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A NOVELLA

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Annabell's Universe(TM)

by  
Charles Jeffrey Danoff

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Dedicated to my Mother and Father.

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His inside edge scars the ice from knees bent heel to fully extended toe, lifting then repeating rhythmically with the opposite leg à la tide ebbing in and out.

Increasing the frequency he gains on his target: number 9 carrying his puck through the neutral zone. Defencemen slow 9's progress allowing our protagonist to connect at his blue line, simultaneously lifting 9's stick with a wrist cock, bouncing his back shoulder off 9's and 180-ing, stealing the biscuit with his backhand and advancing into the neutral zone.

\* \* \*

"Why do you want to learn about Free Software?" Gnuman asked expressionlessly.

"I watched Star Wars as a kid." I replied.

And? Gnuman asked with his eyes.

"Free Software reminds me of the force."

"You see yourself as Luke?"

"No, I just want to study that which connects."

"How does free software connect two trees?"

"It doesn't yet, but I feel through studying it I can learn more about connections just as Luke learned about the force by studying light sabers."

"What do you know about computer code?"

"Some basic HTML." I answered.

"Nothing."

"Yes, Sir."

"You are not worth my time now. You need to master at least one language first."

"Which one?"

"Whichever speaks to you."

\* \* \*

"Fuck you doing, Duke?" Paul asks.

"I, ugh ..." Dustin replies.

"You watched him skate right by you to score. You even consider touching him?" The goal replays in Dustin's mind. He watches the forward cut for the net. He had an angle to intercept, but he hesitated, because he was concerned about the attacker making a pass to his winger cutting for the opposite post. Dustin did not trust his teammate backchecking to get there in time.

A second later when it was too late for the pass across. Dustin committed to the puck-carrier, checking her, but not hard enough to knock 'er off the puck. She accepted the blow, faked like she was going to shoot getting the goalie to commit then pulled the biscuit in with the toe of her stick, pushed it across her body and scored backhand.

\* \* \*

*Following the Gnuman conversation I had not done much to explore programming. I'd been exposed to its mysteries later than most*

*professional programmers I imagined, but I am also not the most determined guy you'll ever meet ... so, yeah, despite my supposed passion I procrastinated. Then, one evening doing something else I stumbled across a free programming textbook online for C++. That was one of the few languages I'd actually heard about. The first section shocked me by looking easy ~ all I had to do was enter in a few lines of code to get it to say "hello". I lit up my bowl while thinking "Tomorrow. ... Tomorrow."*

\* \* \*

"Alright boys, things are not looking perfect. We're halfway through the season and we're .500." Paul says to his team as they stretch at center ice before practice begins.

"Of course I don't know if any of you believed our record could be this good. Now, this doesn't mean we ease up. If we keep playing like we are, we have a chance to get a high playoff seed." John and Joe listen as they stretch with the team at center ice, but their minds are somewhere else. While John sincerely cares about practice and his team's season, the geometry test tomorrow he is absolutely unprepared to take is a far bigger concern. Joe is not thinking about his team or practice, save routinized physical machinations; his conscious mental energy is entirely devoted to Sadie's breasts, and all the things he would like to do to them.

"I'd like to single out Joe for his incredible devotion and focus to our team lately. In the past 5 games he's had 8 goals. There is a lot all of you could learn from him." Joe smiles and says "Thanks coach."

\* \* \*

"What is it that attracted you to Free Software in the first place?"

"To be honest I do not exactly remember. I was looking for something online, stumbled across Free Software and then the more I read the more addicted to its ideas I became. Felt like I found people who talked about real issues and who were trying to do something positive in the world."

"What do you mean real issues?"

"I'm not sure, I suppose. Just like for me and my generation I have never felt especially connected to the political process or like there are any sorts of meaningful changes I, myself, can make to the status quo. I sort of felt as if politics and the way things are are beyond my control ... but, they're not. At all. In many ways they work for me. The people involved in Free Software showed me this and that is why I want to learn more and I guess those are what I mean by real issues."

Gnuman listens without agreeing or disagreeing, so I have no idea what he thinks about the blah coming from my mouth.

\* \* \*

The puck comes to Dustin, but bounces *Fuck!* off his blade as he

tries to catch, sliding to the other team's D-man who quickly advances the puck to a winger heading up ice.

