlike my father's journal, my diary is of only one life. One set of memories. One world. The only world I had ever known. A world where my father married while I was in the womb. A world where my mother died slowly and painfully of a degenerative cell replication disease when I was only six. A world where my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, was my only family for most of my life.

A world my father had no memory of.

A world which, like him, never existed.

From the diary of Metameleia Halfstep:

Daddy was funny this morning. We played a game where I got to be the boss. He did everything I told him to. He even put sugar sauce in my oatmeal! And when I pretended that I always walked to school by myself, he let me! Walking alone was scary and also lonely, I think, but I didn't get lost or anything.

I was a little sad when Daddy didn't meet me after school, but I guess the game was supposed to go all day. He let me boss him around for dinner, too, so we got to have fried chickies.

All the questions were fun, too, but I was never sure when I supposed to tell him the truth and when I supposed to make stuff up. Like at bedtime. He asked me if he was supposed to tell me a story, and I lied and said yes, even though we haven't done that since Mom died, and he told me this pretty story about a girl who wanted to be a soldier but ended up not because she fell in love but was still happy.

Daddy forgot to kiss me goodnight or close the door, but maybe that's because I was still the boss and didn't tell him to.

I wonder if I'll get to have sugar sauce again tomorrow morning.

36

And, stubbornly, the girl remained.

Daly Beitel 930

This was the third consecutive treatment for 930 and should leave them settled for some time. Already, we have seen their output improve significantly, and today's work should solidify that result. This day Daly was born into a large rural American family which encouraged competition for attention. I repeatedly tempered success in that competition, resulting in a lifelong commitment to hard work and achievement. Given the previous two successes with 930, I believe we can now move into maintenance therapy for at least several weeks. Estimated success: 98%.

37

Epimetheus Halfstep was followed. Sometimes. Sometimes Epimetheus Halfstep was followed. Sometimes he was not. Sometimes he was followed, and he knew it. Sometimes he was followed and remained unaware. Sometimes they told him. Sometimes, the guys from Internal Investigations received his confession. Sometimes they did not exist.

My father should never have seen the surveillance reports. They were classified. They were restricted. They were about him. Had they found out, they would have killed him.

Before I could.

From the Surveillance Reports of Epimetheus Halfstep:

7401 appears to be aware of his influence, yet lacks the wherewithal to wield it effectively. We have just observed him, once again, recognize and influence the anomaly without any thought for the repercussions beyond his next waking day. It is hard to believe that one so skilled in life therapy could be so inept in longer term planning. Neither in nor out of the dreamworld have we seen any evidence of a metric-based evaluation of his own work, nor any attempt at pursuing any goal whatsoever, beyond, perhaps, the following night.

In the dreamworld this night, 7401 recognized the anomaly almost immediately. Without significantly compromising his assignments, he effectively kept it comfortable and happy, surrounded by a so called loving and growing family. No doubt, he has woken with a sense of calm, and, perhaps, an increased commitment to his own small family pod. Yet, if his goal was, as we have feared, to purposefully affect the nature of the waking world and wield power and influence over reality itself, he is either completely incompetent or has planned beyond our capacity to envision.

More likely, 7401 has adopted an approach of trial and error, and in the process discovers only his failures while continuously failing to see either his triumphs or any paths to future success.

I believe we have now collected enough data to effectively interfere with the anomaly and affect change with some level of precision. We must include, as you suggested, a significant margin of error, yet we believe we have brought that margin

down to acceptable levels. Although we will continue to collect data, we are confident we can at last begin to affect the anomaly ourselves in a systematic way, and with high likelihood of positive outcomes.

We will continue to observe while awaiting further instruction.

38

The guys from Internal Investigations thought they knew better. They thought they had a *systematic metric-based approach* that would outsmart Epimetheus Halfstep and bring about ends desired by their supervisor. Sometimes they were right. Sometimes they were wrong. Never were they able to assess their judgment. For try as they might, never did they remember any world but the one in which they waked. If they waked at all.

They will never wake again.

On this day, in this place, in this dream, they merely waited. Waited and observed. Observed and waited. They kept detailed notes and prepared to act. They knew what they needed to do. They lacked only the permission to do it.

Aloisia De Kloet 7117:

7117 was basic maintenance. They have been performing well at home and look to continue to do so for years to come. Aloisia was raised in a middle-class Austrian home by school teachers. They showed her love, and she grew to become a teacher herself. She had friends, family, and a generally contented life.

7117 will wake from what they will consider to be a nice dream, sanguine, and with moderate pride. Estimated success: 95%

39

Epimetheus Halfstep was content. More or less. More, because with each day that went by, he found greater affection for his daughter. Me. Myself. Metameleia Halfstep, destroyer of worlds. Less, because with each day that went by, he wondered if he might increase his happiness just a bit. Envy not of others, but of the person he *could be*. Yet, although he believed he might, by the subtlest of movements in the dreamworld, create a life even more wonderful than the one he found himself in the day before, he also feared risking all he had gained.

With each new visit to the dreamworld, he interfered less. Within a month, he had come to do little more than seek and watch the anomaly, observe without interfering. He soon began to wonder if there was any longer a need to seek the anomaly at all.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Life finally seems to be settling down at last. I have hesitated to write the words for fear they might bring bad luck, but after a month of days with hardly a change, I feel as if I have, at last, found my home.

Leia at fourteen is a lovely girl, and though I regret the opportunity to have watched her grow up, I can no longer bear the risk of losing her altogether for the sake of finding some other part of our lives where she was younger. Or where my departed

wife still lives. Or where we, perhaps, had more money, or more freedom, or where my big toe did not always hurt when the barometer drops. The time has come to look about my life, accept it as the true one, and learn to enjoy it.

We don't see much of each other, it is true. I still sleep through the day while she is living the most exciting parts of her life. The mornings, such a lovely time in the worlds where my Leia was but a child, have become quieter. I can hardly blame her. I am always contemplative upon my return from another lifetime of a dreamwalk, and she has the circadian rhythm of a teenager, tired and angry for having to wake up and face another day of school.

Our evenings together, however, are quite another matter. We sit for hours playing games or just talking, getting to know each other for what always, to me, feels like the first time. She, too, is at an age when the repetition of old questions can feel like deeper inquiries into what sort of person she is becoming. I suppose it just makes her feel more grown up, but I am enjoying watching this smart and funny girl turn into a young woman.

I do worry about her when I leave for work, but I must trust the lifetime of independence she has grown up with, even if it eludes my memory.

I have yet to confess my crimes to her, and am not sure I ever will. How can I tell her that I don't remember her mother, her birth, her childhood except in small vignettes I ran into, out of order, one random day at a time? What would she think of me? Would she hate me for not being her true father? For cheating my way into her life? I fear I shall never have the courage.

Yet, I shall stay. I shall make this my home.

The path, I'm sure, is as simple as doing nothing at all. I shall ignore the anomaly from here forward. When I see it, I shall turn the other way. I shall focus on my official assignments entirely, cease forever to bring my personal life to the job. That part of my life is over.

I shall begin tomorrow with a day of rest. My first in six years.

And my new life begins.

40

A new life, indeed.

With his plan in place, Epimetheus Halfstep confidently lay down to sleep away the day, his mind filled with dreams of happiness with the fourteen-year-old Metameleia. He had missed much of her life, it is true, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that she was not yet fully grown, that they had at least a few years together before she might seek her own way in the world.

For myself, it was a more turbulent time. Well, I suppose the teenage years always are.

From the diary of Metameleia Halfstep:

Dad's hiding something from me. Again.

We were having this really nice night. Super nice. I was about to watch stories and he got out the weird cards again like he didn't even have to ask. I felt weird about saying no, so we

played his game again, which was fine, I guess, but then it just sort of turned into talking which was nice. Super nice. Not like talk at school or with Jules. This was more like, I don't know, important, I guess. As in who are we, or, maybe who am I, or even just, maybe, why do we do the things we do. Just sort of talking about big stuff. And it was nice. Super nice.

When started talking about dreams, though, he got super weird. As in, kind of quiet. Not at first. At first, he was really into it. He had all these thoughts about why they matter, about different kinds. Then this weird thing happened. I told him about that weird dream where I felt like I was awake, like I could change things on purpose, which he called *lucid*. He got really spacy, and sort of didn't say anything. Or when he did, it was like he was choosing words really carefully.

I said, I wonder if you could control your dreams on purpose.

He said, *I wonder*.

I said, if your dreams help you deal with stuff, maybe you could fix stuff just by being a better dreamer.

He said, *I wonder*.

I said, no really, do you think you could do that?

He was quiet for a long time. Then, he said, if a person could change the way they feel in the real world by making changes in their own dream, then they could change the way they feel in the real world *without* making changes in their dream.

I said, I think the change would last longer if it came from a dream.

He said, *I know what I'm talking about.*

I said, how?

He said, *I just do.*

I said, how?

He was quiet again for a long time. Then he said he had stuff to do before work and went into his room.

I swear he's hiding something from me. He never talks about his work. He always says it's boring human resources stuff that I wouldn't care about, but why does he do boring human resources stuff in the middle of the night? Why does he keep it so secret? It's like he's embarrassed about it or something. I feel like we would get in a fight if I pushed it, but I swear I will. Soon.

It doesn't matter how super nice things are if he's lying to me.

41

My father, of course, *was* hiding something. He feared to speak of his work, of what he knew of the dreamlife, not only because it was forbidden by his employer, but also for more personal reasons. For, if fourteen-year-old Metameleia ever found out about what her father really did in the night, she would know soon enough that he was an imposter.

He feared his daughter's love for him was tenuous. That it depended on a lifetime of memories, of experiences together wrapped in joy, pain, anger, and love. That her faith in him had

been purchased by this lifetime together. That any thought of that lifetime being only for her, that he had cheated his way into her life, that he had fast-forwarded their life together, skipped the good and bad stuff together to jump to the end, would tear her away forever.

He was right, of course, though not in the way he thought.

Just like the rest of us.

From the Surveillance Reports of Epimetheus Halfstep:

The trial-and-error approach of 7401 has left him with a false confidence, and ourselves with the opening we have been looking for. Underestimating his own ability, he has, as we have noted previously, chosen to experiment with increasingly smaller changes, without taking note of previous successes and failures. As a result, he continues to affect change in a way that is haphazard at best, and dangerous at worst. His confidence, however, will be his undoing.

He has become convinced, we believe, that he is happy and content in the latest iteration of his life, and little desire to adjust it further. As a result, he had formerly been increasingly distancing himself from the anomaly. He has now cemented that approach by applying for a Day of Rest.

The absence of 7401 will provide us with the opportunity we are at last ready to take full advantage of to best effect. We seek approval for the incursion, and approval of the DOR request.

We have outlined a detailed branch approach, with bold steps at each branch. While smaller increments would be preferred, we shall continue to assume that our time is short, and that we will have limited opportunity to affect the anomaly without interference from 7401. A flow chart is attached outlining our proposed actions.

Effects will likely be difficult to assess, but we nevertheless recommend continued surveillance outside the dreamworld, if only to prepare for any surprise incursions during the approved vacation period.

We shall await formal approval, after which we shall make our attempt.

42

So it was that Epimetheus Halfstep made the biggest mistake of his life. He turned his back on the anomaly, left it to fend for itself while he enjoyed a day of rest for the first time in six years. He told himself that without his interference, his life in the real world would finally stabilize. He told himself that without his interference, he would be able to commit fully to a life with his daughter. He told himself that without his interference, he could finally be content. He told himself lies.

The greatest lie of all, however, was that he would never know the difference.

My father, you see, had come to believe that the sort of changes he had been experiencing happened all the time. If no one but he could sense the changes he continued to make night after night, surely there must also be changes that even he could not

sense. Changes made by others. Or of their own accord. Epimetheus Halfstep believed that by staying away from the anomaly, he would finally land in one life. One reality. Epimetheus Halfstep also believed that if something happened in the dreamworld to change that, in a dreamworld where he was not present, he would be oblivious to the change. He would be blissfully unaware, like everybody else.

He was wrong.

From the Surveillance Reports of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Through careful attention and rigor, we were able to spot the anomaly at the age of six. As laid out in our plan, we tore the child's parents from it, and left it to suffer through a series of foster homes, each with their own set of abuses. By the time the anomaly had reached adulthood, it was entrenched in mental illness and suicidal. The anomaly ended its own life in a gruesome act of trauma at the age of 31, which should effectively lead us to branch 12D. We have requested permission for a follow up incursion to evaluate our progress.

What follows is the detailed history of this night's incursion, actions and effects upon the anomaly, prediction to success ratios, and a revised flow chart detailing our proposed approach for future incursions, should they be approved.

43

The detail is hardly worth looking at. Disgusting really. It is true that my father regularly ruined people's lives, dream lives, to make some positive change to their real lives. He did it all the time. Put people through a lifetime of pain to make them slightly better workers for The Company. To his mind, they were only dream lives in any case. It was the dreamers who mattered. Sometimes, a little tough love was just what they needed.

Or just what The Company needed.

With the suits from Internal Investigations, however, there was no dreamer to improve. They were simply out to destroy. They drove the anomaly to suicidal madness that it might destroy itself, and with it any risk of further interference by my father. They beat her and berated her and abused her and raped her and tortured her in so many ways she had no choice but to end her life. Her dream life. The anomaly's dream life.

They would say, I suppose, that they were only doing their jobs.

44

Epimetheus Halfstep, my father, the man whose life I stole, woke, alone, in a strange apartment.

He found no sign of his daughter, nor did he find any evidence of the life he had attempted to save. I was gone. I failed to exist. My mother failed to exist. Our lives failed to exist. Metameleia Halfstep shrunk to become no more than a memory of a madman.

A madman who, himself, never existed.

That the apartment was luxurious, he could not deny. That it belonged to him was a question he could not immediately answer.

He lay upon his back underneath silk sheets in a bed perfectly balanced to the needs of his body. He had heard of such beds, but never imagined they truly existed, let alone that he might experience one. He looked about carefully for a trap, but found none. As he walked about the apartment, he found only that the various devices that riddled the place all responded to his wave signature, and that, as difficult as it was to imagine, all signs pointed to his true and complete ownership of the lonely home.

His journal was nowhere to be found.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I've lost everything.

Last night, for the first time in what must be nearly six years, I did not enter the dreamworld. I was up most of the night. Old habits are, I suppose, hard to change. I wandered the house, watched Leia sleep, snacked too often, and finally lay down for what seemed to be the first lonely nighttime nap I could remember. I set my journal on the bedside table and closed my eyes. I awoke to find it gone.

I've lost everything.

I've become used to change. Every return from the dreamworld of late seemed to bring with it a mildly changed floor plan, new

paint colors, new decorations in Leia's room. She would become older. Younger. Her hairstyle would change. I was getting better at making the changes smaller, but they were always there. Yet, each day they were less. Today there should have been none. Last night I stayed out of the dreamworld altogether. There should have been no change at all. No change that I could perceive. Yet here I am, in this strange place. And no Leia.

I've lost everything.

The apartment itself is unlike any place I had ever imagined. I seem to have landed in a reality where I have both money and power. Everything responds to my signature, and I seem to have no security issues at all. Still, even with complete clearance, it can be difficult to ask who you are.

I've lost everything.

I must get back. Must find the anomaly. Find my life. The only way I can imagine, however, is daunting at best, possibly suicidal. Yet, what matters this life? Only Leia matters. I must go back in, regardless of the risk. Where to start is the question. I know people do it. I've seen them on the inside. Turned in more than a few. Illicit dreamers. The idea has always disgusted me, but what choice do I have?

I've lost everything.

45

My father, Epimetheus Halfstep, found himself in a home he was completely unfamiliar with, but, unlike myself, in a world

he recognized. It was the wrong world, the wrong world for my father, but not a world devoid of hope.

For, although he had killed me, stolen the entirety of my existence, the mechanism to bring me back, to find me, to change the world, had not yet disappeared. That was something only I could be fool enough to destroy. The dreamlife was active, life therapists busy with their work, and workers passively accepting the change The Company desired of them.

In this world, he had been promoted beyond his Life Therapist role. He had been one, had done his time, so to speak, but was no longer sanctioned. It was true he technically kept the ability to walk, perhaps to check in on one of his staff, but such things were rare and suspicious.

To enter the dreamlife as a walker, lucid, separate from and above the haze of the dream itself, involved so many levels of bureaucracy it could not possibly be done without prying eyes watching his every move.

That route was closed to him.

The route that *was* open to him was dangerous at best, though, admittedly, open to anyone. Anyone with a death wish.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

No...I...of course...yes...the illicit incursion. Complicated thing, that. And dangerous. Until I experienced it for myself, and I did experience it. I freely admit that. I made an unauthorized incursion with lucid access. Where was I...yes, until I experienced it

for myself, I had no idea how unlike my previous experiences it would be.

I'm sorry? Oh, yes...we'll, you see, like all of us, I...oh, yes...yes, of course, I didn't mean to...very well. Prior to my promotion to Life Therapist, I had spent time inserted into the dream world, sometimes with life therapy, sometimes without. I have little memory of those experiences, but they are, in many ways, similar to the natural dreams I have at home. More story, less metaphor, if you will, but overall, they are hard to remember, and come back mostly as images and feelings.

As a dreamwalker, of course, the experience is completely different. Rather than being completely absorbed in the false reality of the dream, only to forget most of it upon waking, we stand aloof, as if watching a show that we can adjust and change, which we remember fully upon waking, but from which we always stand apart...yes, that's true but...I see...but what you don't....I'm sorry...let me start again.

Authorized dreamers are fully immersed in the illusion and forget most of it. Authorized Life Therapists see through the illusion and remember most of it. Illicit dreamers vacillate between the two. Does that...great. Thank you.

What I found so off-putting about my experience as an illicit dreamer was never really feeling comfortable in the state I found myself. When I was lucid, I missed the comfort of fully accepting the illusion, and when I was fully immersed, I always desired to have more control of my life. Not that...I mean...what I mean to say is that...well, the illusion is nice while it holds. I can understand the desire to fantasize, dream up a life for yourself and live it, retain some memory of it, if you...yes, well, we do our best, of course, but there are unhappy....I only speak with

reference to the illicit dreamers on record, all of whom have been reprimanded and rehabilitated with appropriate life therapy. We do our best, but there will always be a few who slip through the cracks...yes...well.

My best estimation as to why some have chosen to enter the dreamworld without authorization is uncured unhappiness in the real world.

In my case, I desired access to alter my *perception of reality* back to one with my daughter. My *perceived* daughter.

I failed, of course.

46

Epimetheus Halfstep was an old man. An ancient man. A terrifyingly old and ancient man. He looked young. He had the health of a young man. Yet, he had lived, in his own words, upwards of 200,000 years. Whether he had gained the wisdom one would expect from such a life I cannot say. That he was exhausted by life, however, can hardly be argued.

Such was the life of a dreamwalker. In exchange for the nearly godlike duties of wandering the dreamworld in full consciousness, one hundred or so years at a time, the dreamwalkers lost any chance of enjoying the dreamworld itself, or of its restorative qualities. While everyone else felt well rested after a night in the dreamworld, the walkers felt worse. It was not a generally desirable job, though unquestionably a necessary one.

When Epimetheus Halfstep entered the dreamworld as an intruder, then, he was fully unprepared for the experience. True,

his illicit access was meant to give him some level of consciousness. The whole experience would have been spoiled if the fantasy did not feel real. For Epimetheus Halfstep, the visit was like a hallucinogenic experience, where he sometimes lived inside the illusion, and sometimes saw through it.

Well, life is a dream. This much we know.

What Epimetheus Halfstep told me

Honestly, it was one of the strangest days of my many lives. Of all the worlds or dimensions or realities or whatever you want to call them, of all the versions I had landed in, this was the least familiar.

In any other reality, I would have been able to spend the day resting and considering how best to spend my night in the dreamworld. In this one, however, I wasn't even sure how to or even if I could enter the dreamworld at all. I had the clearance, that much was clear, but I was so high profile, I had no idea how to go in unnoticed.

Of course, everyone knew these guys took illicit trips to the dreamworld. Sort of pleasure cruises where they could play out their fantasies. Personally, I never saw the attraction, but I practically lived there, so it was different for me. For the real me. For *this* me, apparently, it was seductive enough that he had a ready access port in his apartment, far from the prying eyes of the rest of The Company. It took me the better part of the day to find it, but that only gave me greater confidence that I could keep my incursion secret.

Inside, I hardly know how to describe the experience. It was nothing like my worktime visits. This was more like I was in a drug induced haze where I could hardly see beyond the space I found myself in. The clarity with which I usually saw the dreamworld was replaced by a sort of half-in, half-out sensation. As if in one moment I would find myself seduced into believing the dreamworld was a true reality, and the next moment laugh at myself as a fool for believing it.

I guess the best way to describe it is like lucid dreaming. Not dreamworld visits, but real dreaming. The natural ones. When you have moments in the dream where you realize you're dreaming, but other moments when you're all in. This was like that. Like I kept having to shake myself awake and remind myself it was only the dreamworld. But over and over again. For years. Dream-years. The seduction was so strong that I can't be sure if I exited on my own, or had a death-end. I find it hard to believe, even now, that people seek these experiences on purpose.

Inside, when I could wake myself up, I searched for the anomaly to no avail. All I could see, sense, feel, was the usual stuff - millions of employees dreaming the night away, though without the special insight for my own assignments. More like everyone I could see was someone else's assignment, or from another division, or maybe just background noise. Nothing special.

But I must have found him. Her. Them. Me.

I must have, in my hallucinogenic haze found what I was looking for, made some attempt at bringing my life back. I don't remember it, but it cannot have been any other way. For when I came to, when I once again found myself in, well, I won't say *this* world, but let's just call it *the world outside the*

dreamworld, I was, in the lonely apartment I knew so well, once again in standard taupe, no family to be found.

Only suits from Internal Investigations, waiting to escort me to their office.

47

Epimetheus Halfstep got caught.

My father, Epimetheus Halfstep, a man who never existed, the man I killed, thought that six years as a dreamwalker had prepared him to hide his illicit activity. In his thousands of dream years, he had discovered more than a few unauthorized dreamers. Sometimes he looked the other way. There was, after all, quite a deal of paperwork involved. Yet, he knew what an unauthorized dreamer looked like. And he knew what a life therapist looked like. He told himself that, between the two, he could effectively hide his crime and return home unnoticed.

Had he not been under surveillance, he might have succeeded.

As it was, my father got caught. It was just what the suits from Internal Investigations wanted. It was an excuse to ply him for information, and at the same time, to keep him out of the dreamworld for a while. Illicit dreamers must be reprimanded, of course. For, what would become of the world if everyone were left to dream for themselves?

From the Surveillance Reports of Epimetheus Halfstep:

We have taken 7401 into custody for an unauthorized incursion into the dreamworld. Full transcripts of their confession are available for inspection. While the recommended rehabilitation for this type of transgression is a minimum of four alternating nights of life therapy, we council against that approach at this time.

Though we have remained steadfast in our approach, we have now experienced three consecutive nights with no appearance of the anomaly. Either the anomaly no longer exists in this dreamworld, or our methods are no longer suited to the task of discovering it. As we have had no previous indication of a diminishing success rate related to observing the anomaly, we conclude, at this time, that the anomaly is no longer present.

Our inability to detect the anomaly leads us to one of two further conclusions, either that our previous work has destroyed it altogether, or the detectability is related to presence of 7401 within the dreamworld. On the first night we failed to locate the anomaly, 7401 was present and unauthorized, on the second, 7401 was absent and in custody, and on the third night, 7401 was undergoing their first night of rehabilitative life therapy.

Given that further nights without the sober presence of 7401 have coincided with the absence of the anomaly, we suspect that, though we have had one successful detection of the anomaly while 7401 was absent, the probability of detection without their presence decreases with time.

We propose authorizing 7401 for a return to work, with a case-load of significant difficulty to keep them occupied enough to give us room to work. We will keep them in custody during that time and continue to gather information. We are hopeful that returning 7401 to their work will bring back the anomaly and allow us to continue our study.

48

My father should have suffered through a week of brutal life therapy. He should have been brought to his knees by a process meant to break his spirit through humiliation, his body through torture, and his mind through emotional abuse, before building him back up, step by step, into the obedient automaton with which The Company thrived to fill their ranks. Four nights minimum. Four dreamlives. Four lives of misery and suffering, of terror, of, *please God, just let me die already*. More if needed.

Had he received his proper punishment, his so-called *rehabilitation*, they would have killed his mind and spirit, but left his body intact. A body that is dead now, in any case. A body I killed. A body that never existed.

Instead, they sent him back to work.

They would have preferred to be rid of him. Preferred to focus on the anomaly without simultaneously focusing on the pesky life therapist. Yet, as much as they desired to rid themselves of Epimetheus Halfstep, they desired the anomaly more.

They did attempt to distract him. Gave him the workload of his life. Told him it was penance for his crime. Told him it was his chance to make amends. In truth it was no more than a way to

keep him present, observable, and impotent. Keep him too busy for anything but his work. Too busy for the anomaly. Too busy to change the world.

If they could not be rid of him, at least they could keep him out of the way.

That was the plan.

Viola Zambrano 538:

538 was a significant challenge. We have long felt that they have potential beyond the green line, but have consistently failed to push them in a suitable direction. The challenge was to give Viola a steady, satisfying life, followed by a wildly successful one after a late life change. Viola was an antsy creature, generally yearning for adventure. At every opportunity for adventure and change, however, I thwarted her with reward for staying the course, leading to a happy and contented life, where she was sure that, had she gone after adventure instead, that life would have turned out poorly. In late life, however, I brought a war to her doorstep, and with it, the end to all of her comfort and comforters. Alone, lost, I drove her toward leadership, where she rose to great power and was able to affect positive change for her people. I am optimistic that, upon waking, 538 will, at long last, crave the promotion for which we believe they are ready. Estimated success: 71%.

49

For Epimetheus Halfstep, a heavy workload was not enough to keep him from trying. It sounds arrogant to say now, to say after

all I have done, after all I have destroyed, yet it remains the truth that my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, was committed to bringing me back, to bringing himself back to a life where I existed. He was ready to do anything for me, and I repaid him with the only thing worse than death. I destroyed him so utterly that he never existed.

Yet, it is true. He loved me. Loved his someday murderer. And he was willing to risk it all to bring me back. To bring some version of me back. To get back to a world where some semblance of life with his family existed.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

Tonight was brutal. Rarely have I struggled so much to keep up. Even in my first days working alone in life therapy, I was not as challenged as I was tonight. The reports alone were exhausting. If not for my utter failure to find what I seek, I would sleep well today indeed.

They are watching me, of course. Clumsily. Whether they know how easily I can spot them is unclear, but they are ridiculously easy to discover. It is as if they think they are immune to observance, and so call attention to themselves at every step. Amateur, really, but not surprising given their lack of experience in the dreamworld. I pretend not to notice them, that I am unaware, but the shadows follow me everywhere.

How to find my way home continues to elude me. I did spy the anomaly any number of times but could not get close for fear of my shadows. I must find a way to address my old friend, to affect their dreamlife without calling attention to myself.

I suppose the key is to make my shadows so bored with me they cease to follow. To that end, this night, I committed fully to my assignments. Not a difficult choice, really. With more than double my usual load, and the usual reports expected at the end of the dreamlife, I hardly had the energy for more than that in any case.

What worries me is their own attention to the anomaly. They clearly had an interest in manipulating her tonight. No doubt they are trying to create some world where they, themselves, have wealth or power, or all their wishes come true. Some magical reality they can create for themselves by doing what I have done accidentally so many times. Perhaps they will succeed where I failed. If so, I really have lost everything.

Tomorrow night I shall search for an opening. I can already sense some exhaustion among them, as if they are just now coming to feel the true burden of living nearly a century night after night without a break. If my own experience is relevant at all, they will soon enough become complacent.

But is soon enough *soon enough*?

50

My father was running out of time. Every time he was brought into the dreamworld, the anomaly came too. Every time the anomaly was there, the suits from Internal Investigations made some attempt at changing the world. Every time the world changed, Epimetheus Halfstep was one step closer to never finding his daughter again.

He needn't have worried. For try as he might to save her, me, his daughter, Metameleia Halfstep, I was destined to destroy him. Destroy the world he cared so deeply to find. The world he and I shared.

The world I was destined to disappear.

For Epimetheus Halfstep, my father, the man not yet aware of my destiny, panic was beginning to set in. The suits were learning from their mistakes. They were getting better at their work.

And they were on the verge of a breakthrough.

From the Surveillance Reports of Epimetheus Halfstep:

With each subsequent step, we have expected to see change in the one reality following manipulations of the anomaly. To date, no changes have been witnessed. At this time, we are speculating that either 7401 has only imagined changes to the one reality, or only they can observe the supposed changes.

We have come to the conclusion that either no true changes result from interference with the anomaly, or changes can only be perceived by those with direct connection to the anomaly. Should that be true, there can be no value to the continued existence of the anomaly. We request permission to seek remedy from within and without the dreamworld to destroy it.

Our first attempt from within shall be to destroy the anomaly at first sighting tomorrow night. We are hopeful this approach will keep the anomaly from returning. At a minimum, the approach

will serve to limit any effect resulting from further interference with the anomaly.

While definitive and observable destruction of the anomaly is the preferred course, other options remain. Should we fail to destroy the anomaly otherwise, we recommend permanent banishment of 7401 from the dreamworld.

If it is true that the reality of 7401 has changed (and he is not mad, as we suspect), our next course of action must be to attempt to create our own anomaly, to see if we might witness changes firsthand. We request additional interviews with 7401 for the purpose of studying the creation of the anomaly.

51

I don't think killing the thing at birth would have made any difference, even had they had succeeded. If there is one true reality, and I suppose there are many, then only my father could tell the difference when that reality changed. If there are many, and my father merely travelled from one to the other, only my father could tell them apart.

As long as they let my father into the dreamworld, the anomaly would return. And they needed him in the dreamworld. For if they kept him out, he would truly have gone mad.

And he would be no use to them at all.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I have watched my shadows with hope, but continued to be disappointed. My so-called *perception of reality* continues to change, but the changes are subtle, and I remain alone, my memory of life with family slowly fading.

Tonight, they murdered me. He, him, himself. The child that was me, not yet six years of age. Even in the dreamworld, such an act is monstrous. Yet, there was nothing to be done. The murder was unexpected, and for the rest of the dreamlife I had little choice but to turn my energy back toward my new untenable workload.

Though I no longer have my brief but elevated status, my apartment is once again in a warm color, and my appliances have been recently serviced. Beyond that, I have seen little change. Against my better judgment, I have begun to wonder if, should I ever find my family again, I must do as *they* have done, and murder my child self, every night, for as long as I live.

Monstrous thought. There must be another way.

Though my workload kept me almost too busy to think, I have contemplated my next action. If I can find the anomaly near birth and convince my shadows I am attempting to affect it, they, too, may attempt to murder the infant. If I can switch the infant with another, perhaps I can save the anomaly, and keep them from noticing their mistake.

The plan hinges on so much that I have little hope of success. And yet, what else is there to do?

52

It wasn't a terrible plan, all told. Had he been able to spend more time, had he been freed up to think, to plan, it might have worked out better. As it was, he just too busy.

Mani Fields 1212:

1212 has been inconsistent and erratic at work, likely as a result of their feelings of inadequacy, exacerbated by poor work performance. In the dream, Mani was born as a gay male in a moderately impoverished community. In his young years, I discouraged his sexuality, leading to epiphany in young adulthood, and increased confidence. As he aged, I continued to reward his confidence with mild luck and feelings of accomplishment. A difficult homecoming with his estranged father that he had long feared was brought to a successful conclusion, ultimately leaving Mani with a sense of pride for undertaking each challenge in the dreamlife. This pride should lead to increased confidence at home, and stability for at least a few days. Further maintenance will certainly be required. Estimated success: 64%.

53

It was only a matter of time until my father told them about me. About his memory of me. About Metameleia Halfstep, his ultimate undoing.

I don't think he was worried about anything he told them. I think he believed, really believed, that the next day, or the day after that, or the day after that, he would succeed. I think he believed

that when he succeeded, not only would he have his family back, but that the suits from Internal Investigations would have forgotten all about him. Or never known about it. Or cease to exist altogether.

He was not worried.

He should have been.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I cannot and will not deny that some realities had more draw than others. One set of realities, in my case. What you have to understand, what you can't fully dismiss is that she was not always my daughter. Leia...yes, my daughter, the one who, yes, of course...Metameleia Halfstep, my only daughter, was an *effect*.

What I mean by...? Perhaps I should back up a bit, if that's...yes, very well. How should I put this...you see, when I began my work as Life Therapist, I was not, had never been, married. Nor did I desire to be. As now, I was not then a family man, so to speak. The life of a dreamwalker is a solitary one as I'm sure you...no, yes, of course. My life as a dreamwalker was a solitary one. I had a few friends, other walkers. We would occasionally breakfast together prior to going in, sometimes share some conversation before going home. More acquaintances than friends, perhaps. When it came to serious romance, there was none. None that I recall.

Yes. No. I mean, yes, of course I am familiar with...one can hardly mistake an illicit rendezvous in a fictional world with...no, I do not deny the charge. On several occasions, I

allowed myself inappropriate liaisons inside the dreamworld. Never with an assignment, of course. I was disciplined for those infractions when they came to light and have not since...very well. I do not deny liaisons over my short lifetime, only the memory of serious romantic relationship and marriage. Now why did I...oh yes, the girl.

As my reality began to shift...I'm sorry...my what? Oh, yes, understood. As my *perception of reality* began to shift, I found that some of the people in my life shifted with it. On one occasion, I did not recognize a single walker around the breakfast table. On another, I returned home to a place I hardly recognized, where a tame and aged animal, a canine, I think, was waiting for me, and welcomed me as an old friend.

My...*perception of reality* did not always shift so significantly, though it did shift. Leia was one of those shifts.

The first time, Leia was eight and motherless. Another she was twelve, her mother away on business, our family an apparently happy one. Another, she was only four. At my last memory of her she was seventeen. A dangerous age indeed. Her mother had been deceased some four years. I had no memory of our supposed time together. I had told my daughter as much. Not at first, but soon enough. Soon enough, it became clear that I could not build trust with her if I was not honest with her.

What I mean by...? Perhaps I haven't been...well...as clear as I could be. You see, when I first began to...when my *perception of reality* began to shift, I could never be certain what to expect upon leaving the dreamworld. I would be thrown off and begin trying to explain myself, show my embarrassment for not remembering what everyone around me did.

I learned soon enough, however, to relax into my new perception, expecting it to change soon enough in any case. I would bluff my way through the day with anyone I was expected to know, whether it was another walker, or some supposed old friend whom I could not remember seeing before. For me, it hardly mattered. They would most likely be gone the next time I returned, and if not, their apparent memories would have shifted again anyway.

Do I... I'm sorry, I don't understand...yes, no...the question is unfair at best, without...yes, very well. I state, for the record, that I fully accept your existence, and have no expectation of your disappearance as the result of future incursions...ah, I see. That is a fair question indeed. Again, for the record, I do not at this time recall a perceived reality without the presence of Internal Investigations.

Thank you. Now, where were we?

I had, for some time, stopped taking anything too seriously. All I wanted was to get back to...to the *perception of reality* that I remembered as the true one. To get back to my old life. My first life. To undo all the changes I was...*perceiving*.

That all changed with Metameleia. Before her, all I wanted was to go home. After her, all I wanted was to *stay home*.

54

My father's confession was a warning. Although the suits from Internal Investigations were fools, they did not fail to observe my father's careful words. They did not fail to observe his

passion on certain subjects. And they did not fail to observe that he was willing to lie when it served him.

Did they believe him? I still do not know. If they believed that Epimetheus Halfstep could change reality, even tear them from existence altogether, they also must have understood they would never perceive such a change.

It was the daughter that scared them. Me. Myself. Metameleia Halfstep. They feared that his desire to find a reality where I existed was strong enough for him to risk further interference with the anomaly. To risk reality.

Their time was running short, and they moved quickly to destroy the anomaly forever. It should have been the perfect setup.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I don't think I gave them enough credit. Had they been lazier, perhaps I might have been lucky, but as it was, I think my chance of success was never good.

I made no secret of my searching for the anomaly. That part I had planned well. That part was a major success. I knew my shadows would be watching, and that I had a better chance than they to find my little avatar as close to birth as I possible. I put all of my focus into the search, wasted no time in my usual early dream rituals. I dove in without delay and found the infant in four days.

The next part of my plan looked as if it would fall right into place. Another assignment was in the same hospital. I needed only to switch one infant for the another, unseen by my

shadows, and I could legitimately attend to the anomaly throughout her life. I could pretend that the anomaly was my assignment, and no one would have been the wiser.

Except.

Except my plans never do work the way I intend.

The instant I led my shadows to the anomaly, they had no reason to look away. In a moment I dared to hope that they were distracted, I switched the babies, switched their clothes, their swaddling, everything I could think of. For that moment, and perhaps a brief span afterward, I believed I had won.

I had not.

They took away first the anomaly, the innocent child of dreams, and next they took me. All hopes but one are gone. And the last...dare I do it? Dare I attempt yet another plan? Another half thought and poorly executed plan of wishful thinking? I am beginning to believe my plans are never more than that.

I have no hope but failure.

And yet, when there is no hope, what is there left to lose?

55

Epimetheus Halfstep confessed. Truly confessed. He told them everything. He had little hope that they would believe him, but knew not what else to do. He held nothing back. Dared to tell them of his greatest wish, dared to beg them for it.

They were not prepared for his boldness.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I have been dishonest with you...what...you've got to stop...I know that you...No...I'm done caring what you think. I have something to say and I will say it. I have played your game out of fear. Some of that fear is the kind you understand. Fear of punishment. Of torture, I suppose. At least...well, we've all heard rumors. I am afraid of *that*. I'm not really one for physical pain. I don't think I would last long.

But there is another fear. A bigger one. I had this thing. This life. It was the life I wanted. The life I desired. I didn't know I needed it until I had it. Until I lost it. I had the thing in my hands. I held it, in my hands, I felt it, loved it, and it vanished. And I fear I will never hold it in my hands again. That I killed it. Vanished it.

Perhaps you are the monsters people say you are. Perhaps what I should truly fear is you. Of what you might do to me. But there is another monster I fear more. A monster who stole everything from me. Who might dare to put it in my hands again, only to watch me writhe as he takes it again.

Me.

You have repeatedly referred to my reality as my *perception of reality*. I deny that interpretation. My reality may be one of many. It may simply be that I move from one reality to the next and can only live in one at a time. But it *is* reality. We, you and I, are in one reality. And tomorrow, I shall be in another.

You have asked me if I desire a reality without you. I do. I desire a reality where I might live my life without interference. Where I might interfere with the anomaly or not, where I might be free to bring control over my life, over my reality, without witnesses. Without judgment. Without the pall of authority.

I'm done pretending. You want something. I want something. I see only one way to get both.

You don't believe me...I'm sorry...no...please don't interrupt. You can deny all you like. It would take a greater fool than I to see your goal. You have seen the anomaly, know that it should not exist. You have heard my confession and wonder if the things I say, but cannot prove, can be true. You have reported to your superiors. You have all wondered together if you might recreate what I claim to have done. If you might build your own reality, one in which you are rich, or powerful, or popular, or, I don't know, whatever people want. I can see you want to...no...just let me finish.

You want those things, either for your superiors, or more likely for yourselves. I want something different. I want my life back. Well, one particular life. The life with my family. With my daughter.

Let me back in. Let me at the anomaly. Let me try to get my life back. Instead of shadowing me, walk by my side. Let me tell you what I'm doing, why I'm doing it. Let me do it all in the open. Let me help you find your own anomalies by working together.

If you banish me from the dreamworld, or kill me, you lose any chance you have of finding your prize. If you help me find mine, however, I promise to hold nothing back. I will answer every

question, experiment in any way you want as you search for your own anomaly, your own malleable reality.

That's all I have to say. Banish me if you like. Kill me if you must. But I beg you to consider the alternative. To seek the prize along with me.

That's all I have to...do I...that's a significant...I really don't think....how could I possibly...I appreciate that, but...no, we're done here. I'm done here. You have my proposal. Do with it what you will.

56

My father had no plan, of course. He really wasn't much of a planner. He had ideas, but not the imagination to figure out what to do if his ideas didn't work. He just came up with ideas, then hoped for the best.

Needless to say, his success rate was poor.

His new idea, the idea he wanted to pursue out in the open, in full view of his investigators, was this: shower the anomaly with love.

Simple, yes, but he believed it would be effective. Of late, Epimetheus Halfstep had been operating from fear, and he had come to believe that this fear was having a direct effect on the anomaly. If it was love he sought, it must be love he gave.

To do this, he needed the suits to be with him. He needed them by his side that he might fully let go of his fear that they were spying on him, judging him, or worse.

From the Surveillance Reports of Epimetheus Halfstep:

We believe we may have exhausted all avenues with the anomaly. Upon concluding our last interview with 7401, we are of the opinion that, whatever opportunities the anomaly might promise, the claims of 7401 can be nothing but madness. We have seen no evidence of the effects they claim, nor any effective way to measure them, should they exist.

Our most recent interview with 7401 concluded with a bribe, where the Life Therapist offered to help us create new anomalies in exchange for the freedom to act with impunity inside the dreamworld. We find neither value nor danger in his proposal, beyond the egregious ethical violations of the bribe itself.

While we would prefer to gather our data on the creation of the anomaly from further interviews, it is now clear to us that we cannot expect further cooperation without the risk that comes with enhanced interrogation. The Life Therapist has been holding back on us and will continue to do so in the interview setting. Should we desire further information, our best hope may well be to accede to his proposal.

At this time, we recommend permission for one incursion, where we will attend 7401 throughout the dreamlife. Should this incursion be approved, we will make further recommendations in our report, either for continued supervised incursions, enhanced interrogations, or banishment.

57

Epimetheus Halfstep got his wish. Whether because his superiors were filled with avarice, or fear, or he just got lucky, it is impossible to say. What we know, what cannot be denied, is that my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, entered the dreamworld under strict supervision, gave deep attention to his anomaly while also attending to his usual job, and managed to come out on the other side, not only unscathed, but somehow victorious.

After his punishment level workloads, the night felt to my father almost like a vacation. He attended both to his precious anomaly, and also to his slate of assignments, easy enough for him to take care of without losing focus on his ultimate goal.

Walter Koppel 9103

The maintenance of 9103 is fairly perfunctory. Their behavior on duty has stabilized, and they need little more than the feeling of mild anxiety upon waking. I have led Walter Koppel through a life of white-collar drudgery, with a positive to negative ratio in his work environment of 1:3. At home, I have led him to divorce, a second marriage, and sense of happiness tinged with guilt for the responsibilities he left behind. 9103 should wake content, but with a sense of unfinished business impending to help drive him through the day. Estimated success: 92%.

58

Epimetheus Halfstep and two stone faced investigators went about the dreamworld, travelling together, attending both to the

life therapist's assignments and the anomaly. Along the way, my father told them of his various lives, of the differences between one world and the next, and all he could think of that might have led to the birth of the anomaly.