\* \* \*

A few days have passed since I had an audience with Gnuman, and I still haven't started programming. Sort of like he predicted.

"You know Dustin a lot of people like you make the arduous journey to come and see me."

"Really?" I asked, felling surprise and a little disappointment at my lack of uniqueness.

"Yet, very few of those who come actually go out and put into practice the answers I give to their questions."

"Hm? What do you mean? Why?"

"Difficult as it is to get to see me, because it's adventurous what's even more difficult is returning and enduring the monotony of sharing the knowledge you came to me seeking."

I know what my next step must be, but it's so fucking boring.

\* \* \*

Dustin secures the puck behind his own net. He'd always enjoyed watching those sexy highlights of defencemen who took the puck coast to coast themselves to score on the opposing team and came off looking like the hero.

Toby is where he belongs on the breakout right hashmark with the opposing D backing up about 4 feet away. Dustin resists the easy option, deciding instead to advance it himself. He dekes to his right, the forward bearing down on him changes direction a few degrees, which is all Dustin needs as he draws the puck across his body to his left moving ahead of the man. With space now he sees Sam open around the blue line, and another forward zeroing in on him. Again ignoring the obvious play, he tries a spin-o-rama to deflect the incoming blow.

## POW!

Picking himself up off the ice, dusting off his hubris Dustin watches the checker take the puck on a breakaway to score, giving his team the lead. Dustin robotically heads to the bench, surprised to see his coach telling him to stay out.

Dustin skates to the blue line feeling a little sorry for himself, but his coach planted a seed of confidence. He waits across from Fez whom he'd played defence on and off with for about 6 years now.

\* \* \*

*I wonder when I will actually begin? I can feel myself getting closer, but, at the same time, I have not done it, yet.*

*Time's wasting away, but its so hard for me with my pay-job, social responsibilities and more to find the time to start learning. It's not that I don't have the five-to twenty minutes per day it takes, I don't have the energy to consistently keep doing these things*

...

*Interesting that I want to procrastinate so much, makes one even wonder why I wanted to learn this stuff at all. I suppose it all began once I started reading about Free Software ... or ... it started before that, too. I like the idea of being able to customize whatever it is I am doing on a computer. I did not especially consider the notion before I read about Free Software, but now I agree it should absolutely be a freedom everyone deserves to have as an option. I do not yet know if I consider proprietary software to be evil (probably good it exists, how much better off are Chicagoland grease buckets having McDonald's to learn and differentiate themselves from?) but it is certainly inferior ethically to free software.*

*Of course all of this writing in my notebook and thinking grand thoughts is wonderful, but what I truly require is to just sit down and actually work (proprietary developers working for Microsoft definitely did more hacking than me today).*

\* \* \*

In early August, Dustin sat in his room watching a TV show about ice hockey.

\* \* \*

Mr. Jordan once said: "Championships are won in the off-season." The exact meaning of his quote may be known only to him, but a reasonable assumption is choices a player makes in free months between fine-tuning and lounging will dictate performance during the season.

\* \* \*

The puck bounces into the corner. *I am going to fucking cream this guy.* Dustin gathers the puck, *Who's open? Who can ... OK Sam.*

The Ref watches the blue defender get smacked into the boards. *That must've stung. Looks like "charging," but its no penalty.*

Gathering himself, Dustin quickly gets going to chase the play up ice. *Boards took most of the blow.* Arriving at the opposing blue line, he stops and monitors the action.

\* \* \*

He sits down in front of his computer, and says "This is the time to work," out loud. He'd purposefully cleared his schedule to study C+. He was actually pretty excited, maybe because that's how people feel walking the path to their dreams.

Loading the intro to programming book on his computer, Dustin's mind races forward in excitement. *I am actually doing this. Once I learn how to program computing will be so much fucking easier and more fun! If I notice a problem in a program I'm using, I can crack open the hood, figure out what's wrong, then adjust the appropriate screws and bolts to fix the problem for me and anyone else in the world. We can build software together to solve the other big problems humans are facing, like death-war-starvation, on and on.*

The first step in learning computer programming is ... *Dana said they were going to that hookah bar tonight, maybe see if I can catch up with them. No, I said I was gonna do this, computer programming is I need a cigarette break.* "Dana, Hi! ... Yeah ... Am I too late? ... Nah, turns out I didn't have anything to do after all."