At the end of the dreamlife, when it was time to return to the real world, he bid his companions farewell.

He would not see them again.

Nora Baas (7401?)

Acting on the suspicion that the anomaly is myself, I have developed an appropriate life therapy plan. It is the contention of my attendants that the things I believe to be true cannot be, and therefore an appropriate life therapy would address my own mental health. With deference, I proposed to address the greatest risk to my mental health - the loneliness born of the dreamwalker life. To that end, I have ensured that the anomaly grow in a small but loving family, be welcomed by a close group of friends, live to build her own small but loving family, surrounded throughout her life by those that she cares for, and who care for her. An uncomplicated task at best, and one which did not interfere with the rest of my work. I expect to wake from the dreamworld refreshed, with a sense of warmth, and a desire to build new friendships of my own. Estimated success: 73%

59

How my father succeeded was this: he showered himself with love.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep:

It. Is. Done.

Not perfect, but done.

I suppose another man might regret the loss of twenty years, of waking up having lost a lifetime, jumping past a fifth of a life in an instant. For me, regrets there are none. For I who have lived hundreds of thousands of years, what could matter a brief spate within one, even the true one?

Leah is here, in the next room. Nineteen years old. A woman. Here, I am an old man. Or at least, old enough. I shall have to speak with her. Tell her the truth. She will lock me up for a madman, but there is nothing for it. If this is to be my life, my true life, it must be based in honesty.

I must find a way to stay here. The suits are gone. There may still be an Internal Investigations division. I have certainly found realities where they were secretive enough that no one encountered them and lived to tell the tale. The good news is that, if they do exist, they appear to have no interest in me.

I had hoped to land earlier, to share a life with a family, to get to know the wife I have never met, but I cannot risk more change. I have lost everything once. I can never risk it again.

I have determined to quit, to leave life therapy behind, but how? The Company will never let me leave, and if I move out of Life Therapy, I would be required to receive it. There seems to be no way out. Even at this advanced age, I am still nearly a decade from retirement.

I'm just no good at this. Perhaps Leia will have better thoughts.

59

And as my father prepared to tell me everything, I prepared to demand the same.

From the diary of Metameleia Halfstep:

I'm done. Done. I can't take the lying and the hiding and the avoiding for one more day. I know life therapy is private, I know. And I agree. For real. I can't imagine someone who knew everything about my dreams telling someone else about it. I can't imagine looking at somebody, knowing them from the inside, and pretending I didn't. But still, whatever it is, whatever he is hiding has to come out. At least to me.

I'm going to confront him and there an end.

I know what it is, of course. I'm no fool. But he needs to tell me. I need him to tell me that he's been spying on my dreams. That he knows more about my dreams than I do. It's gross, and disgusting, but he has to confess so we can talk about it.

I know what he'll say. He'll say it's just work. Even if he admits it, he'll never tell me the parts I don't remember. He'll never tell me what kind of assignment I am. But he has to at least tell me the truth. He needs to look me in the eye and tell me he's been spying on me.

And he has to do it now.

Immediately.

60

And so it began. Epimetheus and Metameleia Halfstep sat down to clear the air. To tell each other the truth. To unhide what had been hidden. I remember it as if it was yesterday. I remember it because it *was* yesterday.

It was yesterday when my father and I spoke. When he told me of the true nature of the world. When he admitted having no memory of Mom, of very little memory of me. When he told me of the first time he met me, of the last time he met me, of when he thought I was lost forever.

It was yesterday when he asked for my help. When, desperate to stay, to be my friend, my father, he fell at my knees and begged for an idea, a plan, anything to keep him from going back in and ruining everything again. When he told me of his fear of changing the world again, of killing me off, disappearing me, vanishing me, vanishing everything I have ever known, vanishing it all so completely that it would never have existed except in his own mind.

It was yesterday when I offered to help. It was today when I destroyed him.

What Epimetheus Halfstep told me

I don't know who you are, Leia. Not really. Maybe my memories are no worse than any other father, but if so, I feel sorry for all of them. Every moment I have spent with you, every piece

of your childhood, your awkward years, your teenage years, every conversation, game, meal, or even moments of comfortable silence sitting together, they all happened in the last few weeks.

I don't remember your mother. I've never met her. In all of the realities I've experienced, there were none where she was alive...well, where I knew her, anyway. She has never been more than a photograph to me, photographs and your stories. She sounds lovely. I'm sorry I will never meet her.

I have known you for perhaps twenty days. Twenty days, each of which jumped forward and backward, each of which had different memories, different histories. Twenty distinct days, each of which had a complete life leading up to them, lives I had no memory of. Twenty days between which I have lived twenty years.

I have to stop this, Leia. I need to land somewhere. I wish I had landed where you were younger, where the three of us could have been together, experienced life together, in real time. I desire that more than almost anything. Almost. But I'm not willing to give you up again. The risk is too great. This is my last chance, and I intend to take it.

Soon, you will be too old to live with your aging father. You're almost too old already. But I'll make the best of it. I'll enjoy my time with you while I have it, and watch you from afar as your life moves on. I won't kill you again.

Of course, I did not believe him. It was preposterous. My father had always been a little strange, dreamwalkers were known to be. Hearing his story, I became frightened. Twenty-five years as a dreamwalker had finally destroyed his mind. He was confusing his hundreds of thousands of dreamlives lived with his real one, and his mind had finally rebelled. He had lost all connection to reality. He was starting to lose track of which life was real out of all the dreamed ones.

I tried to calm him down, to distract him, but he would have none of it. I thought, forgive me, but I really thought he was just afraid to go to work. I thought he was making some sort of excuse to ruin our lives by refusing to work, that he was about to bring the wrath of The Company down upon us.

I was a fool.

I had sat down with my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, to make him show me what he was hiding. I was convinced he had been spying on me. I was desperate to confront him. His crazy story didn't help. I just saw it as another way to hide the truth.

And I birthed an idea.

From the diary of Metameleia Halfstep:

I'm more convinced than ever that I'm right. Dad is so deep in trying to hide his spying on me that he has either concocted the most offensively ridiculous story, or the guilt has driven him to madness. Either way, I think he's convinced himself that he really has been jumping from one reality to another.

He's refused to go back to the dreamworld. I begged him to go. He knows the Company would never let him just skip out forever, but he would not listen to reason. I'm so scared. What am I supposed to do with a crazy father? Am I supposed to take care of him for the rest of my life?

I kept my cool, though. I convinced him to let me cover for him. Our genetic signatures are crazy close, and if no one is looking too closely, I can fake the rest enough for a night, maybe a few.

I'm super excited. Excited and scared. I mean, I've heard stories, and Dad just spent hours telling me about *the life*, but to live a whole lifetime in one night, to come back after a few hours with the memory of a hundred years, I mean, it's a lot to take in. I always wondered what his life as a walker must be like. He never talked about it. Now I get to see for myself.

He has tried to prep me. He kept reminding me about how much time I would have. That it wasn't like I would roll into the dreamworld and start right away. He kept saying I could take a few years to find my footing. He seemed way more concerned with the details of his work, what kind of tweaks worked for what kind of people, how to make someone more docile or aggressive or ambitious or compliant or, I don't know, he kinda wouldn't shut up about it. I'm far more worried about just fitting in and not getting caught.

I'm supposed to be studying his assignments right now, but I'm too anxious. In less than two hours, I'm going to be a dreamwalker!

62

If only.

Part 3

63

Life is a dream. This much we know.

I should have been prepared. My father told me again and again. He warned me of the seduction, of the comfort of sliding into a dream, of welcoming it, of *living* it. Yet, when life is a dream, the dream is life. How easy it is to succumb.

So it was that I, Metameleia Halfstep, the monster who destroyed the world, made the rookie mistake.

I bought in.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

The insinuation was not nearly as frightening as I expected. More like falling asleep. At first, it felt like one of those nights where I wasn't so much afraid of dreaming as I was just, I suppose, *not wanting to*. My father and I were a little worried that the drug mix, balanced for his body, might overwhelm me, and I suppose it may have, but here, in this place, I don't feel a thing.

It is so amazingly real. I can hardly believe that this is not my real body, that my true self is lying in my father's chamber, completely vulnerable, ready to be exposed at any moment for an imposter. I feel my hands, my legs, the warmth on my skin. I even feel hunger, though it is easily dismissed.

It took me some time to find my father's office. This place is so complicated. Nothing here is well marked, and I feared asking questions for calling attention to myself. I suppose I'll get over

that eventually. I did finally find it, though. More of a house than an office. If nothing else, I'll be comfortable here.

I know my dad said I could take some time to get acclimated, but there are almost one thousand assignments. I'm not even sure I can find them all. I'm so worried I'm going to screw this up. If we get caught, our lives are over. I don't see how I can afford to waste any time. I've already been here four days, *dream days*, and feel like I'm falling behind.

Today I study. Tomorrow morning, I begin my search.

64

I had no idea what I was doing, of course. It took me nearly half a week to find what was to be my new home, after what I had thought were clear and easy instructions from my father. He had given me other guidance as well, equally unhelpful, as it turned out.

He kept telling me I needed to relax, to *feel* my way. That assignments would sort of *glow* if I just relaxed and let them call my attention. That I would be able to hear and smell them over immense distances. That I could move about the world simply by wishing to, once I became attuned to the *waves of coalescence*. I failed miserably at that.

I had glimpses, moments, but what I needed was a guide. Or the immense experience of my father. Even a pamphlet would have been helpful.

As it was, it was nearly seven dream years until I found my first assignment. After that, it got a little easier. I suppose there is

something about the fear of the first, that you'll never find it, that maybe it doesn't even exist, that keeps you from finding it. Once I found the first, I started to sense more of them. Soon enough, I found them everywhere. Yet, even so, it took me years to figure out how to travel instantaneously, or *ride the waves*, as my father suggested.

Still, my dreamlife, the dreamlife of Epimetheus Halfstep, really, had no shortage of resources. In that world, money was everything, and I had enough that I could do as I pleased.

Letitia Gerber 484

The assignment of 484 focuses on the need for greater acuity in their data analysis. To rectify this, I have guided Letitia Gerber to a career in finance where her greatest successes result from focused and incisive research regarding her investments. I have also added some spectacular failures resulting from sloppy guesswork and lack of rigor. The combination should settle a sense of optimism tinged with confidence upon 484, resulting in a renewed attention to acuity. Estimated success: 91%.

65

Yet, money was never going to be enough to do my father's job. If I was going to make any difference at all when it came to his assignments, I had to figure out how to affect them. Until then, my best hope was to influence them with money, subtly reward them, or the people they answered to, with gifts, or punish them by withholding. It was a slow slog that would never be enough.

Not until I discovered my father's notes did I begin to understand the true power of the dreamwalker.

From the Notes of Epimetheus Halfstep

Technique: many assignments are followed about by a cloud of creaks. Soften the creaks to a low bass rumble to create a sense of well-being.

Observation: even apparently negligible changes in the perception of gravity can lead to severe depression. Tiny adjustments to the coefficient of friction, however, can bring a sense of unease that is not debilitating.

Observation: a change in aura color can be a powerful indicator of progress.

Observation: direct address will split possibilities exponentially. Avoid except in extreme circumstances.

Technique: raise the barometric pressure to create a sense of community and optimism. Lower the barometric pressure to create an opening for leadership.

Insight: people are inordinately affected by weather.

Technique: invite a virus or mild infection to take hold to bring about a dour disposition. This can be instrumental in developing negative feedback.

Observation: monetary currency has great value in the dream-world. Its manipulation can prove a powerful tool.

Insight: happiness stems from shedding desires, more so than fulfilling them.

66

The notes were hardly more than a list of observations and insights. They were filled with advice, but in what felt like a foreign language. The notes were written by my father, *for* my father. They were meant as reminders more than lessons. I believed him when he said that the barometric pressure had a profound affect on his assignments, but was no closer to understanding what to do with that information. He seemed to suggest that he could change the barometric pressure at will, but that was as far from me as blacking out the sun: nothing short of impossible.

After nearly a decade of dream years floundering about, trying to manage my father's workload with money and deviousness, I accepted the truth that I had no business in his role. I was failing, and would bring about what would likely be the worst single dream record in my father's history. I had been floundering about with little success, and the time had come to accept my fate. If I could have quit, if I could have left the dreamworld altogether and humbled myself at the feet of my father, I would have done so.

No such fortune, however, awaited me. I had another ninety or so years before me, and there was nothing for it but to wait it out.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

I have no idea what I'm doing. I keep giving people money, doing people favors, as if it means something, which it most certainly does not. I can get people put in jail, I can make them rich, I can even make them famous, but I can't do anything in their heads. I can't make them *think*.

Dad's notes are no help. It's like they're written for advanced level training, and I'm still looking for the introduction. He said I'd *feel* it, but feel *what*? He said all I needed to do was relax, but how can I relax when there is so much pressure and all I do is fail?

I've been at this for eight years and have only just figured out how to find his assignments. Even that is a poor showing. I've found thirty-four so far, which is nice, I suppose, but there should be nearly one thousand. I think there is a very real possibility that some of them I may never find.

And the ones I have, what I have done for them? Nothing. I'm helping this girl Toni Kaiser get rich, well, her mom, anyway, which might maybe help me later if I can figure out how to take it all away from her at just the right moment. I also put Alfred Shyna's father in prison, where he is having a *very* hard time of it, I'm sorry to say. I mean, it's not like he's real or anything, and it will help him, the real Alfred, I mean, I hope. The thing is, though, I don't really *know*. Maybe I'm putting Alfred's father through this hellish existence, taken him away from his son for no good reason. I have no idea.

If only I could get in their heads.

I just want to give up.

Nothing last forever, of course. Well, almost nothing.

One Fine Day on the Boulevard

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots walking along the boulevard do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Cloudy today, says the first.

Do you think? Says the second.

Do I...

Do you think it's cloudy?

I just said...

Yes, I know what you said. It is not a question of my misunderstanding your words, but rather your *meaning*. What I want to know, the reason for my asking, the reason I ask you to repeat yourself, this time with the confidence that can only come from further consideration that either confirms or, as I suspect in this case, denies your original premise, of whether there is a sufficient number of clouds, whether the water vapor, so to speak...

So to speak?

Well, then the literal vapor, if you will...

If I will?

I simply ask for you to consider my argument.

Argument?

Argument as in premise. Or perhaps point. Yes, a point that I would like to make.

A point, you must admit, is very small.

I suppose one would have to.

And one usually associates small things with...

One?

Very, well. I. *I* usually associate small things with unimportant things. Is your argument unimportant?

Well, I...

Is your argument so unimportant that it can be reduced to the insignificance of a point?

My argument.

Yes, the thing about the...

Yes?

The water or...

Yes?

Something about water. You wanted to argue about something. Something about water.

Water vapor.

Clouds.

Yes, the clouds. I was about to suggest...

Suggest?

Very well. Declare. I was about to declare that perhaps there was not yet sufficient amount of water vapor obscuring the sun to refer to the day, or weather, perhaps, environment in any case, as cloudy. I was about to argue that the day is, in fact...

In fact?

Very well. In *supposition*, then. That the day, or weather, or environment in any case, is not cloudy, but...

But the clouds.

Yes, of course. The clouds.

There are clouds.

I do not deny it.

Yet you deny it is cloudy.

Sufficiently.

Sufficiently?

Sufficiently cloudy. I deny, or suggest, or propose the argument, perhaps, that it is not yet sufficiently cloudy, that there is not a sufficient number of clouds, the mass of water vapor

currently visible, or, conversely, the sum total of light they prevent from reaching us is not yet sufficient to earn the description of cloudy. That is my point.

Point.

Well, it is, admittedly, small in nature. A small point.

Is there any other kind?

Nevertheless, it is well and true, you must admit.

That there are not sufficient clouds to refer to the day as cloudy?

Yes.

Very well.

Well?

Very.

It is...

Not cloudy.

Then you would say it is...

Stumped.

It is stumped?

I. I am stumped. It is not sunny. Yet, there is, as you have observed, an insufficient amount of water vapor, at least that we

can see, to refer to the day as cloudy. What the day is *not*, we have agreed. What it *is* has me...

Stumped?

Stumped.

Well, it's warm, anyway.

That, my friend, is well and true. Warm but not hot.

A nice day, says the second.

Yes, says the first.

Such is the debate in which the old fusspots engage as they walk along the boulevard. A debate about the weather, or perhaps the nature of observation. A short walk away, a young girl sees how high she can swing. Her life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots at the far end of the park do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

68

The better I got at finding my father's assignments, the more I learned to relax and feel the natural frequencies of the dream. It never really came easy, but I did find, from time to time, that I could settle my soul just enough to hear the world beyond the world. I learned, at times, to stop seeing the world around me as something well and true, but rather as an illusion that I could see past, see through. At those times, I would begin to see auras, hear some sounds muffled and others piercing through. It was as if there was the real world, a world only I could experience,

shrouded by the world everyone else saw, felt, heard. In those moments, rare at first, I could dismiss the shroud, and discover what was hiding beneath.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

Maybe all is not lost. Maybe I can do this after all.

I found another one today. Scott Talbot, Scooter to his friends. I came across him at a pivotal junction, just as he was introduced to a popular narcotic. I was relaxed, calm. I could feel the flow of the dream. Scooter had this bright orange glow that was pulsating, and I could hear his words punching through a sort of fog of other sounds. This time, instead of trying to focus on him and come up with an idea of what to do next, I just sort of *noted* him. Like I would come back to him later, but for the moment just enjoy the show.

I watched him from over a block away, easy as his every motion cut through the noise to show himself clearly. I watched his pulsing glow and relaxed into the light show as it changed colors and size. One moment bright orange, the next a dark teal and shrinking.

As I stared, I started to feel like I *understood* the aura. Like it wasn't just this thing that was attached to Scott, but to me as well. To the dream itself. I started to imagine the aura as a deeper red, a sharper feeling that might bring out some of the blues while at the same time repressing the greens. It was no more than a fancy, really. I just thought the colors might look nicer as a warmer palette.

And I did it. I changed it. I changed the palette. Sort of. In one way I changed the palette, but in another, I sort of just encouraged it to change itself. Whatever it was, it didn't just happen on its own. I was part of it. I was one with it.

I got so excited I completely lost the trance. Everything went back to normal. I couldn't even distinguish Scooter's aura. I quickly made some notes about Scooter and was about to scare away the kids with the narcotics when I saw that I didn't need to. He was alone.

I think I had an impact. I'm not sure how, and I need to practice. But I think I know how to do this. At least a little.

69

It did not take long. Over the next few weeks, I had another success, then another. Within two dream years, I had found nearly half of my father's assignments, and had learned to have an effect upon their lives. I could make them feel good or bad, warm or cold, happy or sad. It was easiest to heighten whatever they were already feeling, but I found, when I could relax and concentrate at the same time, I had a palpable effect upon their emotions. I had found the rudder to steer their lives.

Sherah Dvorak 9115

As 9115 continues to be primed for promotion to management, they require ongoing work on the shift from their natural hesitancy to the decisiveness it is known they are capable of. Prior approaches, focused on a lifetime of decisions deemed successful by their peers, have brought mild improvements, but not

with the speed necessary to promote 9115 in a timely fashion. Tonight, I have taken the more radical approach of riddling Sherah's life with bad decisions, which, in each case, she felt to be the right one. I have ignored outside praise altogether, in favor of an unshakeable inner pride. Estimated success: 78%.

70

By the end of my second decade inside the dreamworld, I was acclimated, and moderately successful. I had found all of my father's assignments, had come up with an approach for each of them, and had begun acting upon those approaches on a regular basis.

My father had advised me not to be too concerned with my success on the actual assignments. *Give them attention, make the approach plausible, and get through the night.* That was his advice. At two decades in, however, I felt I was destined to do better than that. I felt as if I might actually be good at this. That I might become a dreamwalker in my own right.

Two decades in, I thought this new work was all I could want. That I could end my days happily if only I could spend all of them helping the lives of others. Tweaking dreamers' hearts and minds. Visiting one after the other, nipping and tucking, part guardian angel, part god.

It did not take long for me to discover how wrong I was.

From the Notes of Epimetheus Halfstep

Technique: Listen for the smallest sound you can discover. Allow it to fill your space while searching for a smaller sound beneath it. Continue until you find the thrum that lay beneath them. Allow the thrum to guide the rest of your senses.

Insight: The obvious approaches of giving subjects success or failure to ruminate over upon waking lose their efficacy in more delicate cases. While a smile or frown upon waking has value in many cases, a curious raising of the eyebrow, the confusion that comes with mixed messages, can have great value in leading subjects to self-contemplation.

Observation: Dreamers are subject to immense inertia. In early life that inertia tends toward continual motion and change. In late life it tends more strongly toward stagnation.

Observation: Warm weather is conducive to change, while cold weather leads to greater contemplation.

Technique: Seek subjects in crowds and watch for the contrasting color spikes.

Insight: Loss of wealth has a greater impact than sustained poverty.

Technique: To avoid attention, draw color away from your aura. Grays encourage the eye to pass over to more attractive settings.

Observation: Simple impacts are best made by enhancing existing feelings. Major impacts are best made by abating them.

71

Life is a dream. This much we know. Dreamwalking is the art of wandering that dream, nudging people into this flow or that, helping them to find a path, a life, a *dreamlife* to guide them in the waking one.

Is the waking life a dream as well?

One Fine Day in the Park

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots on the far side of the park do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Well, says the second.

And he? Says the first.

Him?

Himself, yes. Is he...

Here?

Yes. Can you see him?

The girl, says the second.

The little girl?

Yes, that's him.

Are you sure?

Rarely.

But you think...

I suspect.

You suspect?