\* \* \*

Dustin opened his bag. First he found his jock and put it on over his boxers. Next, outside the cup band, he wrapped his garter belt around his waist. He put his right shinguard on, held it in place, and pulled his team colored socks over the guard. Then he clipped it in with those bits at the end of his garter belt whose name he can never recall, repeating the process with his left sock.

To keep his guards in place, he wrapped clear tape tightly around his socks.

"Dustin, can I borrow some clear?"

"Why the fuck don't you buy some yourself sometime?" Dustin asked, tossing the tape to Carl.

"Why should I go waste my money when I can count on you always being prepared?"

"Fuck off." Dustin said smiling, pulling up his hockey pants. They have string to tie them and a special belt to get them especially snug on your hips. Dustin only tied the string, preferring a looser fit. Then came the blades.

\* \* \*

He was darting around the apartment, as he could not find his shoes. *I don't want to keep Dana waiting too much longer. Finally* he finds one under the bed, then the other jammed in a closet near the door. After checking he had everything: lighter, smokes, wallet and phone; he was ready to jet. Got an urge for a smoke waiting for the elevator. Lets it pass, *outside soon.*

\* \* \*

Dustin's bag was imprecisely 4 feet wide by 1.5 feet high by 1.5" deep. On one width were two triangle pockets for his skates. On the other: the Rainbow Warriors logo.

Once finished tying his skates one brass hole down from the top, Dustin unzipped the large pocket of the right short side (looking @ the logo) and removed the plastic bag where he kept his tape.

Removing the black, he placed it on the bench, then reverse-mummifies his blade from heel to toe. He examined the wood for cracks and splinters, noting a few, but none deeming the stick unworthy of an opportunity for everlasting glory. He started with a single strip of tape along the bottom of the blade. Sticking tape to the heel he then carefully wrapped it around again and again, each time covering half a man's fingernail's worth of the previous strip, carefully ensuring the tape fell on the blade smoothly. Earlier in his career he was not so precise. A stick blade curves on the horizontal and vertical axis. As such, you have to play the bend while taping, leading the tape

slightly and pulling it taught so no air seeps in between it and the wood.

He ripped off the end of the tape, examined the front and back for blemishes and privately admired his work. He put the tape back into his stick supplies bag. A puck came out with his hand, he rubbed vigorously with the grain synergistically flattening and rubber coating his tape job. His mind drifted to the annual hockey banquet.

It has been a heck of a ride, these past 4 years. I never thought I'd be standing here today with two championships under my belt. I want to thank my teammates who pushed and supported me in practice and games; coaches for teaching me how to play at my best; and parents who made all of this possible with their sacrifices, love and devotion to me and my hockey dreams.

That was one of the better speeches he remembered. He had been planning his since his first banquet a year ago. It was one of many fantasies completely unrelated to the present moment, which he expended (some suggest wasted) tremendous amounts of energy playing out in his mind - by definition distracting him from the actual task at hand.

Before putting his top on, he sat and relaxed for a bit.

"You are so full of shit" Sam shot from across the room.

"It's the truth." Jimmy replied resolutely.

"There is no fucking way you got her to do that." Carl chimed in, supporting Sam. Dustin had been in his own world, so he missed exactly what the mysterious "she" had done. He considered asking what's going on but does not, recalling past similar instances when he'd been chastised or mocked for trying to catch up. Strangely, the conversation found its way to him.

"What'd you think Dustin? Do you believe I did it?"

His heart beat picked up and his palms gleamed with sweat. He thoroughly preferred being a quiet, observant wall flower during these times. Forced into the heat of the fire, he panicked.

"Did?" Dustin somehow mumbled amidst a rising intonation.

"Donkey punched her." Jimmy instantly replied.

Dustin chuckles "What!?" laughing again, "Why would you punch a donkey?" As the room transcends into laughter, Dustin came to quickly realize it was not with him.

"Duke you fucking tool - you don't know what a donkey punch is?"

"Why would you punch a donkey! My God Duke, you're good!"

"He punched the donkey ... because it was an ass!"

Dustin's cheeks got a post-it pink hue. He laughed a little then stared down, berating himself and silently begging for the conversation to move on. Gradually the laughter receded and a new topic was discussed, as game-time approached Dustin's humiliation slowly washed away.

Eventually, Nick, next to him on the bench affectionately elbowed him for his attention, then whispered "A donkey punch is when you're ..."