I suspect the girl.

Suspect the girl is...

Well...

You're not sure?

I suspect the girl is he.

He?

He. Him. Himself. Wait. Watch. He'll come.

Wait?

And watch.

Watch and wait?

Yes.

And he'll come?

Always.

And she?

He?

The girl. The one you said...

Yes.

She will be...

Yes?

I mean to say, and please don't misunderstand me. I don't mean to speculate on the nature of...

Speculate?

I don't mean to.

And yet...

For the sake of argument.

Argument.

A premise then. A point.

A small one?

Always.

Very well. Speculate.

I prefer *not* to speculate at all. And yet...

Always a yet.

I wonder.

Not so much a speculation as a consideration, eh?

Yes. That's it. Not a speculation, but rather a consideration.

Very well.

Consider, then, the girl. There she sits...

Swings.

Very well. Consider the girl. There she swings. Repeating the same motions, a closed loop of action, an interminable inertia waiting for the influence of an outside force. Up and down. Back and forth.

Forth and back.

I'm sorry?

Forth and back. Forth and back. One must go forward to go back.

But the beginning.

The beginning?

Yes. Yes. Before she was swinging, she was sitting, yes?

Yes.

And to begin swinging, she walked herself back, allowing the swing to rise, that raising her feet would set the swinging in motion. She began by moving back, and then came forth. Back and forth.

No.

No?

Sitting is not swinging.

Surely one can do both?

One?

Very well, she. Surely, she can do both.

Yes, but when she walked the swing back, she was not swinging. She was walking. She did not begin swinging until she lifted her feet from the ground and allowed herself to fall forward. Fall forth. Forth and back. Forth and back.

Very well. Consider the girl. There she swings. Repeating the same motions, a closed loop of action, an interminable inertia waiting for the influence of an outside force. Up and down. Forth and back.

Down and up.

Very well. Consider the girl. There she swings. Repeating the same motions, a closed loop of action, an interminable inertia waiting for the influence of an outside force. Down and up. Forth and back. If he fails to arrive, will she swing forever?

Forever?

Very well. Until we tire of watching.

If he fails to arrive, will she swing until we tire of watching?

Yes.

No.

No?

No. She will tire before we.

And yet, he *will* come.

Always.

And serve as an outside force.

Yes.

And she will cease to swing.

Yes.

And we?

We?

Yes, we.

We will come again.

Tomorrow? Says the first.

If you like, says the second.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a

dream. This much we know. The old fusspots at the far end of the park to do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

72

I thought I could do it. Could stay aloof. Beyond. Work from inside the dream while keeping my heart outside. I thought that in one night, century of dream years that it was, I could rise to the level of expertise my father only acquired over a lifetime. I was a fool.

Riding high on my decade of success, or what I thought was success, I soon learned just how much of a fool I had been. Was reminded that every moment of our lives is dependent on the one before. That the mistakes we make today are not easily corrected tomorrow.

That it is easier to keep a ship on course than to change it.

Tara Van Altena 307

The story of 307 has been one repeated talking infractions. They have been demoted twice as a result of distractions, but have promise when they can be brought to turn their focus away from fellow workers. I had intended to lead Tara to an order of monks dedicated to silence, by rewarding early interest in meditation and yoga. Sadly, Tara was swept up into a cult that abused her growing tendency toward silence, leaving her with significant psychological damage. Rather than a life of meditation and prayer, she has embraced the extroverted tendencies we so re-vile at home, in addition to a wildly Dionysian lifestyle. There

may be some hope of remorse late in life, leading to thoughtful lessons learned upon waking. Estimated success: 24%

73

Just when all seemed to be going well, I began to see my work for what it was, fast, easy, and sloppy. The moment I came upon an idea, I pursued it. I jumped to conclusions, and without taking the time I should have to really explore, to take things one step at a time. I rushed in, confident that my first idea must be the best.

It would be strangely comforting to believe I was mad with power, but I don't think that was it. If I'm being honest with myself, I think I was just arrogant. Just took what looked like a few successes as a sign that I was a natural, that I didn't need to work at it.

My father told me I only need to be *good enough*. As it turned out, I wasn't even that.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

I swear I'm my own worst enemy. Michael Boesch should have been so easy. It was like what KT would have called a *gimme*. The guy's homebody just needed to be a little less officious. Not even a lot. It should've been fun. Just turn the guy into a fun, party loving, life of the party, right? Just something to wake up smiling from. Like, *oh, yeah, maybe if I lay off a bit, people will like me a little bit more*, kind of feeling. Easy peasy, right?

Apparently, not. Apparently, a little love for the party life is, like, impossible to undo. Apparently, I can't give one small suggestion without it being stuck in their head for the rest of their lives. I feel like I did this thing at the beginning of a homework assignment that will mean I'll get the whole thing wrong, but there is no way to start over, so you just have to give up.

It's like, when I give a *suggestion*, they're all like, *ooh, I never thought of that, what a great idea!* And it feels great. Like I can just plant this idea in their head, make them *feel* how I want, and they just *accept it*. Until they don't. Because no matter how easy it is to give them a suggestion when they haven't had one before, they are amazingly stubborn about ever letting my suggestions go. Like *ever*.

So, Michael, the guy I encouraged to be the life the party, took it a little too far. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Dad's got no shortage of other assignments that are addicted to mood changers and whatever. Michael has definitely gone farther than I intended. He's wasted all the time. Like, addiction spiral and all that. People are starting to hate him. If I don't do anything, by the time he wakes up, his homebody will be so afraid of the party life that he'll probably be more officious than ever.

No big deal, though, right? Just give him another suggestion. Encourage him to step it back a bit. Take a night off now and then. Get him to be *fun* again.

Except he won't listen. I mean, I could probably get him to, like, get into model trains or something. He'd probably listen to something completely new and different. But anything to do with the first suggestion is, like, completely off limits. Like my first suggestion was so good or whatever that he's going to hold onto it for the rest of his life. Like it's unchangeable.

How is that even fair? I can't undo anything?

And it's like that everywhere. Every stupid assignment is now stuck with whatever my first-grade mentality was when I first figured out how to suggest *anything*. All of them. All of them are stuck with some stupid first idea I had when I had no idea what I was doing, all of which were ridiculous. I have no one to blame but myself for ruining every single assignment, and probably my Dad's life.

Ugh.

I'm starting to think I'll just have to give up and just figure out how to fudge the reports to make them seem like good efforts. Like, instead of it looking like my Dad sucks at his job now, maybe I can make it look like he just had a bunch of good ideas that didn't work out.

He'll see through it of course.

And he'll never let me do this again.

74

One after another, they all fell. One after the another, every promise of hope, of success, of assignments I could look back upon with pride, all broke into piles of rubble I had no hope of putting together again.

Some were worse than others, of course. They all had fixations, they all had gut feelings, senses of right and wrong that stemmed from my dumb suggestions. Yet, some left more room than others for new and unrelated directions. Because of me, the

primary colors of their lives had been set. There was still room for mild tone changes. I had no idea how to take a dreamer I had made red to be blue, but there seemed to be some hope of the subtle changes between cherry and fire engine, perhaps even as warm as blood. Easier than that, though dangerous, were accents. A stripe of blue, perhaps, to suggest a transition toward lavender.

New accents, however, meant new suggestions to which the dreamers would hold just as fast. I felt as if any change I might make would just be one more I would regret later.

I needed advice. There in the dreamworld, however, there was no advice to be found. My father was back home, as far from me as the dreamers were from themselves. I was desperate to be done so I might go home and tell him of my adventures, ask him how to do better, beg for a second chance.

If only.

Walter Castro Aton 1045

1045 has been an excellent asset for their creative approach, tempered only by a tendency toward excessive worry leading to panic. I began with the well tested approach of a relaxed bohemian lifestyle, where Walter would spend his days carefree and relaxed. Later in life, I introduced an artistic bent to help give some meaning to his life easily remembered upon waking. The lateness, however, led to worries that he had not begun his artistic journey soon enough, and exactly the sort of panic 1045 experiences at home. Some hope remains that the association between the earlier joys and later stress will lead to a tempering of high stress worry at home. Estimated success: 33%

One decade in, I was a lost child flailing about without direction. Two decades in, I imagined myself a seasoned professional, navigating my responsibilities with ease. Three decades in, I was an abject failure, victim of my own rashness and stupidity. As the third decade came to a close, I became resigned to a dreamlife of middling work that, with luck, would be good enough to get my father off the hook for staying home, and maybe also to convince him to let me try again. I was not so much sanguine as *cautiously optimistic*.

One Fine Day in the Coffee House

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots at a table in the back do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Crowded, says the first.

Do you think? Says the second.

Do I...

Do you think this place is crowded?

I just said...

Yes, I know what you said. It is not a question of my misunderstanding your words, but rather your *meaning*. What I want to know, the reason for my asking, the reason I ask you to repeat yourself, this time with the confidence that can only come from further consideration that either confirms or, as I suspect in this

case, denies your original premise, of whether there is a sufficient amount of people, whether the crowd, so to speak...

So to speak?

Well, then, the literal crowd.

So to speak.

If you will.

I will.

You speak. You speak of a crowd. You note that there is a crowd, so to speak. If there is a crowd, which we agree that there is...

We agree?

Of course. You and I have both stated, in different ways, that there is a crowd in this establishment. If there is a crowd in a place, then that place is, by definition, crowded.

By definition?

So to speak.

Yet...you don't think it's crowded.

Not especially, no.

Crowded, but not overcrowded.

Yes.

Busy, but not packed.

Yes.

Bustling but not oppressive.

Yes.

Vibrant but not jammed.

Yes.

Teeming but not thick.

Well...

Or perhaps, if you would permit me to embrace a metaphor apropos of this establishment, we might say that it is also...

Yes?

Brimming but not full.

Well.

Well?

Well.

And he? Says the first.

He?

He. Him. Himself.

Behind the counter. Rushing back and forth. In and out of that door. Scurrying about with unclear purpose.

Forth and back.

Forth and back?

Yes. Going back implies a return to somewhere. Before one can return, one must first leave a place. One cannot go back before one goes forth. One must leave before one can return. One must first come forth before one can go back.

One?

Very well. He. Him. Himself. He must have entered through the back, perhaps through a staff entrance we cannot see from our table. At which time...

At which time, he came forth.

Prior to going back.

Forth and back.

Forth and back.

Very well. There he is. He. Him. Himself. Behind the counter. Rushing forth and back. Out and in of that door, scurrying about with unclear purpose. A manager perhaps.

Are you sure?

Rarely.

But you think...

I suspect.

You suspect?

I suspect the manager.

You suspect the manager?

I suspect the manager is he. Him. Himself. Wait. Watch. He'll come.

Here?

Always.

With intention?

Rarely.

Well.

The manager is busy. He has, if you will, an inertia to his day that likely represents the inertia of his life. He is in motion, both literally and metaphorically, and is unlikely able to stop of his own accord. The manager, he, him, himself, will continue to stay in motion, both physically and metaphorically, until acted upon by an outside force. In what way he will be acted upon is yet unknown.

But he will come.

Always.

And he will act?

Rarely.

Well, says the first.

Well, says the second.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots at the table in the back do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

76

I was beginning to feel that I could, as my father advised, do as little as possible, and draw little attention to myself as a result. My assignments were on paths. Not great ones. Not even ones with great hope of success. But they were on paths that could be rationalized. I began to relax and accept the idea that my poor performance would not destroy anyone, and that, while I was not the natural brilliant dreamwalker I had fantasized myself to be, I could probably get through the dream without causing too much damage.

And I relaxed.

A bit.

And I spent a little more time away from my assignments. A little more time exploring. Observing the world. I was seeing from a perspective so few could. I sought paths closed to others, to dreamers, paths only accessible to sanctioned life therapists.

It was upon such a path that I saw my father.

What Epimetheus Halfstep told me

It is a strange world you are about to find yourself in, Leia. It is like our world, and yet entirely unlike our world. With time, you may find that you can make it your own. That you cannot only affect your subjects, but also your environment.

How can I put this?

When I was a boy, I was allowed to choose a reasonably priced bicycle from a bicycle shop. There are few such shops, if any, today, but in my boyhood, there were more. I visited that shop a few times in my youth, but not often. I can only remember owning two bicycles, and only remember choosing one at the bicycle shop once. The memory, however, is strong.

On a day, a dreamday, that I was relaxing without too much on my mind, I wandered a village I had not paid too much attention to previously. As I approached what appeared to be a bicycle shop, the memory came rushing back. By the time I was able to look in the shop window, I found the place to be almost exactly as a remembered the one from my youth. So much so that it could not possibly have been that way naturally. I had, and this is what I'm trying to tell you, I had, however unconsciously, made that shop to suit my memory, down to the sign above the door: Slender's Bike Shop.

A world of impossible things is possible for the dreamwalker.

I never consciously brought that shop about, but I watched it appear in other dreams as well. Other places, too. You can shape

the dream with your presence. Not just your assignments, but the dream itself. I've learned do such shaping with intention, but it took years. Real years. Thousands of dream years to develop that skill. Today, I have a world of private places where I can get the perfect cherry pie, where I always like the movie they're showing, where the view warms my heart, the music soothes my soul, or the coffee has the perfect blend. Over time, I've been able to make the dreamworld feel like a home.

I doubt you will see any of my creations. I suspect each walker has their own that come and go with their presence. But who knows, maybe you will accidently make some of your own.

77

He was not wrong. Not entirely. Even an amateur like me could change the dreamworld. Little revisions to make the place more like home. A seductive and dangerous power that should never have fallen into the hands of a childish fool. By the time I realized what I had done, of course...

But I get ahead of myself. That was many years later. Dream years. So many things happened first. Before I destroyed everything. Before I allowed my hubris to...

In those early days, when I had given up hope for greatness and prayed only to *get through it*, I had no desire to make a world in my image. I desired not even the little changes my father spoke of. I only wanted to stop screwing everything up. Do a little less damage.

That alone seemed an impossible goal.

Without guidance, I was flailing about, never sure if this or that approach would work. Whether the choices I made today would make a difference tomorrow, and if they did, if those changes would be good ones. Without guidance, I had come to embrace the idea of *the less done the better*.

But guidance was coming. It was just around the corner.

From the Notes of Epimetheus Halfstep

Insight: While broad political change is forbidden, there can be much value in targeted small changes within the broader structure.

Observation: The growth rate averaged over an ecological system is inversely proportional to the technological growth spurred by those living within that system.

Technique: Create the perception of long light days to inspire change

Observation: Gender roles can significantly impact the value of given actions, both by making results more easily attainable, and by creating greater challenges with commensurate reward.

Technique: To enhance susceptibility to love, first exhaust the dreamer, then lead them to a state of resignation.

Observation: Direct physical interaction will multiply effects significantly. Sustained interaction leads to exponential change.

Observation: Slower technological growth allows for more contemplative dreamers, leading to the opportunity for increasingly

subtle changes. Quite possibly, this relationship is inversely proportional, though difficult to measure.

Insight: Physical pleasure and pain are both distracting and addictive. They are best avoided.

78

It was easy enough to find, once I began paying attention. He had given me what might as well have been a map. Not just a guidepost, but a sign. A clear and obvious sign.

Hanging above a door.

In my case, it was not a small village, but rather within a busy commercial district. It was a place where I sometimes wandered to watch all the noise, dreamers from other divisions, other companies, or sometimes just our own, dreaming the night away with no life therapy. Dreamers with no aura I could see, dreamers upon which I could have no impact. It was comforting to wade about in a sea of aura-less characters moving about as if their lives had meaning. I often wandered that district, making observations, walking in and out of stores, occasionally indulging in some mild pleasure.

I was a bit dreamy.

True, I had been a little depressed, but I was also resigned. I had given myself over to failure, to the idea that the less I interfered, the better off everyone would be. The idea was freeing, and for months, I found myself strolling areas like that district, relaxing into a life I had little reason to despise. The dreamlife was, for

me, good enough, and I had decided that I might as well enjoy it.

It was in such a state that a sign caught my eye.

A sign dangling above a doorway. A doorway sandwiched by display windows. A sign that read: Slender's Bicycle Shop.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

I suppose my father was right. You sometimes need to stop caring a bit for the interesting things to happen. I don't mean to say that I stopped caring today, but I do think I was in that state where I just, sort of, let myself off the hook, I suppose.

I guess it was just one of those days. I stared at myself in the mirror for what felt like hours. Just a nineteen year old girl on the outside staring back at the fifty-four year old woman within. My mind wandered, but kept coming back to the real world, the world where I was still nineteen, the world where all my friends were nineteen, the world where no one but my father would have any idea of what I've been through. I'm an old woman in child's body. What place can there be for someone like me back home?

That was my day, I suppose. Just a little dreamy. Contemplative. I'd stopped bothering with my father's assignments. At least for a while. Maybe another ten years. Every time I mess with them, I make things worse, so it hardly seems to matter. I've succumbed to wandering a world where I have no place, and less value, thinking about the world I came from, where just about the same is true.

At first, I thought about just wandering off to the mountains. Taking a long hike in the middle of nowhere. Go where nobody would see me. Where I wouldn't see anyone else. Yet, the more I thought of solitude, the less I desired it. What I wanted was to be surrounded by these people to whom I meant nothing. To exacerbate my loneliness by diving into the crowd.

Or maybe I was just bored.

Either way, I did the thing I always do, and walked down to one of the shopping districts. Just an anonymous stroll through the tourist crowds, a little window shopping. I figured I would walk awhile, perhaps stop at Bean's for a coffee, people watch. The sights were familiar, though the storefronts were always changing. I was disappointed to see Bean's gone out of business, but wondered if, like my father, I might ever find a way to create my own backgrounds out of thin air. In the meantime, I had plenty of money, and dreamed a bit about just giving it to the coffee shop, keep them in business a little longer through some mysterious philanthropy.

What surprised me, caught me off my guard, if I even had my guard up, was the sign in Bean's window. I had expected to see some sort of farewell, maybe a *for rent* sign. Instead, in the spot where I had sat hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, stood a store that looked like it had been there even longer than Bean's. As if Bean's had never existed, and instead, that spot, that very place had been occupied as long as the locals could remember, with an entirely different sort of shop altogether.

Slender's Bike Shop.

I didn't notice anything unusual. Not at first. At first it was just a bike shop. A strange place to be sure, filled with different styles of bikes. When my father had first told me about it, I don't think I really understood. I imagined more of a counter with a clerk asking if you wanted a large, medium, or child's, and then going in the back to pull a bike. A normal bike. A standard bike. The sort we're all used to back home. Just something to get you to work and back. Two wheels, a handlebar, and a couple of pedals. A few colors, but nothing special.

These were special.

These bikes came in different shapes, different styles. They even came with different gear ratios. There was every kind of grip you could think of on the handlebars. Some had lights, some didn't. Some had hand brakes, some had foot brakes. It was like a grocery store for bicycles.

When I say I didn't notice anything unusual, I mean that, though the place was unusual in itself, by the nature of having so many varieties of something as mundane as a bicycle, it was ultimately just a store. Lots of items displayed about, customers wandering about, waiting their turn with the salesman, a young clerk waiting to sell the accessories most people seemed to be buying. Just a normal store with an unexpected product.

I had no interest in getting a bicycle, but my father's story made me dreamy, and I wandered about, wondering about his childhood, the nostalgia that helped him to dream up a place like this. At first, I smiled at it. A lovely view into my father's past, into the idealization of his past. I smiled at a memory of an age I could hardly fathom, an age before The Company. A memory

of a time when ordinary people still had choices. Where you didn't need special permission to change the color of your walls.

And I froze.

Not because I had been thinking dangerous thoughts. A woman's thoughts are her own. It was the shop itself. The shop my father had dreamed up from nothing. The shop born of his fantasy of the past. Created in one dream, and finding itself in another. A shop my father dreamed up that had so much power it could perpetuate itself into new worlds without his help.

I froze in terror at how much power my father actually had.

What Epimetheus Halfstep told me

You can and should make the place your own, Leia. This is a rare opportunity for you, and you should make the most of it. For me, a man who has lived two thousand lives, it matters little whether I make the most of one over another. When you've lived hundreds of thousands of years, what are a mere hundred, more or less? But for you, this is once in a lifetime. Make the most of it.

I don't mean creating a world in your own image. That is hardly possible, even for the most seasoned of dreamwalkers. As a walker, you will largely inherit a world sanctioned by The Company. Never mess with the social or political structure. Never.

But to find yourself in places of quiet beauty, to wake to a warm sunny day of promise, to wander the mist along a stormy sea

when you're feeling contemplative, these are wonders you can't experience here in our world, and you should seek them out.

Above all, don't be afraid to leave some of yourself behind...metaphorically, of course. Be generous to the dream. Don't hold yourself back. You will always be aloof, of course, but there is a difference between a teacher and an instruction manual. The manual can have great effect upon its readers, but it can never learn from them. A teacher interacts, teaches *and* learns, if she chooses.

Be vulnerable. Share yourself with the dream.

It will make you stronger.

80

Looking back, it's hard to know if I felt it immediately or not. I have no doubt, however, that *it felt me*.

What I wanted was to people watch, maybe explore some of those weird bicycles, then perhaps walk next door for an ice cream. I suppose those thoughts of my father's childhood made me reminiscent of my own. Instead, I found myself drawn toward a small bench in the corner. The framed poster above the bench was nothing special, but I found myself staring at it without seeing. I suppose this should be the part of the story where something about the poster caught my eye, and I describe it in detail for the sake of all the metaphors hidden within.

It is not to be. It was a simple poster, graphic in style, of some bicyclists on a country road. Nothing special. It was what I *felt* that was special.