\* \* \*

I need a cab, but first I want to finish my smoke, as most cabs forbid the vice. While I know I am addicted to smoking, which is cruel for me and the cigarettes, I try to make smoking as ritualistic as possible, repeating the same process each time as a way to respect the plant as something holy and as a conduit for opening my mind to a higher plane of focus. I sit on a bench, trying to only think about smoke entering, pausing then leaving my lungs. Of course I was not successful, my mind flitting between tobacco and disappointment in myself for giving up on programming tonight, considering how I took the first big step by actually sitting down at the computer and attempting to code. Starting is always the hardest. Now that I planted the seed a magical work flower could blossom.

No that's bullshit. I never should have given up tonight; just relax Dustin, these things hap- she's hot -pen in life, you have a myriad of choices, don't beat yourself up so bad for choosing this one. Damn, I was supposed to be focusing on my smoke. Now there's only doves left. We'll try again with these. Feel the smoke entering. Let it pause in my lungs. Let go of other - man I totally would've fucked that girl - thoughts, and - right here on this bench - focus on - bend her and then - nothing ... there goes the smoke. Do I light up another? No, not for now. Time to get going, find a cab.

What is it about the free software idea that entices me to Learn code? They seem like the modern age's Knights of the Round Table; defending freedom and truth for people who've never heard of them from attacks those folks ain't aware of. In return they ask for money to sustain their organization, which I find a little disconcerting. Something about requesting donations reminds me of the Church. They'll save your soul so long as their coffers are full. Of course I'm unjustly criticizing two organizations there aren't I? In the modern and dark ages we all have/had overhead. Why is asking for donations then justifying them wrong? People are not forced to pay; they make their own decisions, even if their fears are manipulated.

A leaf passes by.

I wonder what tree that leaf is from? Leaves must've been passing in front of humans sitting down forever. Back when man lived in awe of nature to now when he believes he's enslaved her.

How long have people been sitting, watching leaves roll by? I suppose they've been resting and watching them for a while. Following a day's work of hunting and gathering, might a man rest on some tree stump where a leaf could easily roll by? Would he ponder about that leaf? Or, would he barely notice it, focusing instead on rest, or what else needs to be done for survival? I imagine it'd lean more to the latter. Who gives a fuck about a leaf if you're trying to (similar, but still different from someone trying to survive economically on a low paying job? Have to be different wouldn't it? Even if they're jobless they'd know how to find publicly available food and housing right? Even if they didn't have that, they'd know those things are only a job away. And, even if they weren't, they still wouldn't have to worry about a tiger coming in the night to eat them.) survive?

How about later on? After humans'd began cultivating ways of using free time. One was (when did this omnipotent narrational voice become so dominant in my stream of consciousness? For all I know, even that guy working really hard could've pondered the where of the leaf,

right? In any event, the conclusion my omnipotent self was working towards seems sound, its just strange to hear, its not one of my voices I'm used to.) relaxation by choice, instead of need. At that point, I believe a man could sit and ask himself "Where did that come from?" in relation to a passing leaf." With that context, how long ago are we talking? Well, the first civilization was probably the Sumerians, right? Or, the folks from the Falklands. That's what, maybe 30,000 years ago? So if they're the first known civilization, because they recorded their history, there had to be some pre-cursors right? (What are you doing out here, this is bullshit you should be inside fucking working.)

A wise man once told how the Egyptians created the world's first recorded state around 3,500 BCE, allowing citizens to realize their artistic, scientific and spiritual potential. Improvements in security and basic necessities allowed the leisure time necessary to reach that potential; plus, conscience was born in this petri dish.

Was that then the first time a man sat on a bench and truly pondered the "where" of a leaf? I mean, conscience is not necessary for the question, but perhaps an environment suitable for conscience would be suitable to "why?". What did my intellectual ancestor conclude? Did he know the leaf's name? Its uses to his people? With the capacity would he even ask why at all? In Egypt would they have trees?

My guess is Egypt had trees whose names had also been recorded. He might then be the type to ask a question and then follow through by finding the answer himself by walking over to pick up the leaf and examine it. Or, he might be like me, only interested in asking the question, not in finding the answer. (People are really lazy about throwing away their butts. Look at how many are around here, even though there's a trashcan less than a yard away.) What if leisure time is where all good things are born? (What if a dictator used the same tactics of alterity to galvanize a mob against a minority, that the minority previously used against the mob?) Wish I had a cigarette.

Who might he ask? (What about me? I can tell you lots of things they cannot.) That was strange. (Why? We've had a lot of fine <A lot of advertisement is just making people dangerously fat.>)

I've had some interesting thoughts here, but I still haven't answered my question from earlier: How long have people been sitting, watching leaves roll by? (Is writing my story likable? Fun to sit down every day and record what happens to me? Or is it viewed as a chore? An obligation? So long as they keep writing do I really care? <All of these ideas in my head are going at different wavelengths. I have a choice, to sit down and choose which of them I really want to key in on for this moment. All of them lead down long roads. Some of them seem more exciting than others. Does that make them more worthwhile? ... When people are social, the goal seems to be finding something they can connect over to talk about.>). Again, what I want to be figuring here is the answer to my question "How long have people been sitting around watching leaves roll by?" It seems the conclusion I've reached is that the first people with enough leisure time to reach the level of consciousness necessary to question Monsieur Leaf were the Egyptians. But, that only refers to people with a connection to our current era.

What if like twenty thousand years ago, some society worked together enough to get to the point where the question of "Why?" was conceived. Imagine that: the first person to ask the question "Why?"

Perhaps it was in relation to something about knowledge - as in, why do we need it or why should we study it?

I wonder what was the answer? Was it that knowledge is sacred power? Or that knowledge is something which is only valuable if pursued for its own sake?

Or, that knowledge is a worthless, nebulous concept and that all the junk being crammed into the heads of school children is done so solely to make them more effective cogs in the state's machine?

I'm probably forcing some 1984 onto my imagination there, but my guess is the first "why" ever uttered in regards to knowledge was probably done at a time when knowledge wasn't democratized and given away freely to the masses (@ differing levels of quality). It was likely when knowledge was hoarded by the select few. Maybe that was the question: why is knowledge hidden?

I wonder what was the answer? Because most people were uninterested in learning? Or, that they were unable? (Why is that guy listening to music so loudly as he walks by? Cry for attention.) What is it about knowledge? Does it elevate one's life? Is it necessary for a person's, or society's, intellectual evolution? Did the aristocracy of past ages have a meaningful life? Is that what we're all looking for? It was hoarded because if it spread it'd lose its value? Is a life with knowledge a better one? I suppose the thing about a life built on knowledge is you're advancing human consciousness by reading and considering thoughts of those who've read and considered the thoughts of those who came before. This has to have value, doesn't it? It's the gradual, unfolding process of culture and understanding how to be a human. (Look at that squirrel. I remember hearing they're able to tactically deceive people by pretending to dig and hide a nut in one spot, but actually putting it somewhere else. This displays a level of cognitive development not previously known about their species. Considering the other famous displays of dolphins and monkeys, it may only be a few millennia before other species join us exploring knowledge.) Though I don't know if that was a correct conclusion to draw. I would assume hoarding knowledge would involve some sort of written language and/or books, right?

I suppose you could hoard a skill like sword-making, a lyric poem that's only passed down through your family, or maybe knowledge about the spirit world or healing people. Those would seemingly be hoarded within a very narrow subset of people, within whom I suppose a son could ask his father who was teaching him whatever, "Why can't this knowledge be shared?" The father would answer with something about how it's been passed down through generations of their family. The son'd respond by asking "OK. ... So why can't we share it now?" They probably wouldn't be having the conversation in English, but who knows? What would Gnuman opine on the value of sharing knowledge?

"Because when something that had been kept private is shared with everyone, it loses a lot of its value."

"For example?" The son would respond. (What if there's the same me in a different universe in a similar situation, but not the same. What if each me acts in a different way perhaps not sitting for long,

or passing out, or one thing or another - and then we're all tapping into all these different wavelengths I'm bouncing into, but only one of us are allowed into/at any given time, or these physical manifestations I'm now creating are just these different wavelengths in an easier sense for me to understand? What if this lack of focus-) I never got to the father's answer to his son ~ I was finally progressing, although this new turn has its benefits as well. (Is it a defect in us that the beings who turned us into their robots couldn't quite fix? Or, what if the contradiction is actually the strength? Not contradiction, I mean lack of focus. What if that is the strength? Bouncing around between all of these different wavelengths ~ it allows us <or, just me? Am I the only one like this?> to gain perspective on all the separate things we can do with our time, although there is also a danger in never choosing specifically one of those things to follow through - though you can also go too far following one thing.)