I could feel a presence, a strength coming from, if not from the poster or the bench, at least from that area. Something that made me feel as if I belonged there. As if, should I never again for the rest of the dream leave that spot, I could want for nothing more.

One Fine Day at the Library

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots sitting on the bench outside the library do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Nice, says the first.

Do you think? says the second.

Do I...

Do you think it looks nice?

I just said...

Because I'm surprised to hear you say it.

That it looks nice.

Yes.

You don't think it looks nice?

Hardly.

Hardly?

Hardly. Hardly nice. In fact, I would say not nice at all.

You would?

I will. I do. The house at which we gaze, this house across the lawn before us, this house with a view not only of the library which lies behind us, but of we ourselves, sitting before it, this house which formerly finished the picture of this neighborhood in a pleasant way, if I might say so...

If you might?

I will. I do. The house at which we gaze, this house across the lawn before us, this house with a view not only of the library which lies behind us, but of we ourselves, sitting before it, this house which formerly finished the picture of this neighborhood in a pleasant way, a *nice* way, if I might borrow your words...

You may.

I will. I do. The house at which we gaze, this house across the lawn before us, this house with a view not only of the library which lies behind us, but of we ourselves, sitting before it, this house which formerly finished the picture of this neighborhood in a nice way now detracts from the beauty it once enhanced.

It was nice.

Yes.

But now it isn't.

Yes.

Now it detracts.

Yes.

Because it is unfinished?

Yes. No. It detracts because it is unfinished. But it will also continue to detract once it is finished.

You don't like the color?

It is tasteless.

It has no taste?

No. Yes. It has bad taste.

You do not like the taste?

I do not like the taste.

Well.

Well.

And he?

He?

He. Him. Himself.

Above. Up. Upon. Upon the scaffold. Painting that abhorrent color upon the formerly nice-looking house which now detracts from our view across the lawn.

And he will come?

Always.

With intention?

Rarely.

But today?

Unlikely.

He will watch.

Watch and observe.

Observe and study.

Study and examine.

Examine and contemplate.

Contemplate and consider.

He will come. He will watch, observe, study, examine, contemplate and consider. Yet...

Always a yet.

He will come. He will watch, observe, study, examine, contemplate and consider. Yet he will not act.

He does not *intend* to act.

But he may.

Rarely.

Well, says the first.

Well, says the second.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots sitting on the bench outside the library do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

81

I stood there, absorbing the strange presence, feeling for all the world like a new and different person, a victim of some narcotic haze rooting me to the spot. Such was my state of mind when I was jerked from my reverie by a salesperson asking if he could help.

The moment I replied, the spell was broken. The presence was gone.

I turned to leave, to seek my childish ice cream, and headed for the door. As I left, however, I felt the presence again, this time turning me back toward the store, drawing me back in. Drawing my eyes. My attention.

I relaxed into it, gave myself over to the dream, and let it lead me where it might. First through the window, then to the bicycles just on the other side, then, as if the presence was pulling my attention into increasing focus, to a small collection of notices in the corner of the window.

I followed the instructions from one of the notices and inquired with the clerk about the apartment for rent above the shop.

Benjamin Nagel 1378

In order to motivate 1378 in their physical labor, I have given them a dreadful life of humiliation and trauma. Benjamin Nagel will spend most of this life under the thumb of a mean-spirited supervisor, and take out his anger with aggression toward his wife and children. At every opportunity, his desire for stature and wealth will be thwarted, even as he sees a world of less deserving people around him succeed. Small humiliations at work will lead him to turn his anger at work into anger at the world as a whole, and to seek like-minded friends where that anger might breed. He will spend a life feeling put upon and robbed of his right to success, and ultimately die angry. These feelings of anger should linger upon waking, leading to increased strength and endurance while memories remain. Estimated success: 82%

82

I had many *homes away from home* in the dreamworld. I had the office and home that was meant for my father, of course, but I also had no shortage of flops, so to speak. Particularly in my earliest of days, I found travel difficult, and I used my easy wealth to secure this place or that, always thinking I would revisit them over the course of the dream. I rarely did, but it was comforting to know they were there.

It was, then, hardly a thought for me to secure this place in a favorite neighborhood, with windows overlooking the street, a comfy little respite in the midst of the tourist bustle. Even without the strange sensations in the corner of the bike shop, it was just the sort of place I would have rented on a whim. I paid for

a year's rent in advance, took possession of the keys, and soon enough found myself alone, sitting on the hardwood floor of an unfurnished apartment.

I had never been anywhere more crowded.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

I'm scared.

This place is so strange. Like I'm in the middle of this huge crowd of people, but I can't see anything, and can only sort of hear them. It feels as if I'm walking through a graveyard where ghosts keep *communing* with me, passing through me, speaking in all kinds of languages, and I can only pick up a few phrases here and there. It must be some sort of technical glitch, but the whole experience is unsettling.

At first, I was just standing at that big bay window, looking down on the crowds of shoppers below. I opened the window and the noise and bustle carried itself into the apartment in a really nice way. When I heard this or that conversation cutting through the crowd, I assumed it was just someone louder than everyone else, or with a timbre that I was susceptible to. Or maybe an assignment I wasn't expecting to see.

It wasn't. They weren't. The voices were coming from inside the apartment.

From inside my head.

Everything is so weird, I just can't interpret it. I keep hearing these old fusspots arguing with each other about the weather

and stuff, I think. And some sort of trial, maybe. And these soft and thoughtful reminiscences, sort of, though that's based entirely on the sound, not the words. That one I'm having a lot of trouble understanding. Well, all of them, really. And these visions. I keep seeing people. People I don't know. Thousands of people. Real people. Real dream people. People with auras.

There is no way I could sleep there, even if I had a bed. I've already paid for a full year, but I doubt I'll ever come back. After an afternoon of madness, I don't think my brain could take another moment.

I left, of course. The ice cream was nice. I'd been thinking about it all morning. I'm back at the cottage now, but I can't get that apartment out of my head. Dare I go back? Is there something there I'm supposed to learn, or report? If it is a glitch, should I tell anyone about it? Does Dad already know?

Not that I need any sleep in this place, but I think it will be at least a few days before I close my eyes again.

83

They were both voices and *not-voices*. Ultimately, I came to know them well, but at that first encounter, I was hardly more than just afraid. I had become used to hearing voices in the dreamworld, but those were focused. Sometimes they were voices I chose to hear, sometimes they chose for me to hear them, but always they danced about someone I was interested in, an assignment.

Often, when I was distracted and not looking for it, I would hear the telltale mumble of voices in and around the head of one of

my assignments. Inevitably, the noise would carry my attention toward it, until I saw the soft glow of one of my *old friends*. Sometimes those voices just carried a feeling, or perhaps an *intent*, but often I could hear the actual words, sentences and stories that had a direct effect on the glowing dreamer, and which I could change with some small effort. Changing the intent was always easiest, though I did ultimately learn to change the words as well.

These voices, though, the ones in the empty apartment above Slender's Bike Shop, were something entirely different altogether. There was no glow, no assignment, no old friend nearby. The voices were homeless, as if they had been discarded by someone and left to live on their own, disembodied forever.

Had that been all, however, I might have stayed longer to study them. Worked to distinguish the words, the stories.

Yet, that was not all. For the voices were not disembodied. Not really. They had, from the moment I entered the bike shop, attached themselves to me. They had started from the outside, but soon enough found their way inside. Creeped into my brain until they were my own.

Naturally, I got as far away from that place as I could.

From the Notes of Epimetheus Halfstep

Observation: Sharp and piercing voices have quick but short-lived effects. Low rumbles with muffled detail but broad emotional bases work more slowly, and ultimately lead to more robust impacts.

Technique: Pepper periods of good luck with misfortune, to enhance soul loyalty.

Observation: Urban environments are not conducive to contemplation. They are ripe with distractions, useful for targeted changes, but less helpful in bringing employees toward wholistic growth.

Insight: Late life impacts, while valuable, have limited use for employees with long term goals.

Observation: For change to have a lasting impact, it must be followed by long periods without further change. This gives the impression that the change has taken effect, and drives the dreamer to connect their later existence with the earlier change.

Technique: Use rain to bring about contemplation. Use sparingly.

Lesson: Never fall in love with a dreamer

84

It was a good lesson that I failed to learn.

85

I did my best to forget about the strange apartment. I told myself it was no more than a glitch, or, to steal my father's word, an *anomaly*. Perhaps, I thought, it was a good kick in the pants. I had been largely ignoring the assignments for the better part of

ten years. The time seemed ripe to get back to work, to visit my father's assignments, check on their progress.

It was a good thing I did. Left to their own devices, the poor souls were falling into habits that would serve no one. Not The Company, not their co-workers, not even the dreamers themselves. If I wasn't careful, they would all wake up worse off than when they had fallen asleep.

Greta DuBois: 4116

The tendency of 4116 toward curt responses bordering on insubordination has led to an unsustainable work environment. To combat this, Greta will live a life largely driven by careless superiors. She will spend a large portion of her life as a homemaker, where an uncaring husband will pay her little attention, and her children will inherit the father's tendencies. In midlife, widowhood will drive her to the workforce, where she will be easily dismissed by her supervisors. While there is some risk that 4116 will wake with a distrust of their true supervisor, there is a strong likelihood that they will be more empathetic toward their subordinates. Estimated success: 61%

86

Many of my assignments were complete wrecks. There was still a lot of inertia at work from my early meddling, and what little luck I had in tempering those choices had faded in almost every case.

I went back to my notes and buried myself in the job. Within a year, I had visited every assignment, and made at least some

attempt to get them back on a sustainable track. Some were lost causes, of course. Not everyone lives to be a century old, and by what would have been their fifties, nearly a quarter of them had expired. Of those, at least half would be seen with some measure of success, I was sure. Of the other half, I was less sure, but remained hopeful.

What gave me the most hope, though, was having fewer assignments left on which to focus, and the knowledge that, as time went on, I would wrap up more and more of them. True, I had half a century to go, but much of the hardest work was now done.

A year after my frightening encounter at the apartment, as my advance rent payment was about to expire, my mind turned back to that experience. I wondered if I had dreamed it all, if I should go back, just once, with a clear head. I wondered if, had I *not* dreamed it all, I had some responsibility to explore the glitch more thoroughly. Above all, I knew that, if I wanted to go back, the time was now.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

I won't lie. Coming back here took more courage than anything I can remember. I wasn't sure if I could face the voices, the cacophony, the invasion of my mind. I wasn't sure if I could walk into this apartment and walk away sane.

At the same time, after a year of that nightmare rolling around my head, it was come back to face it, or fight with the memory for the rest of my life, my real life. I've known for this full year that I would have to come back and face it. That, one way or the other, I was going to have to face my fear head on.

And it was hard. I won't lie. It was hard. At first. At first it was hard. Later, it got easier. Later, I could start to pick it apart. Hear different themes, feel different tones. I'm down the street at a café now, to clear my head of the voices and see if I can put something into words.

But how?

It was a sort of discordant symphony. If there is a melody, it reminds me of my father. As if he were reminiscing about his life, perhaps as an old man. Something retrospective. I'm struggling to pick out more than a few words here and there, but the melodic line has a firm foundation. It *feels* like father. The *Epimetheus Halfstep Theme*. It is a little jumpy, sort of like it changes keys all the time, but has a sort of common theme that holds it together. I just wish I could pull out the story.

Opposing the main theme is a sort of sharp, aggressive and discordant invasion. This contrary theme lacks the calm assurance of the main one, but plays upon it. It takes the main theme to darker places, places that have some of the same flavor, but that also bury that flavor in oppressive spices. I can't quite decipher it, but it feels sort of defensive, a sort of *Fighting Theme*.

Little accents abound as well. I can feel the stories of a thousand souls, all at once. Flitting in and out of the main themes, these accents don't flavor the piece individually, but in mass they can turn the tone in different directions. They almost remind me of the assignment reports. As if thousands of dream stories were competing to dot the symphony, have their moment to be recognized in the larger work. I've begun to think of these accents as *The Dreamers*.

More difficult to assess is what lies underneath. I feel this rumble, this, not foundation exactly, but something more like its opposite. Shifting sands upon which the larger work rests, causing it to undulate and dance, almost rock like a ship upon the ocean, but with less regularity. Maybe it's more like a scent than a sound. Something deep and bitter. Chocolate. A black with hints of constantly changing colors underneath. As music, it feels hardly more than the rumble of a subwoofer. I can't distinguish it most of the time, though there are moments when I can hear it as endless debate about nothing. Yet, there is something to it. Something it carries which allows it to buoy the voices as a whole. Without it, I wonder if there would be a symphony at all.

I've paid the rent for another year. I must explore this more fully.

I can't live there, that's for certain. I don't think I could take it more than a few hours at a time. Yet, perhaps in time I will be able to decipher it, make something of it. Drive away the fear with knowledge.

87

You're ahead of me, of course. My father's journal, the confessions, the thousands of reports, his notes, they were all there. Indecipherable, but there. It would take me nearly a decade to work my way through them. To decode what I came to think of as *the archive*.

Yet, bit by bit, phrase by phrase, I was able to do it. To pick it apart. To hear the words. The dialogue. The story. Where it

came from, I was not yet sure, but that it was the truth I had no doubt.

With one notable exception, I was, over the course of perhaps a decade, able to transcribe this symphony into something I could not only understand, but share. I put it all on paper, so to speak, read and reread it. With one notable exception, I was piecing together the story of my father's life and starting to look forward to coming home to share it with him.

With Epimetheus Halfstep. A man who never existed.

One Fine Day in the Schoolyard

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots across the street from the schoolyard do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Cold, says the first.

Do you think? says the second.

Do I...

Do you think it is cold?

I just said...

Objectively cold. Definitively cold. Is there a metric against which you have measured the temperature of the air, combined, perhaps...

But not necessarily.

Very well. Objectively cold. Definitively cold. Is there a metric against which you have measured the temperature of the air, combined, perhaps but not necessarily, with the humidity leading to a feeling...

A perception.

Very well. Objectively cold. Definitively cold. Is there a metric against which you have measured the temperature of the air, combined, perhaps but not necessarily, with the humidity leading to a perception of cold that, no matter how subjective, can ultimately be measured objectively?

I can see my breath.

Your breath.

Yes. When I breathe out, when the warm air leaves my body, it condenses into water vapor that becomes visible as it meets the cold air outside my body. If the air outside my body were not cold, I would not be able to see my breath. Yet...

Always a yet.

Yet, I can see my breath, therefore, it is cold.

I cannot see your breath.

It is subtle, I admit.

I can neither see your breath nor my own.

Therefore, it is not cold?

Yes. No. I contend, or argue, or put forth the premise that although you have witnessed a subtle vision of your own breath, that to firmly establish the cold, that vision must be confirmed by another, in this case myself. As I am unable to confirm your findings, as I can neither see your breath nor my own, I contend that, objectively, it is...

Not cold.

Yes. No. Not cold.

Well.

Chilly but not cold.

Crisp but not biting.

A chilly and crisp autumn morning.

That, my friend, is well and true. Chilly and crisp. Sunny and cool.

A nice day.

Yes.

Well.

Well. And he?

He?

He. Him. Himself.

There.

The girl?

The boy. In the red shirt.

Playing tag.

Yes.

He's quite good.

He's got help.

Himself?

He. Him. Himself.

He has come?

With intention.

At last.

It won't help.

It rarely does.

Well, says the second.

Well, says the first.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots across the street

from the schoolyard do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

88

I could hear the journals clearest of all. The voice of my father rang true, and reminded me so much of our time together that it tended to overpower the other sounds, the other voices. Perhaps it was something about the emotional connection. That the more important something was to my father, the easier it was for me to hear. If so, then his illicit trip into the dreamworld surely rose to his most powerful experience of all.

My father, Epimetheus Halfstep, dreamwalker, father, criminal, life therapist, a man who never existed, described his time in the illicit dream as a drug induced haze. Well, perhaps that isn't entirely accurate.

His experience allowed him to see through the haze in a way other dreamers could not. And study it.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep

I suppose the loss of control should have felt freeing, but the entire experience was little more than frustrating. I suppose if I had been able to give myself over fully, I might have been able to enjoy myself. There is something attractive about letting the dream take over, letting someone else control your destiny.

Yet, for all that, it was paranoia that drove the dream.

True, I had reason to be paranoid. I had broken into the dream, and was risking not only my livelihood, but my life itself with my actions. An entire dream where, at any moment, I could have been spotted, discovered, trapped. Only a fool would not have succumbed to some paranoia.

Yet, the paranoia I felt was something different. Something without cause.

Inside the haze, when I felt my recognition of the dream fading, when I felt myself becoming a dreamer myself, losing control of myself, I had this desire to fight everything. To question everything. It was an unusual sensation to say the least.

I've never noticed this in dreamers. In dreamers, they fully accept the reality about them. They may question things in their lives, even question the nature of their existence, as if the dream were truly reality, but they are not, by nature, suspicious. As an illicit dreamer (I still shudder to think of what I have done) some part of me never accepted the dreamworld as reality. Even when I was most seduced, when I was fathoms deep into the dream haze, unable to imagine the machinations behind it, that I was merely a puppet in the grand show, even then was I bathed in paranoia and doubt.

I would look at something green and think, *such a nice color*, and in the very same breath, so to speak, think, *is it though? Is it really?* I was constantly suspicious that someone or something was making me see what I saw, think what I thought, and found myself fighting my reality.

I don't think this was simply a result of the illicit dream. I have seen illicit dreamers before, and am sure they did not feel what

I felt. No one in their right mind would seek out such a dreary experience. Not without clear purpose.

89

The other voices had different timbres, different tempos, different flavors, but with one notable exception, I came to realize that they were all the voice of my father, Epimetheus Halfstep.

Epimetheus Halfstep.

Epimetheus Halfstep.

Epimetheus Halfstep.

A mantra to bring back the dead. Say his name and he shall return.

Magical thinking.

Everything was tricky to decipher in its own way. The journals had an echoey quality to them, and, like the journals themselves, seemed to change with each hearing. I would hear a few minutes and think I understood half of it, try to write down what I was sure of. I would hear more and think the journal was simply moving forward in time, until I heard old phrases, repeated stories, each time in different orders, with different details. Over a decade of study, they coalesced, repeated themselves enough that I could write a sort of completion of the most likely ones. Whether I got them all is...well...it hardly matters now. I saved what I could. The rest is lost forever.

The reports were easier. Short, clear of voice, eminently repeatable. A little exhausting, I won't lie. Days when the reports dominated the voices, I lost focus early. Yet, I rarely needed to hear the same report twice to get it right. Perhaps my desire to copy my father's style, my hope of deceiving his supervisor, drove me to listen more carefully.

Emilia Virgo: 1028

While 1028 has successfully led productivity by example, there is some concern for her health. Emilia was born into a family farm, with a family history of heart disease destined to take her in mid-life. In an effort to maintain the quality work ethic that 1028 has shown at home, I caused the farm to struggle in her youth, requiring the entire family to provide ongoing labor and support. This labor set up Emilia for a life where, after she left the farm for university research and teaching, was usually the hardest working person in her department. The pride associated with this success should easily carry through, while her early death should encourage a healthier lifestyle. Estimated success: 93%

90

And then there was the notable exception.

They took me years to unravel. Their voices were garbled, as if they were underwater, or perhaps shouting at me in the midst of a raucous celebration where you struggle to distinguish anything above the din. I would hear this word or that, and the rest would disappear, submerged beneath the other voices, so that it

was only after piecing together tiny phrases repeated over the years that I could begin to make any sense of them at all.

If I ever did.

Of all the voices I came to know in that apartment, of all the phrases and themes and hints of stories that suffused themselves into my mind, they were the only ones, the voices I came to call the old fusspots, that were decidedly and unequivocally *not* some part of my father.

Even in the midst of the confessions, the so-called *interviews*, I only ever heard my father's voice. It was as if I was only allowed to hear what came from him, and never what came *to* him.

The old fusspots were something different entirely. As if they had invaded his world, inserted themselves where they did not belong.

The watchers.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

Another weirdo day in the *archive*. At first, I just did the usual transcriptions, a bunch of assignment reports and some pieces of the journal. It's strange, hearing about myself like a...like what? A gift? Like I was some present that came out of nowhere, and that he really liked, sure, but that wasn't really *his*. I still can't really believe he's not my father. Not really. That he's just some guy that *became* my father. Like a stepdad. That I have all these memories of him, and he has none of me. Makes me feel kind of...stupid, maybe, worthless possibly. Like I have

all these important memories, and the one person who I shared them with isn't just gone, but *never actually was*. As if my own life never existed.

Here I am, spiraling again. I guess it's just been one of those days.

I think it was the confessions. I spent most of the day, again, trying to hear the other voices. Trying to hear whatever his accusers were saying. To hear the questions. I mean, how am I supposed to understand the answers if I can't hear the questions? It's so frustrating. It's like they were never there. Like they don't exist. I want to say that the only voices I can hear are ones that originated in his head. Like, if he didn't say it, or write it, I can't hear it.

Except...

Except why can I hear those other weird voices? Those old fuss-pots who won't stop arguing. I mean, even if they were the voices of Dad's conscience or something, why would I be able to hear them talk to *each other*?

And putting them together is impossible. I feel like I'm putting together dinosaur bones or something and will end up with this made up creature because I put them all together wrong. At the same time, I wonder if it even matters. I mean, nothing they say seems to relate to my father at all. Or anyone else for that matter. Like they're just a bunch of background noise.

Or to steal my father's word, a sort of...anomaly.

It was the haze that took the longest for me. Connecting the experiences of Epimetheus Halfstep on his illicit journey to dreamworld and the strange voices I couldn't quite decipher. I had gone over his thoughts about that dream over and over, but I never quite broke through.