\* \* \*

That was a sweet stick check, close to, but definitely not a penalty. Mom yelling in the stands looks just like that brunette taking it doggy style in that porn I watched last night.

Ah, fuck that kid just fell. Was that a penalty? Partner hasn't said anything, so maybe not. Stupid porn star hockey mom distracting me. Kid fell over somewhat suspiciously, but I didn't see any foul play.

OK, good save.

"shhhhhhhhh!" The whistle blows.

"Alright, alright boys that's enough." Goalie saved the puck on the right, so face-off over there. Its ridiculous how much she looks like that star. I wonder if she also lets guys finish on her-

"9 put your stick back on the bottom of the circle. Why do I have to go over this with you on every draw?"

\* \* \*

Fuck that, anyway back to getting out to that hookah bar. This has been a swell little exploration of an idea, but now its time to get out, and meet with people and society again. Individual idea adventures are important and worthwhile on their own merits, but it is exponentially more useful (and less selfish) to take the conclusions or theses one comes to alone to society. Test them out on folks to see if they hold or are worthwhile in any way beyond just the context of a guy talking to all the different voices he hears in his head sitting by himself on a park bench.

\* \* \*

"So, what'd you think about that kid who fell up ice from you, just before the whistle? I couldn't see, but the guilty side of my mind was eating away at me."

"I didn't really see it either, but fuck you man, eliminate that selfish woe-is-me crap. I need you to help me ref this game."

As they were standing, the captain from the home team skated

over.

"So, why was there no call when 17 tripped 9, Sir?"

"From what I saw, it looked fine."

"The kid tore his skates out from underneath him."

"I can only say what I saw, I was a little behind the play, and I didn't see any penalty."

"Perhaps you should try to keep up with the play more."

"Perhaps you're right. Perhaps you should also leave lest you make another comment like that in front of my thinning patience."

"You're right. Thank you, Sir."

As 16 skates away, John says "You didn't have to acknowledge your faults like that, doesn't matter. Doesn't fucking matter."

"Maybe, but I also think he might've seen through anything but the truth."

"Maybe, but fuck you care?"

"None of your concern."

There is another draw in blue's defending zone to the left of their goalie. John lines up the forwards, checks to make sure no defencemen have crept into the circle, then extends his right elbow as straight down as he possibly can hoping to slap the puck flat like a flapjack on the ice so that each center has an equal chance to win the draw.

Blue does, backhanding the puck back to the corner defenceman. *Thank you, Kyle. They have a winger and defenceman cheating over to the far side to prevent how I normally just bang it around the boards, and my teammates are covered, there's too much traffic to take it myself, what if I? No, that wouldn't.* Dustin drags the puck with the toe of his blade, slides his lower hand further down the shaft, then flips the puck up and out into the neutral zone. In his mind.

In the game he flipped it right into the stomach of the burly, husky forward bearing down on him, who then obliterates him. *Fuck. I totally thought that would work.*

"*You can't do me doggy style.*"

"*Excuse me?*"

"*I think you heard what I said.*"

"*I did, but I wanted to ensure that the silly thing I thought I heard was actually what I heard.*" He says, accenting his point with a full penetration thrust.

"*Emmh.*" She coos through pursed lips. "*You heard exactly what I said.*"

As Dustin peels himself up and off the ice, the high school hockey beat writer behind the corner glass jots *Duke gets eliminated by Olshansky after flipping the puck into the ogre's chest. Idiot.* He ~~crosses~~ that last part out; can't be that hard on players when you're writing about high school hockey.

\* \* \*

*What was the name of that hookah bar again? I forget, but I remember it was at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and North Ave.*

*As an artist, I wonder if it's difficult to draw a distinction between what a character wants to think or do and what the author wants them to think or do, so the artist can get their own ideas out*

using the character. I suppose it's similar to a parent wanting to re-live their lives through their child, but not also, because following that first night it is possible still (in theory) for a child to survive without its parents, whereas if this story's writer stops moving his pen across the page, what'll become of me? I suppose if the novella finishes and I become famous or whatever, there might be some sort of spin off or something else where stories of me could keep being written, and/or I could live on forever in the imagination of readers.

For that to happen, Danoff needs to keep moving the pen across the page (perhaps an act of sex itself between pen & paper?) until this novella is finished. Is it permissible for him to force some of his ideas onto me, pawning them off as mine, even if I may believe something entirely different? What do you think reader?

I don't know what to think. If he stops fucking the paper b4 the novella's done, I cease to exist. Then again despiting writing me and including himself his true self is not in the story. Think about it, how could the "Danoff" he is consciously writing about be the same as the Danoff you might meet on an idle Tuesday? He's not writing that convo is he? By that logic, do I not need to worry about him? If only he were able to keep writing fluidly AND let me as a character evolve only as I do, irrespective of what idea he wants to trot out that day at his desk, I'd probably be better off. I suppose if the only way he'll stay hard and interested is by throwing his own ideas on me, then I'm better off existing.

\* \* \*

Alright, let's win the draw here, get the puck out of our zone, and head into intermission down by only one goal. Nice fucking draw Kyle, now Dustin bang it around the boards just like we drew it up.

Move quick, that husky dude is bearing down on you ... wait, you're facing the wrong way ... what are you?

FLIPPING THE PUCK!

"Duke! The hell you doing?" Coach Davis screams.

"Tommy, get Duke off the ice as soon as we clear the zone." Davis commands, then paces behind his players. It is such an easy play. I know the winger on their team was cheating over, but you still could've gotten the puck outta there, you did not need to get so creative and try something that would've been awesome to pull off in practice but to attempt it in a tight game like this is just selfish.

"Tommy take Dustin off next chance." Paul reminds him again.

That stream and dialogue may have been the sequence of events, but in Dustin's mind his unseen vision of his coach's response was:

"DUUUKE! FUUUUCK YOU!" Coach Davis erupts in a blood curdling volcano.

"Tommy get him off the ice now and ask if he enjoyed his shift, because its the last time he or any of his descendants will ever play for me again!" Dustin sees coach flaring with blue hot fire comes out his nostrils.

\* \* \*

Another thing I've been thinking about lately, is getting to know yourself, you know, the whole cliché finding yourself thing, that young people love to talk about these days (perhaps they've always liked to do these things). What if you find the person you are, take my writer, Danoff, for example, he has all these ideas about himself and slash or what he could do, with world traveling, teaching, writing, women, leaving the world on a more sustainable path than when he was born, yada, yada, yada. Yet, he is finding that while the person he is may be capable of doing all those things and more, that same person perhaps loves being social most of all, and just is not wonderfully self-motivated, and may be using this entire travelling around garbage, just as a way to run away from the life he was born into, ironically which if he were to pursue, would be the way to actually achieve all of his other self-ideas ... maybe ... but consider what this may imply for us if it's true. Perhaps part of the difficulties in our lives stem from how we keep doing things or thinking things, which do not jive with the person "we" really are? I'm the perfect example, I went through that long ass dream journey to see Gnuman, found out what I need to be doing, only to find myself again not studying or working or using computer code constructively. Just out here on my way again to be social and do drugs.

\* \* \*

She put the VHS tape into the player, checking its white label "10/14/2004 Blue vs. Loywick"

"This is a tape of you right, honey?" She asks.

"Yeah, I don't remember this specific game, and it's not just me, it's also my whole team," he responds, then presses play as she curls up next to him on the couch and smells his post-work musk of sweat, coffee, cigarettes and the faded cologne he dabs on in the morning just cause she likes it.

The old TV flares up, fuzzes into a faceoff in the blue zone.

"It's in the middle, you wanna fast forward to the beginning?" she says.

"Nah, this is fine."

They watch as the blue center wins the puck back to his right defenceman. "Hey that's me."

"Oh!"

The blue defenceman hesitates then brings the puck in with the toe of his blade seemingly trying to flip it out of the zone. Instead it lands in the stomach of an aggressive Loywick winger who pounds the defenceman into the glass.

"That hurts just as bad now as it did then."

Laughing, she says "Well, the idea of us moving through time is an illusion."