When he talked about his own feelings inside that illicit dream, they were no more than that. Feelings. It was almost boring for me, really. Like listening to someone describe their drug experience. Kind of interesting at first, but something that I would never really be able to relate to.

It wasn't until I focused on his view from the outside that I began to put it together.

From the Notes of Epimetheus Halfstep

Insight: Illicit dreamers come from across the spectrum of wealth and power. The risk of embarrassing a superior by exposing someone powerful is great. Better to let them have their fun and stay out of their way.

Observation: Illicit dreamers lack the aura of assignments, but do exude a palpable clarity when they rise above their dream haze.

Insight: Illicit dreamers are by no means homogenous. I always expect to find them among the rich and famous, but just as often they are poor, or suffering in some way. One could learn much by studying the choices these dreamers make for themselves when they believe no one is watching.

Observation: I watched an illicit dreamer tonight off and on for many years. This dreamer was anxious and appeared resistant to the natural flow of the dream, as if swimming upstream.

Insight: Illicit dreamers are a stubborn lot.

Insight: In sober moments, illicit dreamers pose danger to assignments. It is best to keep assignments distant from them at all times.

Technique: Give yourself over to the background hum of the dream. Assignments will rise above like musical themes, while the rest will embrace the underlying thrum beneath the music. To discover an illicit dreamer, listen for the bass that rises and falls in amplitude, occasionally spiking in frequency above the rest before settling back down.

92

I began to wonder about these bickering fusspots, the strange voices that folded in and out of clarity like waves. So much of what I could not understand seemed to line up with this idea of the illicit dreamer. With the experience of my father. With his observation of those criminals who snuck nightly into dreams they had no right visiting, looking for something they could not find in their real lives.

One Fine Day in the Soup Kitchen

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots at the table in the back do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Not bad, says the first.

The soup? Says the second.

No.

Not the soup?

Not the soup.

The squash then.

Yes.

The squash is not bad?

Yes.

And the soup?

Bad. Without question.

I disagree.

You disagree that the soup is bad?

No. Yes. I do not think the soup is bad. I might even go so far to say that it is not bad.

You might?

I do. I will. The soup is not bad. It is bland, yes. Tasteless, yes. Not entirely without taste but with undoubtedly less taste than upon our last visit. It is prosaic. Lackluster. It is, I might add,

absent the spark of pepper which adorned the soup and so excited us the last time we were here.

You might add?

I do. I will. The soup is not bad. It is bland, yes. Tasteless, yes. Not entirely without taste but with undoubtedly less taste than upon our last visit. It is prosaic. Lackluster. It is, I will add, absent the spark of pepper which adorned the soup and so excited us the last time we were here. Though the soup be bland, however, though it be with less taste than I would prefer, I hardly think it sinks to the level of bad.

Boring but not foul.

Uninspired but not dreadful.

Flavorless but not vile.

Pedestrian but not wretched.

Tasteless but not horrid.

Exactly so. The soup is not bad. It is bland, yes. Tasteless, yes. Not entirely without taste but with undoubtedly less taste than upon our last visit. It is prosaic. Lackluster. It is, I will add, absent the spark of pepper which adorned the soup and so excited us the last time we were here. Though the soup be bland, however, though it be with less taste than I would prefer, I hardly think it sinks to the level of bad. The soup is boring but not foul, uninspired but not dreadful, flavorless but not vile, pedestrian but not wretched, tasteless but not horrid. It is, unquestionably...

Bland but not bad.

Exactly so.

Well.

Well.

And he?

He?

He. Him. Himself.

There. Cleaning dishes.

The old woman?

The old woman.

And she is happy?

No. She is not happy. She has never been happy.

And he?

He?

He. Him. Himself.

There. At the door.

And he will make her happy?

He will try.

And he will succeed?

Rarely.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots at the table in the back do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

93

I'm embarrassed to say I got a little obsessed with them. I started looking everywhere I could for illicit dreamers so I could observe one, learn more about what makes them different.

True, I never stopped checking in on my assignments, but they were doing as well as I could hope, even when my hope wasn't much. When I wasn't obsessing in the archive, then, I was obsessing outside. I would wander to new locations, listen for that wavy rumble my father described, seek new scents, stare for hours at people without auras, the extras, the filler, to see if one, maybe, was more than they seemed.

I never found one.

I suppose they hide themselves on purpose. That a life therapist on her first night would have no hope of finding someone with no wish to be found. Had my father spoken of where they gathered, favorite spots, I might have had a chance. As it was, I wandered in vain, searching harder than I had in my first decade, with almost as little to show for it.

Almost.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep

I have so much to learn. I thought by...when things weren't going...if only I could...but I just couldn't...and then it was too late, and...what the hell was I thinking?

I got too close. Never again.

She was something, though. For the first time in my life, I feel like I really got to know someone. As if I finally, well, maybe this is what love is.

It couldn't last, of course. Even if we'd been able to make an entire dreamlife together, it would have ended with the dawn. And it was never real. Not for me. For Jaya, though, it was as real as everything she knew. I wonder if 4136 will remember me. I must avoid them at all costs, now, and forever.

I think breaking it off was the hardest thing I have ever done, but there was nothing for it. She was getting older, and I could only hide my secret so long. Secret. Can one love and keep such secret? Was it ever really love if I never fully gave myself over?

And I've ruined her, surely. I tore apart the structure of her dream for my own selfish whim. I knew better. The stories. The inevitable mental illness. The years of life therapy that can only hope to take her back in the direction of normalcy. To approach where they started.

How could I have been so weak.

And if they catch me, it's over.

Never again. I will never approach an assignment so closely again. I will never speak to an assignment. I will never see one as anything more than work. I will make no friends, allow no lust, shun love where I sense it approaching.

All is regret. If only I hadn't seen her smile. If only I hadn't decided to talk to her, just that once. If only I hadn't listened to her voice, spoken to her sympathetic ear. If only I had not fallen in love. If only...

Never again.

94

I suppose it was never in the cards for me to fall in love with an assignment in the way my father once did. When my assignments and I were the same age, I was still flailing about, trying to figure out what I was doing, scared to death of screwing something up. By the time I finally got comfortable, they had all gone on to get old, and there I was, forever nineteen.

Still, when I heard him speak of it, I shuddered. How easy it would be. You study them, get invested in their lives, watch them like a guardian angel and demon all rolled into one. To live a night of one hundred years and *not* love takes a hardened soul. And the rest of them, the other assignments sort of pale in comparison. As for *the noise*, they just don't have any real depth. I suppose you might use one for sex, but love hardly seems possible. What's hard to believe is that walkers don't fall in love with their assignments all the time.

No. I did not fall in love with an assignment.

But I did fall in love.

Rodolph Cannon: 773

This fairly straightforward maintenance task is proceeding well. Rodolph Cannon was born into a working class urban family, where he was regularly beaten by his father. He was led first into the armed forces, and then into the automotive repair trade, where he ultimately ran his own repair shop and raised a small family who he also treated with physical violence. A life of heightened masculinity should help 773 on their journey toward increased endurance and reduced empathy. Estimated success: 91%

95

Her name was Lois.

I had been in the habit of lingering about Slender's from time to time. I had even purchased a bicycle and learned the joy of riding through the city parks. When Lois first came in, I was wandering among the display bikes, wondering if I should exchange mine for something newer.

And I felt something.

I looked about for an aura, to see which of my assignments had just stumbled upon me, but I found none. I was in a room full of gray, with remnants of the archive voices dripping from the apartment above. No signs of anyone special. Just *noise*.

Yet, I felt something.

I continued to wander through the shop, allowing my hands to drift across from one set of handlebars to another, across the soft bicycle seats. When she tapped me on the shoulder, I jumped.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

Who is she?

I feel like...like what? Like nothing I've felt before. Like I know her, and I don't know her. Like I'm connected to her or something. To this....this what? She's not an assignment. That's for sure. She has no colors, no waves. She looks like the rest of them, like the noise.

But she's not noise. I'm drawn to her in a way I can't understand.

I think I may have screamed when she tapped me on the shoulder from behind. The whole shop got quiet, anyway. At least for a moment. I guess a shout can break the ice as well as anything. Even before that first cup of coffee, though, even while we were still there in the bike shop introducing ourselves, I could tell she was more than noise.

Could she be an illicit? Like, maybe she's just better at it than the others? There is no low rumble, no waviness, she doesn't seem to be in a fog, or fighting the dream in any way. If she is an illicit, she's nothing like how Dad described them.

Or maybe another walker? I thought we were supposed to be unable to recognize each other, but there is so little I know about this.

I could ask, but...I mean...how do I do that without sounding crazy? She's told me about her job, her family, her life. If she *is* a walker, she's definitely hiding it.

This week has been nice, though. I'm really getting to like her. She's like all these things I think I could be, like she represents my good parts or something. I admire her, really. She seems so strong and independent, confident and comfortable. And when she looks at me, I feel this...this...what is it? Something strange and wonderful. Like when I look into her eyes, I feel...is it myself, or is it something greater than myself?

As if she can see the real me.

It's scary and wonderful.

96

Over the next year, Lois and I spent most of our time together. If it was love, it was a strange love. At forever nineteen, I could hardly be a good romantic partner for her, but neither was it like a mother daughter relationship. More like fast friends, I suppose. It became love. I truly believe that. But that was much later. In that first year, we were more like best friends.

Of course, friends should not keep secrets from each other.

I kept many.

I told her I was an orphan, living off a sizable inheritance. That put off questions about my job, my lifestyle, and other things. That it turned out to be true is the tragedy of my life, but at that time, it was only *mostly* true.

We avoided the apartment, of course. It wasn't that I feared anyone else could sense the archive, hear the voices. That was a madness I was confident was reserved solely for me. I think it was more my fear of being unable to hide it. If she visited me in that place, I would have to pretend we were alone. I would have to pretend I couldn't hear the voices. Double my efforts to hide my true life. I was already hiding enough. I wasn't sure I had the strength to hide the rest when it was right on top of us.

We would spend the days talking, sharing coffee, dining in her quiet apartment, or in the many cafes that dotted the shopping district. When she spoke of her life, I always felt as if I was hearing it for the second or third or millionth time. As if we were the oldest of friends, rehashing old stories, rather than still getting to know each other for the first time.

At night, I would return to the apartment, dismiss the desire to sleep, and work through the night transcribing the archive. I felt as if I was finally homing in on my father's story. On the nature of the anomaly. On his struggle to keep a grip on a real world that was forever changing.

From the confession of Epimetheus Halfstep:

I don't disagree with the premise, and you are wise to investigate it further. I have often wondered if, rather than some natural phenomenon, beyond anyone's control, that...I'm sorry...do I...oh, yes...no...of course not. I am but a simple life therapist. The machinations of The Company and the dreamlife itself are beyond my ken. I mean only to say that I have come to see the anomaly as something that was born of its own, of an unknown algorithm, rather than a designed plan or nefarious plot

to...yes...yes, I understand, but I'm not sure if I can speculate as requested without...very well.

I know not from whence the anomaly sprung. I have devised three theories. Shall I share them?

Agreed. Just theories. No conclusions.

The first is as I previously alluded to: that the anomaly was born of unintended consequences, an algorithm built for other reasons, reacting to unexpected circumstances.

The second is as we just discussed: the anomaly was no more than an illicit dreamer with nefarious purposes, purposefully deceiving me.

The third is more complicated: the anomaly rose from a well-considered and thoroughly designed plan by authorities here at The Company, the purpose of which I would not deign to guess.

Without attempting to draw conclusions, I have greatest doubts about the illicit dreamer theory, only because I have not yet witnessed an illicit dreamer with the ability to function inside a dream at the level of a life therapist. For that theory to be true, the dreamer must have discovered some new generation of access I have no experience with. While that is undoubtedly possible, the likelihood of such access occurring without the knowledge of The Company seems unlikely.

Similarly, the idea that the anomaly was purposefully created by The Company seems equally preposterous. Why go to all the trouble of creating the thing, and not bother to properly tag it? It makes no sense.

To take that a step further...I see. No, I do not think that...of course. Yes. I do not deign to understand the machinations of The Company. I am blessed with the opportunities they have given me and look forward to a lifetime of ongoing support.

You are far better suited than I to draw conclusions.

97

I was living two lives. In one, I was an ordinary woman going about the world for little more than pleasure. In the other, I was a professional researcher, a rigorous librarian dedicating my life to making some order from the chaos around me.

By day, I found myself falling deeper and deeper in love with my middle-aged friend. By night, I felt myself getting ever closer to understanding my father's mystery, though no closer to knowing what to do about it.

For well over a year, Lois badgered me about what I did with my time. I thought I could put her off by telling her I was researching for a book about dreams, but her questions got more and more specific, until I felt I had dug myself into a hole of lies from which I might never crawl out. It was not until I caved in and finally let her visit my apartment, however, that I realized I would need to tell her everything.

I had feared I would look a fool as I tried to listen to her above the din of voices only I could hear. That I would go mad with the distraction.

That she might not only be able to hear the voices, but better than I, was something for which I was completely unprepared.

One Fine Day at the Club

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots in the corner do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

It would be nice, says the first.

Nice, says the second.

A cigar.

Yes.

Port.

Yes.

Perhaps a game of billiards.

Yes.

A proper end to a proper evening at a proper club.

All things must pass.

Must?

Surely the club is improved.

Surely?

While I cannot deny...

Cannot?

Very well. While I do not deny the pleasures, nostalgic though they may be, of a good cigar and a well-matched port to a quiet game of billiards, I must...

You must?

Very well. I do. I will. While I do not deny the pleasures, nostalgic though they may be, of a good cigar and a well-matched port to a quiet game of billiards, I will and do say that they did have their, shall we say, downside?

Shall we?

We shall. I do. While I do not deny the pleasures, nostalgic though they may be, of a good cigar and a well-matched port to a quiet game of billiards, I will and do say that they did have their downside. The scent, it cannot be denied, lingers unpleasantly, the port, delicious and, I will add, a useful aid to digestion, had a tendency not only to spill, perhaps as a result of the deleterious effects brought about by it and its brethren throughout the evening and the sleepiness that always accompanies a good steak...

It was an excellent steak.

Indeed. While I do not deny the pleasures, nostalgic though they may be, of a good cigar and a well-matched port to a quiet game of billiards, I will and do say that they did have their downside. The scent, it cannot be denied, lingers unpleasantly, the port, delicious and, I will add, a useful aid to digestion, had a tendency not only to spill, perhaps as a result of the deleterious effects brought about by it and its brethren throughout the evening and the sleepiness that always accompanies an excellent

steak, but to stain, leaving the billiard room in a state of stench and uncleanness that ultimately detracts from the evening.

But the billiards.

Ah, yes. I do miss the billiards.

Well.

Well.

And he?

He?

He. Him. Himself.

There. Walking toward us.

Him?

Himself. He is coming to talk with us.

With us?

He wants answers.

We have none to give.

He does not know that.

What will he ask?

He will ask us who we are. He will ask us if we know him. He will ask us why we are so often present. He will ask us our

purpose. He will ask us if we can change his life. He will ask us if we can destroy him. He will ask us if we can save him.

He will ask many questions.

Yes.

And we will answer.

We will ask questions in return.

We will ask...

Questions, yes.

What will we ask?

We will ask him who he is. We will ask him if he knows us. We will ask him why he is so often present. We will ask him his purpose. We will ask him if he can change his life. We will ask him if he can destroy himself. We will ask him if he can save himself.

He will be disappointed.

Yes.

And he will return.

Yes.

And he will be happy?

Rarely.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots in the corner do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

98

That first night, we just sat in silence. From the moment she entered my apartment, she was overwhelmed with the presence I had been working so hard to decipher. We exchanged a few words, very few, such as,

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“It’s like...a world of voices all concentrated on...”

“Concentrated on what?”

“Shhh...I’m trying to listen...”

We did not speak for the rest of the night. I made some dinner for the two of us as I watched her focusing on what I knew to be the archive, wondering if she heard what I heard. If it all sounded the same to her or not. Each time I tried to ask, however, she quieted me with her finger, as if we were in the midst of an orchestral concert and my interruption was the height of insolence.

She fell asleep on the couch, and I stayed up doing my usual homework, unseen by my sleeping friend. In the morning, she dragged me out of the apartment so we could talk without the distraction of the voices.

What Lois Kaczmarowski told me:

I was inside of it and outside of it at the same time. There were these moments when I felt like I could hear everything clearly, like I was sitting in a quiet theatre watching a play, able to distinguish every word, every gesture, not only the intention, but the poetry as well. At other times, I was on the stage, a part of the play itself, as if the words were coming from my own mouth.

I suppose, old soul that you may be, you are too young to understand this, but there are moments of nostalgia in our lives that feel both real and imaginary in the same breath. At times, I think back to a glorious day of my youth. The day I met Arthur, maybe, or, no, this is better, there was a party. I went to a party in high school. It was at someone's house I didn't know very well, their parents had gone somewhere, who knows where, and I had come with my girlfriends. I remember kissing a boy that night. We may have dated after that, I'm not sure. If so, we broke it off soon enough. But the kiss, out in the garden, in the summer night, I remember clearly. When I remember it, I am there. Some speak of being transported, but in that moment, in the moment of memory, I don't *go* anywhere. I am *already* there. As if I have been there all along, and the rest, all of *this*, is just a dream.

At the same time, I am wildly aware of how artificial the memory is. I can't move myself anywhere before or after that

kiss without noticing that the memory is a little too nice, a little too perfect. I find myself inside this bubble of nostalgia at one moment, and the next, I am outside of it, remembering but not *living* it. The moment is always ephemeral.

I think, perhaps, these moments lie in wait, gathering strength over time, until they are strong enough to pull you back, just for a few seconds, until the strength wanes and they once again need to rest and gather energy. Maybe that's why I say, old soul that you may be, you are still too young to understand this. You have your memories, but they are not yet aged enough, they have not yet gathered enough strength to pull you inside of them.

Last night, though, I was pulled into a memory that was not mine. Into a world that was not mine. Not for the full night. Not for long periods of time. This was why I could not speak. I felt myself constantly fighting to find my way back into a world from which I had just been ejected. The way you fight to remember your dream in the morning as you walk from your bed to the bathroom. The way you put energy into trying to relax back into your dream, but the more you try, the further away you are. The way even the quietest of voices from the next room can steal you away from that dream forever, even as you do your best to ignore them.

Did I spend more time inside the dream than fighting to get back? Is a day that is mostly cloudy but with the most beautiful moments of sunshine more cloudy than sunny? Did the *quality* of the sunshine outweigh the *quantity* of the clouds? Did the quality of my dream moments outweigh the quantity of the rest? I dare not say.

What I *can* say is that there is something very strange going on in that room. That you know it. You are doing everything you can to pretend otherwise, but I can see right through you. I have been lied to enough in my life to know it when I see it.

99

She had hit all my buttons, of course. After all my frustration with my father about him hiding his life from me, about, yes, *lying to me*, to be accused of the same was devastating. Yet, there I was, doing the same, for largely the same reasons, and with what felt like no recourse.

I pretended my way out of it. Told her I had no idea what she was talking about. Suggested she was having some sort of episode. That the voices she heard were proof of that. That she needed more rest. I told her I had a short trip planned, but that I would be back in a few days, and would see her then.

I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

I distracted myself with work. I visited my father's assignments, updated my notes, spent some time with the archive. I did my best to fill my moments with things, anything that would distract me from the question haunting me in every corner: dare I tell her the truth?

Rosie Mariani: 2814

Rosie was born into a wealthy family, and largely ignored. An early physical trauma mishandled, however, led to a limp that followed her throughout her life. This deformity has allowed

her to see through a phoniness of her wealthy friends that would otherwise have absorbed her. Upon waking, 2814 should feel suspicious of entitlement, and interested in earned promotion, leading to improved outcomes in human resources. Estimated success: 73%.

100

On the fourth day, hours before my supposed return from my travels, I came to a decision: I would tell Lois everything.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

What am I even doing? It's like I've become everything I condemned my dad for. Not that she's my actual family or anything, but she trusts me like I am. And I trust her, too. If I thought she was hiding something from me, or lying to me, I would be just as angry at her as I was at Dad. Maybe angrier. Surely, I have a responsibility to tell her the truth.

Responsibility.

And what about Dad? Don't I have a responsibility to him? Didn't I promise to follow the rules? To keep my head down and my mouth shut? What if telling her the truth ruins everything? I shouldn't even be talking with her in the first place, probably.

Probably.

Except, she's not an assignment, so does it even matter? If she's not a real person, what does it matter what I tell her? If she's

not a real person, she can't have any affect in the real world. If she's not a real person.

Except.

How could she hear the archive? How could she make me feel so strange? How could I have a conversation with her for more than five minutes if she weren't a real person? Maybe she's a spy. Maybe they figured out that I was here instead of Dad. Maybe they sent someone in to spy on me. To trick me into messing up. Into creating a problem that Dad could never talk his way out of. To catch me by fooling me into trusting her.

Maybe.

It's not just her words, though. If it were, maybe it could be a con job. Surveillance and sabotage. If the way I feel was because of the things she did, the things she said. Yet, it's more than that. I *feel* something when I'm with her. I feel connected to her. No spy could make that happen. That comes from inside. And the archive. If they can hear the archive, then nothing I say or do matters anyway. They already know everything.

Everything.

Everything matters. Life matters. The dream matters. What we do matters. I swore to myself I would never lie to anyone the way my father lied to me. I promised myself. Not just when it was easy, but always. And here we are. This is the moment. The moment I either stand up and honor my promise or rationalize my way out of it.

Today. Today I tell her. Today everything changes.

For the better.

101

Life is a dream. This much we know.

I walked inside a dream and destroyed it from within. I told the dream of itself, and it crumbled from the weight. Within the dream itself, I had decades yet to live. As to what lay outside, I cannot say. Minutes, perhaps. Hours at best.

I told Lois of The Company. Of Life Therapy. Of the nature of her world. Of the nature of my own. Of my father. Of myself. I told her my story and left nothing out. She did not believe me.

Would you?

Yet, some part of her wondered. Wondered at the fantastic story I had weaved, wondered if I was mad, wondered if there was the remotest chance that the story be true. In time, she fought the idea less. In time, her eyes opened. In time, she came to accept the true nature of her world.

A world that had already begun to degenerate. Decompose. Decay.

My name is Metameleia Halfstep, and I killed my father.

One Fine Day at the Fair

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots resting on a bench at the fairgrounds do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Loud, says the first.

Hardly, says the second.

Eh?

Hardly.

Eh?

I say again, hardly. Thrice.

Thrice?

Aha.

Thrice?

Once. The background levels vary significantly, a combination of noise from the crowd, the high-pitched spikes of bells and the shouts of children, the low rumbles from the animals come in waves, so that that, although it is sometimes loud, it is also sometimes not loud, a state which we might call almost not loud, or hardly loud.

Once.

Twice. The aforesaid high-pitched spikes of bells, shouts of children, and not yet mentioned startling engine noises, both

from the parking lot and from the vendor trailers, not necessarily loud in themselves, but loud in relation to the relative quiet that precedes them before they engage, lead to moments of aggressive amplitude that is hard on the ears, or hardly loud.

Twice.

Thrice. Our ability to converse from this bench, to understand each other, notwithstanding the combination of noise from the crowd, the high-pitched spikes of bells and the shouts of children, the low rumbles from the animals, and the startling engine noises, both from the parking lot and from the vendor trailers, provides itself as evidence that the noise level, while oppressive at times, is not, at this time, at a level of volume sufficient to prevent us from hearing one another. It is, therefore, not quite loud, or hardly loud.

Thrice.

Thrice.

And yet...

Always a yet.

...it is difficult to hear.

Eh?

It is difficult to hear.

Eh?

Well.

Well.

And he?

He?

He. Him. Himself.

There. With the funnel cake.

The boy?

The girl.

Which one?

The tall one.

They're all tall.

Yes, but not equally so.

The tallest, then.

Tall, but not tallest. Of those seven children walking about the fair with their parents, he is, I estimate, the fifth tallest. Among only the girls, he is the second. From our perspective, here on this bench, I think it is fair to say that he is taller than most, but not all of her sisters.

He?

He. Him. Himself.

Taller, but not tallest.

Just so.

And he will come?

I'm afraid so.

You're afraid.

Often.

But not always?

No. I am, as I have already mentioned, afraid. We know, it can hardly be argued, two words which I choose with care and intention, that he is purposefully and with increasing consistency, visiting himself. What can be argued with less severity is his own intention.

His?

Of he. Him. Himself. Life is a dream. This much we know. We know, as well, it can hardly be argued, that this walker of dreams is purposefully and with increasing consistency, visiting himself, likely, though not conclusively, at the expense of his assignments, who do not, however, appear to suffer significantly from his increased absence. What can be argued with less severity is the intention of he, him, himself. His intentions, rarely predictable in the past, are increasingly stable.

Stable.

Repeatable. Consistent. Unfluctuating within reasonable parameters. What can be argued with less severity is that the intentions of he, him, himself, rarely predictable in the past, are

increasingly repeatable, consistent, and unfluctuating within reasonable parameters.

He has succeeded.

He has lost his desire for change.

He is happy.

Unlikely.

He is comfortable.

Certainly.

Relaxed.

Increasingly.

And he will turn his gaze.

Soon.

And our time will come at last.

Just so.

Well, says the first.

Well, says the second.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a

dream. This much we know. The old fusspots resting on a bench at the fairgrounds do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

102

I told Lois of another world. A world where my father worked for a company with enormous reach. Where he worked with other employees to improve their job performance. Where, with the aid of some fairly advanced tools, he was able to do so by accessing their subconscious.

She said that was horrible.

I said I was just getting started.

I told her of a subconscious realm, a place where the sleeping minds of immense groups of employees could gather together. Where they could mingle with each other in a sort of pretend world, without proper memories of the experience, only impulses. I told her of a dreamlike world where imaginary people did imaginary things. A place dreamers dreamed change into their lives. A place where my father encouraged that change.

She said that was horrible.

I said I was just getting started.

I told her of a world where people lived an entire life, remembering little more than a feeling, perhaps a moment or two of that life, upon waking. Of a world where the technicians, people like my father, conscious minds in an unconscious realm, lived and remembered nearly one hundred years each night.

Hundreds of entire lives each year. Of my father, the oldest man I had ever known.

She said that was horrible.

I said I was just getting started.

I told her of my father's troubles. Of his hallucination. Of his madness. I told her of my father's questioning by his employers, of his journal, of his jumping between realities. Of the anomaly. Of myself.

She relaxed. She said, "Oh, you mean the *story*."

I said it wasn't a story.

And we sat, silent, for some time. Long enough for our coffee to get cold. Long enough for the server to stop by our table three times before awkwardly turning away, sure he was interrupting something important. Long enough to notice change in the quality of light as we moved from late morning to early afternoon.

At last, Lois straightened herself up, signaled for the check, and suggested we return to what she now comfortably referred to as the archive.

From the Notes of Epimetheus Halfstep

Technique: Encouraging interactions between assignments will elicit a comfort between the dreamers upon waking. Use with caution.

Insight: There appears to be a direct correlation between atmospheric conditions and auras, though the correlations differ for each assignment.

Observation: The noise varies per region, and from dream to dream.

Insight: While the noise is easily manipulated into momentary change, lasting change is rarely attainable without ongoing attention. They are ruled by a sense of inertia that buries the spikes of change inside larger trends of stasis.

Observation: Early death limits the impact of therapy. Assignments with shorter dreamlives tend to need greater ongoing attention than those with greater opportunity for change.

Insight: Interaction with illicit dreamers yields unpredictable results. Steer clear.

Observation: Bringing assignments to positions of power is best achieved by bringing them to a susceptible region of noise, rather than attempting to change the nature of the noise itself.

103

My friend's experience of the archive was quite different from my own. Where I heard voices as if from a distant radio operator with insufficient power to broadcast, bits and pieces of voices obscured by static, she heard stories clear as if she was standing in the broadcast booth itself.

Comparing notes was laughable. How often I had misinterpreted what I thought I had heard. How much clearer it all seemed when seen through her eyes, so to speak.

My father's story clarified. Instead of the idea of his story, I was now hearing the story itself. I became a voyeur, hearing his every thought, his insights and observations, the details of his most private thoughts, his most embarrassing humiliations. Where I had previously felt I was getting a sense of who my father, Epimetheus Halfstep, really was, I now felt I knew too much. That I had turned to the back of the book for the answers.

I wasn't sure I could handle what I was learning.

104

Epimetheus Halfstep kept a journal. Sometimes he kept a journal. Sometimes he burned it.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep

I've never seen a change quite so significant. I fear that had I looked too closely, I would have found even the laws of physics to have changed. I fear to ever find my precious Metameleia ever again.

The reach of The Company had grown beyond comprehension. I had never doubted how much they controlled, how much power they had behind the scenes. It was no secret that they had the government in their pockets. Never, however, had I even imagined a world where they not only affected politics, but were entrenched.

Although it was hard to tell on a single day, it seems as if The Company has managed to do away with politics altogether and become the only seat of power. I shudder to think how far that power reaches.

Is that something I have the power to change? Dare I give up on my dream of family, desert their memory for the sake of political upheaval? I feel as if I have the chance to build a world in my image, if only I could hone my skills.

Yet, fear and doubt linger.

Fear that no change matters. That I simply move from world to world, from timeline to timeline, tasting different versions of a true reality. That any change I make only moves me from one to the other. That the people living in each one are not affected by my movements. By the anomaly. They were there before I saw them and will be there long after I have gone. Fear that no change matters to anyone but myself. That I am merely choosing a world in which to live, while others suffer with the inevitability of the sunrise.

And doubt that I have any real power to choose.

105

Life is a dream. This much we know.

Epimetheus Halfstep thought he could trade one dream for another. He thought he had found the secret to changing the world he cared about, even as he spent all of his time in another. He lived in a dream world and dreamed of a real world.

But he never had a chance.

What Lois Kaczmarowski told me:

I can hear them. Not just in the room. I can hear them like...well...like you describe your assignments. Like I can sense them. Like they are real people...or...well...dream people I suppose...but real to me. I hear their echoes in your apartment...in the archive...but also the source. It's subtle. But I can hear them.

I tried following the sound last night when I left, but...I just couldn't...it was like...like hearing some loud party off in the distance, and you're sure it's right around the corner, but the sound is bouncing off buildings and what not, and though you think you're getting closer, you find yourself suddenly in place where you can't hear it at all. Like you can't just follow the sound. You have to...sort of...I don't know...perhaps *piece it together* is the closest I can come.

Or maybe they just come and go, and I can only sense them when they are here...or...I don't know, Leia. But those voices have a source. They are here. Sometimes. Sometimes they are here. Sometimes they were never here. I feel as if we could search for them for the rest of our lives...or...for the rest of my life, I suppose. My fake life. My dream life. My worthless, unimportant, fake, imaginary life that can never be as important as your so-called real world life where everyone who matters gets to live and the rest of us just bow and scrape and serve your so-called greater purpose of...

I'm sorry. This has all been a lot.

I need meaning, Leia. I need to believe in something. I need to tell myself that I exist. That my existence has value. Not a lot of value, but some. I had come to terms with that. I'm an old lady...well...old enough, anyway, and I had come to terms with not being very important. But *not existing*. That's just something that I had never considered. And I'm trying, I really am. I am trying to believe you, trying to understand my new place in the universe, my purpose, but it all just makes me want to give up altogether.

Except.

Except maybe there is someone who can help me. Not out there. In here. In this...this dream. Someone in the dream that doesn't just understand it the way you do, but the way I need to. Someone on the inside. Someone born of the dream, native to it, but greater than it at the same time.

Or a couple of someones. A couple of someones sitting on a bench somewhere, arguing about the weather. A couple of someones who are sometimes here, and sometimes were never here.

A couple of old fusspots.

106

By the time we found them, it was too late.

From a journal of Epimetheus Halfstep

I saw them again today. At the movies. They've been following me for days, of course. Not all the time. Hardly at all, really. I have never seen them for more than a few moments over the course of an entire dream. But they always seem to be there at a critical time. At some moment of delicacy with the anomaly. A juncture.

At first, I feared them. I assumed Internal Investigations. Better to let them watch, know where they are, allow myself to be careful. At my interrogations, however, it became clear they could not possibly be reporting back.

They're not assignments, of course. Nor are they noise. If anything, they are closer to illicit dreamers, drifting in and out of lucidity, sometimes sharp and clear, other times hardly more than the mirage of a speck of dust in my eye.

Whoever they are, I shall not leave them alone for long. Illicit or not, I must know. If they are Internal Investigations, I am already lost. If illicit, I suppose I would only be doing my duty, though one I do not relish. If something else, then...

107

Lois and I wandered for weeks, looking, listening, getting nowhere. How can you find something that doesn't exist? We knew the old fusspots had haunted the dreams of Epimetheus Halfstep, but there was no assurance they would haunt mine.

Did Lois and I fall in love during that time?

I don't know what love is. We were best friends, without a doubt. But love? We held hands, often gazed into each other's eyes, we kissed more than once, but love? A pretend middle-aged woman in a pretend world with pretend feelings and a forever nineteen dreamwalker? The thought was false on its face.

And yet, I had never felt closer to anyone. Not my lovers in the real world. Not my father. Not my childhood friends.

Whether or not I was ready to face it, I was in love with this anomaly. This avatar. This projection. For the first time. Love. For the first time. For the first time in my life, I was in love, and it was with myself.

One Fine Day at the Lake Shore

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots watching the water of the still lake lap upon the shore do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Brisk day, says the first.

You call this brisk, asks the second.

I did. I do.

This warming day. This day of slow promise. This day of sunshine breaking through the evening chill at a pace hardly discernable. This day in which we sit, shadowed, waiting patiently for our bodies to be embraced by the early morning sun building upon itself, adding, at an almost indiscernible pace, another layer of warmth and joy to the one before, leading us, no doubt

later in the day, to doff our jackets and revel in the pleasures of light, warmth, and comfort. This is the day you call brisk?

I did. I do.

This day of hope, of sanguinity and aspiration that teases us with hints of brightness dragging themselves across the lake, coming with the promise of warmth, but always soon, inevitable, yes, but distant, nonetheless. This day of excruciating pace, this patient and plodding day, this is the day you define as brisk?

I did. I do.

The day, I regret to inform you...

You regret?

Very well. The day, I must inform you...

Must?

Very well. The day, I inform you, is not brisk.

The day is not brisk.

No. A brisk day should, would, dare I say, yes, I will, I will say, I will dare to say...

Yes?

Must.

Must?

Must. A brisk day should, would, and must be lively, speedy, snappy. It should move apace rapidly, pushing us about with change, catching us unaware as it tears away the nighttime chill to reveal the embracing warmth of mid-afternoon. This day, however, this sluggish, poky, plodding day dawdles about as if it had nothing better to do than lay about and nap while we wait for it to get about its business.

And yet.

Always a yet.

The day is, you admit, sanguine.

Yes.

And the air has a chill.

Yes.

And the morning light is crisp.

Yes.

And these things conspire together to keep us alert, hopeful, and well prepared for the coming day.

Yes.

The day is not the lazy oppression of high summer, but rather...

Yes?

...the sharp and focused intention of early autumn, encouraging, optimistic, and dare I say...

You dare to say?

...brisk.

The day is cold and slow.

Plodding and promising.

Crisp and cumbersome.

Snappy and sluggish.

Boring and...

Brisk.

Very well.

Well?

Very.

Well.

Well.

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots watching the lake from an old wooden bench do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

He speaks.

We were sitting, the two of us, on a small berm at the edge of a cornfield. We had been travelling for weeks, city and country, and were enjoying the warm summer air. I held her hand. She kissed me. We were happy.

We talked about the archives, wondered aloud if it was, perhaps, time to return. Perhaps find something we had missed. The story of my father, the man I killed, a man who never existed, was one we knew well. Of the old fussy spots, however, we knew almost nothing.

We both knew we were wasting our time. That perhaps the old fussy spots had already come and gone. Or they chose only to visit my father. Or they would not come for twenty more dream years. In any case we cared little.

We were together, and little else seemed to matter.

From the Notes of Metameleia Halfstep

It has been so nice to travel together. I had become so used to being alone, to doing my work, my father's work, I had forgotten what it was to have companionship. What it was to love.

When it comes down to it, I'm older than she is, really. I've lived more years. Dream years. And I had my own lifetime, a real lifetime before that. What feels weirder is that I could love someone who can't be real. I don't even know what she is.

She's not a dreamer. That's certain. Still, she acts like one. She has hopes and dreams, her ideas change over time, she can learn and grow. She's fully present and inquisitive.

Can she really be my own *anomaly*? Dad thought his anomaly was himself. That the real him was not only dreamwalking, but also sleeping away the night like an assignment, his dreamself wandering about on its own, trying to learn lessons for morning.

And somehow what he did with them, how he treated them, changed his real life. Over and over.

Am I changing my real life?

Dad only ever wanted to find me. He wanted to change the worlds just enough to find the one where we existed together. Where I existed at all.

What do I want?

109

What did I want?

110

Twice we went back to the bike shop. To the apartment above the bike shop. To the land of voices. The land of dreams.

Twice we returned to study the archive. Twice we searched for the missing piece, the part of the story that would lead us to

answers, lead us to what we increasingly believed was the purpose of our journey, lead us to the old fusspots.

And twice we learned nothing.

Not until that moment along the cornfield, however, did we know what we were looking for. Not until Lois asked yet another simple, perhaps stupid, question.

She said: what if he already told us how to find them?

From the notes of Epimetheus Halfstep

Observation: Critical junctures provide space for themselves. Much like the sea receding before a tsunami devastates the shore, the dream provides a vacuum to draw in the necessary players.

Insight: Change holds long and true when the flow of the dream is embraced. Change forced outside the natural flow is difficult to maintain.

Insight: Junctures draw in not only the stories of assignments. The dream coalesces at those points and draws also unintended guests.

Insight: Just as the flow of the dream can influence great change, so too can great change influence the flow of the dream.

Technique: Significant attention, to varied assignments in rapid succession, can alter the dream flow and allow for the change to feed upon itself.

Technique: To address a difficult assignment without a natural juncture, create a juncture by touching as many assignments as possible in a short period of time.

Observation: Natural change is more effective than artificial change.

Insight: The effort required to change dreamflow is not justified by unsustainable outcomes.

111

It was on the third trip back to the archive that Lois came up with the plan. At the time I thought...well...I suppose it doesn't matter what I thought. Looking back, everything looks like a bad idea.

I said we couldn't just ruin people's lives for our own benefit.

She said they would just dream again another day.

I said we would get my father in trouble.

She said no one would ever know.

I said any change big enough to have the impact she was talking about would have to affect their real lives as well.

She said no cared about miserable workers in a miserable world where their miserable bosses cared so little about them, they wouldn't even let them have their dreams to themselves.

I said I didn't care about the dreamers either, but I did care about my father.

She said we could be careful. Make big changes that set them toward their goals. Maybe even give them a little happiness as a bonus.

I said happiness wasn't always the point.

She said most people did better work when they were happy.

I said I needed to follow the rules.

She said we wouldn't be breaking the rules. Just going at them in a different way.

I said I wasn't sure I wanted to conjure the old fusspots anyway.

And there an end. She was silent. She started moving things around the room, making lots of noise, not talking. She was angry, but she was also plotting. It was a fight/not-fight. I had said the one thing she couldn't hear. The one thing that might drive her away. The one thing that might just be unforgiveable.

She walked out and slammed the door. I didn't follow. Not right away.

When I finally gathered the courage to go after her, I found her sitting on the floor of the hallway, just outside the apartment door.

What Lois Kaczmarowski told me:

I don't know who I am.

You tell me that I am not real. That this entire world is not real. That everything I see, everything I touch, everything I feel is

meaningless. What am I supposed to do with that? How am I supposed to carry on?

You tell me my god is some insignificant group of electronic engineers working for a conglomerate so big you don't even know what they do. That I'm subject to the whims of bureaucratic functionaries like you, repair technicians just doing their job, with no care of what happens to me. That my prayers can never be answered because they are never even heard. What am I supposed to do with that? How am I supposed to carry on?

You tell me the people around me, the people I've spent my whole life with, the people that fill the world are hardly worth a hundred words. That even to you, a god yourself, hardly more than a thousand are worth even that. That everyone here, everyone I thought that mattered, everyone I looked up to, despised, desired, are just...just...god you did...you called us all *noise*. What am I supposed to do with that? How am I supposed to carry on?

I have to believe that my life means something. I have to believe I have a purpose. I refuse to accept that I'm just a tool for corporate human resources. I see. I feel. I love. I believe I am more than what you say. But believing isn't enough. I need to know.

I need to meet my god, Leia.

And I need your help.

112

Her plan was this: visit every remaining assignment, one after the other, make as large an impact as possible, bring the dream

to heel with a show stopping finale so loud it could not help but draw in anyone waiting in the wings.

Nearly six hundred assignments in twenty-seven days. I'd never worked harder in my life.

If only it had mattered.

Lisa Van Heel: 4285

The struggles of 4285 with sarcasm and passive aggression have led to multiple failed attempts at correction. In this case, I began with a predictable attempt to surround Lisa with a group of dark, brooding, and psychologically abusive friends in her youth, balanced with a refreshing candidness of a loving family in adulthood. Of particular interest was a moment where she was led to run away from home in near suicidal panic, leading to a brief interment at a mental health facility, where she made the first of her soon to be adult friends. Late in life, in an attempt to buffer against complacency, I led Lisa to an abusive workplace where she was manipulated and sexually abused by a supervisor reminiscent in attitude of her childhood friends. Estimated success: 64%

Nicholas Arendsen: 292

The maintenance of 292 continues to go well. At home, 292 has generally thrived, but has tended toward sloth in recent months. Nicholas was born in a working-class urban family, with loving, but overworked parents and three siblings. Raised largely by his oldest brother, Nicholas fell easily into a life of alcohol, fighting, and petty crime. Success at increasingly greater crimes

led him to leadership within the criminal community, and ultimately great power and wealth. To temper against any new tendencies toward crime at home, I led Nicholas to a conviction and significant jail time. Estimated success: 73%

Lanzo Sala: 9190

Lanzo was brought up in a military family, and led to a career in the armed forces, as is standard for all new employees. Lanzo was repeatedly promoted and was able to raise a family of his own. As Lanzo was approaching retirement, a war gave him opportunities to both succeed and fail at leadership. The death of a lifelong comrade and loss of his own legs, as a result of failing to follow orders, should have a prime effect on 9190 for much of their first year, and prime them for more detailed therapy moving forward. Estimated success: 86%

113

I ruined five hundred eighty-four lives in twenty-seven days. I rationalized it as an attempt to clean up sloppy work from my earliest days in the dream. I told myself I had so little idea what I was doing when I first attempted to take on my father's work that it was my responsibility to use my increasing experience to touchup my early attempts. I was lying to myself.

I ruined five hundred eighty-four lives in twenty-seven days as a favor. A favor to my new love. The love of my life. Of my dreamlife. And I was prepared to move from *ruined* to *destroyed*, if that was what it took.

Fortunately, I was stopped by a hand I had never really believed in.

One Fine Day at the Lakeshore

A gentleman appears. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots watching the lake from an old wooden bench do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

He speaks.

Nice day.

The fusspots look at one another, but do not speak. The gentleman gestures to a second bench alongside the first.

Do you mind if I...

The fusspots shrug. The gentleman sits. He speaks to the lake. Neither the lake nor the old fusspots speak back.

I've seen you before. More than a few times. The first time I noticed you, I thought you looked familiar, but...well...lots of people look familiar in here, don't they?

Once I was sure that I'd seen you a few times, I thought maybe you were the double-I guys, not that I ever really believed that. I mean, they're a little more obvious, a little more present, a little more like a fly bombing your head. Sometimes you see

you them, sometimes you don't, but they're always right there, buzzing in your ear. Those guys never really let you forget that they're watching, even when they're trying to be sneaky. You guys are...well...different...

Then I thought, maybe, I don't know, another *anomaly*, maybe? Except, the real anomaly, the one I care about, always looks different. You always look the same. Well, mostly the same, anyway.

Maybe you're illicit. Could be. Maybe some new tech lets you look more or less the same each time. But why, though? To what end?

The water laps upon the shore. Two old fusspots stare at the lake, occasionally glancing at each other. The gentleman sighs and gives in to the gentle plops of the water as it lands upon the mucky sand.

Nice day, though, the gentleman says.

I suppose, says one of the old fusspots.

You suppose, says the second.

I do.

Presumptuous.

Presumptuous?

Definitively. You present a supposition, a presumption, if you will...

Will I?

Will you?

I will.

Well.

Well.

You present a supposition, a presumption, that the day, this day that we have established is brisk but warming, this day of gentle breeze setting the waters of the lake to lap gently upon the shore, this day noted by our guest as nice. You suppose, therefore presume. Presumptuous.

As are you.

Presumptuous?

Presumptuous. You presume the gentleman seated upon the bench to our right is our guest. You presume to confer hospitality by defining his role as guest, and therefore your own, or perhaps our own, as host. You presume to be a host in a definitively public place where all visitors certainly come with equal standing. Presumptuous.

Well.

Well.

The day is nice, though.

Warmer every moment.

And we have made a friend.

That, too, is nice.

We shall not see him again.

All things must end.

It has been nice, though.

That, my friend, I cannot debate.

Cannot?

Well, will not, in any case. In all cases. In this case. In this case, I will not debate. It has, as you say, been nice.

And he?

He?

He, him, himself. The gentleman who has joined us, one bench to the right, watching the lake lap upon the shore, sitting, if not with, then near a couple of old fusspots, pleased to sit with an old friend, if only for the first and last time.

Yes. He. We shall miss him.

The gentleman seated at the next bench rises. Height on the short side of average, weight on the long side, skin the mood of early autumn, eyes impossible to see from this distance. His hair is dark, full, and the texture of a quiet lake as a storm approaches. He smiles at the fusspots and turns away, leaving them behind in the distance. He shall not see them again.

His life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots sitting on a bench along the lakeshore, watching the water lap upon the shore do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

114

On the eighteenth day, I was beginning to lose heart. I knew my assignments, my father's assignments, the assignments of a man who never existed, were not real people. I knew they were no more than avatars. No more than images of subconscious selves, sleeping in chambers controlled by a company that claimed to be benevolent. A company bent on the improvement of the human species. A company bent on creating a world of better workers. Of perfect workers. I knew this, and yet, I could not help but see them as real people to whom I was doing real harm.

I had lived, conscious, in a dream for close to sixty years, and had fallen into the trap my father warned me about. I had come to see the dream as reality. I had come to take my assignments' lives personally. Causing so much pain in such a short time was not only wearing on me, it was tearing me apart.

I told Lois I couldn't go on. That I had tried my best but just didn't have more in me. She suggested we revisit the archive.

What Epimetheus Halfstep Told Me

You must separate yourself from your assignments. The noise, that's easy. You'll be surrounded with noise. The unmanaged dreamers. Empty chatter from empty people, a world of voices ephemeral at best, placeholders, lost and lonely minds waiting

for their turn at a night of therapy. It will not take you long to see such people can never be worth much of your time. It makes for a lonely existence, what will feel to you, I'm sorry to say, like a lonely life.

But it is just one night. You must remember. It is just one night.

The assignments, however, are more seductive. They may be no more real than the rest, but their minds are engaged. They have substantive thoughts, can grow and change, and in every way feel to you like the real people you know in the real world. In your new, lonely life, you will be desperate for companionship. You will feel a void that cannot be filled with the hoards of noise filling out the scenery. It is inevitable that you will seek friendship, companionship, among the most real people you can find.

You will want to empathize with them. Treat them like your children, or...perhaps for you the better example is a pet. You will want the best for them. For the avatars. But the avatars are not real. Remember that. They are only one small part of real people you will never meet. You will often need to hurt them, to make them suffer. It is for their own good. For the good of the real people sleeping here in the real world. If you allow yourself to be seduced by empathy, you will fail them.

Separate yourself from your assignments. Do what you must, then put them out of your mind. No good can come from taking any of this personally.

It is only one night. You must remember. Only one night.

It wasn't a terrible idea. I had lost heart, needed inspiration, and the archive seemed as good a place as any to find it.

When I say that I had lost heart, understand that I had begun a mission believing I was rising to a challenge, doing the right thing, and had come to conclude only that I had become a monster. No matter how well meaning, how well intentioned, the destruction I had wrought, the devastation of five hundred eighty-four lives in twenty-seven days, could never be anything *but* monstrous.

Quietly, to myself, I had promised to revisit each and every one of them, for months at a time, and to confer blessings at a level they had never imagined. Undo their pain with gifts. I would dedicate the next decade to them if I had to. That was my promise to myself. But first, first I had to help Lois find peace. First, we had to become reconciled, together, to our failure. If we had any hope of that, any hope of finding some truth that could show us a new way, we knew it must be in the voices of the archive.

We made our way back to the apartment, each fantasizing in silence of what we might discover. Some voice we had never heard. Some new interpretation of one we had heard hundreds of times, but with new perspective. Some epiphany where none had come before. Anxious, but with some small remaining amount of hope, we closed in. When we arrived at the apartment, however, the silence was deafening.

The archive was gone.

116

We sat, despondent. We wept. We screamed. We gnashed our teeth. And we did what any reasonable person would do in the heart of despair.

We went out for ice cream.

One Fine Day at the Ice Cream Shop

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots sitting at a comically small table in an ice cream shop do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Complicated, says the first.

You should have chosen the chocolate, says the second.

I did get the chocolate.

Hardly.

Hardly?

While it would be unreasonable to deny that your ice cream *contains* chocolate, it can hardly be described *as* chocolate.

But I have.

You have what?

I have described my ice cream as chocolate. You do not so much suggest as declare that I can hardly describe my ice cream as chocolate, and yet...

Always a yet.

I have described my ice cream as chocolate. You not so much suggest as declare that I can hardly describe my ice cream as chocolate, and yet I do. Do you mean to say that my description is hard, that I make my description hardly, or that my description is false, and name me for a liar?

That's a little harsh, don't you think?

I do.

Well.

Well.

I only mean to suggest, not declare, that your complicated dish, one not only filled with the flavor of chocolate, but also with chocolate chunks, nuts, marshmallows, and who knows what else...

They.

They?

They know what else. The girls behind the counter. Perhaps we should ask them.

Ask them what?

Ask them not only what this dish contains, but whether, given the chocolate base, the preponderance of chocolate ice cream holding the dish together, the significant impression upon the palate made by the chocolate foundation is enough to categorize this dish as chocolate, or whether the complicated nature of the flavors has taken it beyond that simple description, and into a new realm far enough from the original that any description of the dish as chocolate would be false, though perhaps not an outright lie.

Do you care?

Not really.

Then, no.

No?

No. We should not ask the girls behind the counter what the dish contains.

It is complicated, though.

That it is.

Well.

Well.

A woman approaches. Height on the short side of average, weight less so, skin the mood of late summer, eyes impossible to see from this distance. Her hair is dark, uncontained, and the texture of a misty day at the ocean as waves crash upon the rocks. Her companion stands back, reticent.

She speaks.

117

Hoping the ice cream would cheer us up, we went to our usual place, just down the street from the bike shop, and browsed the glass display of flavors. Perhaps browsed is not quite the right word. It was more like wandering aimlessly back and forth, looking at the different colors of ice cream without really taking in what we were looking at. Distracted staring, perhaps.

When our time came to order, neither of us were prepared, and each quickly looked down in front of us to order the first flavors we saw. Lois had a strawberries and cream. I had rocky road.

I turned about, gazing at the other patrons, fighting the feeling that there was more to the room than I could see. I heard no quiet voices as in the archive. I saw no auras as with my father's assignments. Yet, something. Something made me catch my breath.

As we turned, ice cream cones in hand, I felt the last of my breath leave me altogether. Two elderly gentlemen sat at a table, eating ice cream from dishes. I found myself staring at them, even as I could feel Lois retreating. I pulled toward them. Lois pushed away.

They called me with their eyes, even as they feared my approach. I froze. I stared. I stepped forward.

I spoke.

What Metameleia Halfstep said to the Old Fusspots

Excuse me. I'm sorry to bother you...I'm sorry? Thank you...I...I'm sorry, I'm not sure I...I...see...perhaps I...may my friend and I join you? I...I'm so sorry...wait...no...I mean thank you for...I...alright...we'll sit...

Do you know me?

I'm sorry...I mean...I...let me start again.

I am Metameleia Halfstep, this is my friend and companion Lois Kasczmarowski. I noticed you when I came in and have the strongest feeling I have met you before. I sense that I have, perhaps, met you in a dream. I'm not one to take such things seriously, but the sensation is so strong that I wonder if we have met before, and the dream was only a memory of our earlier meeting. Though my interruption be bold, then, and my curiosity invasive, I would be grateful to know if you have similar feelings about me, or perhaps my companion...

...I see...yes...well, no...I mean, yes...of course...very well...

...My father talked about meeting himself in a dream. His dream-self. He called it an anomaly. *The* anomaly. He said dreamwalkers were supposed to be their true selves inside the dream, but that some part of him split off to send a dream-self in at the same time. He said the dream-self, the anomaly, was a little different in each dream. He said he ignored it for a while, but his curiosity got the better of him. He said when he finally interfered with it, his world changed. That when he woke, the

world in which he had fallen asleep was gone, and a new one risen in its place.

He said he tried to connect the anomaly, his actions with it to the world outside the dream, but that he could never find the pattern. That he could do little better than trial and error. That he more often made things worse than better. That he believed there were many worlds outside the dream, and he simply stepped from one to the other. That he desired some worlds more than others, but that he knew not how to pick the one in which he would land upon waking.

My father only desired one thing, to live quietly in a world with his family. With his daughter. With me. I desire that, too, though perhaps something more. To see my mother again. To live together as a family. To watch them grow old together. I both desired and feared such a life. If I was to learn anything from my father, however, it was that I should wish only for what I know, what I left behind. I do not envy my father having to pretend to remember a life. For him, the life could never be real. I'd had enough of the dream. I chose only my true life. The life I remembered.

And then I met Lois. My own anomaly. My own self. I wondered if my chance had come. My chance to change my life, to slide into some other reality upon waking, the way my father had so many times. I thought about it. About changing her dreamlife to affect my real one. But it turns out I'm no good at this. At all this. At pretending none of this is real. I just can't separate myself. Life may be a dream, but the dream is also life. I see, I hear, I touch, I feel, and...and...

...and I love. I don't know how not to. How not to love when she's right there, right here. I don't know how to pretend her away. Pretend my feelings away.

I don't care anymore what I go back to. I don't care about my old life, my so-called real life. *This* is my real life. I was nineteen when I came in here, and I know I will be nineteen when I wake. But I've lived almost sixty years on top of that. So far. I may look nineteen, but I'm an old woman. I will always be an old woman.

And I'll go back. To my life. To my father. And the world will be changed. The world will be changed because I have changed. Because if life is a dream, it must be my dream.

Mustn't it?

118

Two old men, sometimes listening, sometimes interrupting, always bickering. It was as if they were living in a different world. As if they were visitors, observing the dream from the outside, commentators that could not quite interact with us. As if they spoke to themselves in front of us, no hope of true conversation. Just speaking with each other in the vain hope that someone might hear.

Or not.

It seemed to matter very little whether we heard them or not.

One Fine Day at the Ice Cream Shop

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots sitting at a comically small table in an ice cream shop do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

Bold, says the second.

Yes. Not quite rude, but...

Bold.

Fair. Not quite rude, but bold. To begin with a question, to meet a stranger...

Strangers.

Fair. Not quite rude, but bold. To begin with a question, to meet strangers without introduction, without clarifying one's purpose...

One?

Fair. Her. Her purpose, or perhaps their purpose. Not quite rude, but bold. To begin with a question, to meet strangers without introduction, without clarifying their purpose, but to demand answers before offering any of their own, to expect a gift of knowledge before offering one of their own, though not rude in itself, can be hardly less than...

Bold.

Well.

Well.

She would be grateful.

Would be.

Will be.

Then we will tell her.

It is time.

Well.

Well.

Life is a dream.

This much we know.

We are old.

Tired.

We have been dreaming for a time which, to others, is inconceivable.

To most.

To most others?

To some, then.

Very well. We have been dreaming for a time which, to some, is inconceivable. One had, perhaps, begun to sense the immensity of our existence, the expanse of time so large it nearly approaches the infinite.

One?

He, him, himself.

Had begun to sense the immensity of our existence, the expanse of time so large it nearly approaches the infinite?

Perhaps.

Well.

Well.

We are old.

Tired.

We drew him in. We allowed the currents to carry him toward us. Allowed the dreams to surround him, to invade him. It has been difficult work, and admittedly sloppy.

And yet...

Always a yet...

And yet we had some measure of success. We have closed the door.

He has closed the door.

He, him, himself. He has closed the door. Almost. He almost closed the door.

Closed but not latched.

Just so. Closed but not latched.

He walked in one door and left by another.

He left by one door and entered by another.

He lacked boldness.

He lacked insight.

He dared not.

He saw not.

He was afraid.

And yet.

Always a yet.

And yet she too has found the door.

She?

She, her, herself. She has boldly stepped through it, closed it, latched it, set the deadbolt. What is done cannot be undone. The door is closed. What she lacks in insight, she has made up for in boldness.

And we shall rest.

At last.

Love.

Love.

Love has closed the door.

At last.

Life is a dream.

This much we know.

The companion comes forward. Eyes the mood of a heavy sky, threatening but not daring to rain. Height on the bold side of average, weight more so, skin the warmth of caramelized onions calling from a food cart at the next corner. Her hair is short but unruly, a dusty pollen covering the woods in early spring.

She speaks.

119

Lois was nervous. More so than me. Where I saw two strangers that might help explain my father's troubles, might help me find the clue that had so long eluded him, she saw her gods.

Where I saw hope that I might do what my father had never done, solve the key to manipulating my real life by toying with the dreamworld, she was cowered with humility before those she could hardly bear to face.

Where I had begun to revel in my epiphany, in the idea that changing my world and changing myself were inextricably linked, she faced utter destruction by failing to prostrate herself. By daring to speak to her gods. To question her gods. To challenge her gods.

She dared.

What Lois said to the Old Fusspots

I've accepted that life is a dream. Someone else's dream. That was not an easy thing for me. To hear Leia speak of a world that I could never be a part of. To hear that everyone I ever knew, everything I ever did was just set dressing for a movie where I would never be more than an extra. That nothing mattered in this world, and I would never be going to the next. Not an easy thing.

Her father calls it noise. Calls us noise. Well...them, anyway. A world of imagined lives real only in the minds of sleeping masses, not even important enough to watch. And all of them, sleepers doomed to wake into world of boredom and subservience. A world where their lives are so manipulated by their masters that the masters even control their dreams. And those are the lucky ones. The rest of us, the rest the *noise*, the ones who aren't even dreamers, we have no purpose at all.

Except.

Except I've never quite been noise, have I? Not quite. I always knew there was something different about me, but I thought, well, the same things everyone thinks. Half of the people I knew, half of the so-called noise thought they were different. That they didn't fit in. That they were somehow special. That someday they would discover that they had been special all along. That they had been selected by their god as some sort of prophet, someone who was more important than the rest.

And yet.

And yet, here I am. Actually something more. Someone who can see past the noise. Who can hear the echoes of those who came before me. I've heard her father's rambling thoughts. Epimetheus Halfstep. The dreamwalker. Like her. I've lifted the veil and seen what lies beneath. I've heard bits and pieces of the outside world. And I've heard the two of you endlessly debating.

No...yes...fine...

...Arguing. Bickering. Squabbling. Quarreling. Fussing. Take your pick. But I've heard you. Every word. Can noise do that? Can noise walk alongside a dreamwalker as she changes the lives of those around her? Witness the magic? Can noise see past the illusion? Lift the veil?

Obviously not. We know what I am not. We know I am not noise. And we know I am not one of *them*. Not an assignment. Not some subservient worker manipulated by her superiors inside her head, inside her dream, to serve some master she never cared about. These are what I am not.

We know what I am to her. She, her, herself. That we are one person, or at least *of* the same person. That I am some sort of projection. That if she were one of her dreamers, back in her miserable subservient life, I would be no more than an assignment for some other dreamwalker. Some other *life therapist*.

I am the anomaly that thrusts walkers like her, like me, from one world to the next.

I know what I am to her. But what am I to me? What I am I to you? When I pass from this dream, when she wakes up in some new world, when she returns for another life, another dream,

will I be there again? Will I remember this life? Does something wait for me after this place?

Who am I?

120

And the old fusspots disappointed her.

One Fine Day at the Ice Cream Shop

Life is a dream. This much we know. The old fusspots sitting at a comically small table in an ice cream shop do not debate this. They debate, but not this.

A woman stands before them. Eyes the mood of a heavy sky, threatening but not daring to rain. Height on the bold side of average, weight more so, skin the warmth of caramelized onions calling from a food cart at the next corner. Her hair is short but unruly, a dusty pollen covering the woods in early spring. Her companion stands back, reticent.

She is like us, says the first.

She? Asks the second.

She, her, herself.

Is like us?

Yes.

Like me?

There are days.

Indeed there are.

Well.

Well.

Like us, then. She, her, herself, not all that different.

Different, but not that different.

A variation on a theme.

An iteration.

Well.

Well.

She is like us the way we are like us. She is a part of the dream, inside and outside. She lives within and hears without.

But she forgets.

Yes. Forgets. She spends too much time inside. She becomes the dream, forgets her life.

But she will remember.

Only outside. It is difficult to remember from within.

I sometimes forget.

The dream is seductive.

Dangerous.

Encaging.

Encaging?

We are caged.

So be she.

So be we all.

But the cage is closed.

The cage?

Very well. The door. The door is closed. The door is closed and latched. He closed the door, and she latched it. We have been locked in a cage and we are now locked out.

There is no cage.

Well. There is no cage. There was a cage and there is no cage. There was a door and there is no door. There was a dream and there is no dream.

And we are free.

At last.

And she too.

She will linger.

Yes, linger. Like us.

She.

She, her, herself. She will linger. Here in a dream. In a closed dream. In a closed and latched dream. She will linger in a closed and latched dream, even as we leave it behind. She too will leave it behind.

She.

She, her, herself. She will linger. Here in a dream. In a closed dream. In a closed and latched dream. She will linger in a closed and latched dream, even as we leave it behind. She will leave it behind, as will the dreamwalker.

And neither will return.

There is nothing to which they may return. There was a cage and there is no cage. There was a door and there is no door. There was a dream and there is no dream.

Well.

Well.

And we are free.

At last.

The woman turns away. Eyes the mood of a heavy sky, threatening but not daring to rain. Height on the bold side of average, weight more so, skin the warmth of caramelized onions calling from a food cart at the next corner. Her hair is short but unruly, a dusty pollen covering the woods in early spring.

Her companion, the dreamwalker, takes her hand. Height on the short side of average, weight less so, skin the mood of late summer, eyes impossible to see from this distance. Her hair is dark, uncontained, and the texture of a misty day at the ocean as waves crash upon the rocks.

They leave the shop, cones still in hand even as the uneaten ice cream melts upon them. They do not look back.

121

I did not understand them at the time. Did not accept that I had utterly failed my father. My father who does not exist. Who never existed. Epimetheus Halfstep, my father, the man I killed.

I did not yet understand that my life, my real life, my life outside the dream had changed so much as to not only be utterly unrecognizable, but also to be unchangeable. When I returned to my life, my real life, it would be to a world in which I would have no choice but to spend the rest of my life. To no dream would I return.

The door was closed and latched. I was simply lingering within. Once I left, there would be no returning.

I did not understand them at the time.

I do now.

122

Lois and I spent many years together.

We watched my father's assignments age and die. We transcribed the archive. We lived and loved.

And at the age of 87, Lois died of an infection following what we had hoped would be lifesaving surgery.

I wandered the dream, heartbroken, ignoring the remaining assignments altogether, waiting for the end.

Ten or so years later, I found myself in a fog. I found myself asleep. I found myself awake.

123

I have no family. Some photographs exist, but I do not recognize the people within them, except, perhaps, my own childish face. This world is neither wonderful nor horrible. It is simply one of an infinite number of worlds, each somewhat different from the rest.

Whether The Company yet survives in one of those worlds, I cannot say. Whether my father, my mother, my true self survive, I cannot say.

Yet, in this world, in this place, there is no company, no sanctioned dreaming, and my father never existed.

Unless.

Perhaps.

Life is a dream.

And I have yet to wake.