\* \* \*

*If the time I am experiencing now is non-existent as something yet to unfold, that regardless of my anticipation slash trepidation the events will unfold as they unfold, or not even unfold as they \_\_\_\_\_ anyway even if all of this is true, I still have certain things to*

*finish like setting up the alarm clock. There's no reason to rank things, but the common agreed upon reality seems more valuable if only because it keeps us relatively from running around and mindlessly slaughtering one another, allowing a sort of unnamed goal we're all working towards, and that process is probably the most worthwhile thing in the universe even if many individuals try to co-opt that energy and lead it towards un-sustainable, self-serving ends. Could the son talking to his Dad about sharing knowledge say something like that?*

*I wonder if my knowledge of the existence of my writer, Danoff, something I believe most characters never know, much less suspect, makes our relationship akin on some level to Jesus & God's?*

*Within our context, he is decisively the creator of me and everything else in this universe, then does this special power to think about his actions makes me Christ-esque? Probably not. Unread as I am of novellas it seems surprising he'd throw himself in here with such gusto, I know of some who do so in biographies, but not really there either, because the John Doe of the past 50 years JD is writing about differs from the memories of that JD, JD sitting down and writing.*

*In any event, there are no original ideas, so I'm sure he's stolen it from someone else.*

\* \* \*

"I am here to see Gnuman," he told the guard.

The guard made direct eye contact while stroking the bottom of his Fu Man Chu with a right hand featuring a tattoo of cerberus on the bony non-palm side.

Following some measurable amount of time, he opened the same hand, waving it out in a half circle indicating the uninvited guest could pass, and showcasing his Cherubims tattoo. As the guest passed, the guard opened a white pack withdrawing a black cigarette. He offered it to the guest.

"You got a light?" the guard asked.

"Yeah."

\* \* \*

Following a won defensive zone faceoff early in the 3rd, Blue defenceman Dustin Duke showed where all the money schools invested in creativity has gone: attempting a flip out of the zone. Fortunately for us, the puck landed immediately in Bif's husky chest who proceeded to clobber Duke into oblivion, a sad metaphor for a return all that creative investment has yielded students.

REPRINTED FROM THE LOYWICK GAZETTE COLUMN "BLUE BASH II" WRITTEN BY MCLOVIN, STAFF HOCKEY COLUMNIST

\* \* \*

*Jeez, there I go once again, bouncing all these ideas around my head when I should have already gotten going by now.*

*I wonder what time it is? Nah, not really; I like this situation I'm in now, unaware of how much or how little time has passed since I came to sit down on this bench. This is freedom, isn't it? Of course, this is coming at a cost. I am wasting other people's time, perhaps even taking away their freedom of time so I can have more of my own? Or is that simply solipsistic bullshit?*

*I'm not totally sure ... the respect for other people's time element is separate from a discussion about the freedom coming from the unawareness of time, even if said unawareness can lead you to disrespect others's time.*

*I wonder what led Danoff to give me this string of thoughts? Perhaps he was contemplating the illusory nature of time as a 4th dimension, or suffering from a lack of unaware time, or maybe it was just a bad writing day he sloshed through (might've been better to give up, eh?). This awareness of the writer of my story - in some ways it makes me powerless - I know I can't do, say or think anything without him ... true of any fictional character. I suppose a lot of them just enjoy the ig-is-bli route, plodding unawares through their little universes.*

*Given my context, is there any way we could chat? So he could get to know me better and I could share some ideas about what I think? Was Christ even allowed an audience with God?*

*That would be a rather unique experience, for the master of your universe to receive you. I wonder if he'd do it graciously like a great player fielding a pass, by going out to meet the puck with his blade, then giving an inch or two to gain better control of the puck? Or, would he be inflexible and rigid, refusing both to go out to meet the puck and to give with it upon arrival, reducing chances he'll catch the pass?*

*Either way is that really something desirable? Could anything helpful come from that conversation?*

\* \* \*

"Hello Kyle," the smiling gentleman in the pink bow tie says.

"Greetings Carl," Kyle replies. "This is my agent John Carlson."

"Hi Carl, it's a pleasure."

"Likewise. Nice to finally meet in person. You're even uglier than you described." Carl's barely grinning, but grinning, as his two guests chuckle politely and sincerely. "Have a seat, please."

They are in Carl's ornate, civilized office. There is no computer. Mahogany, ivory and white dance in parallel and cross, coloring and culminating in the tri-color elephant rotary phone sitting on the desk.

The main non-human visual contrasting is a box of Orange & Pink cardboard seemingly processed, but honest donuts next to it, complimented with a french cruler and an unopened box of munchkins.

"You want one?" Kyle hears, catching one thrown to him.

\* \* \*

*If this Danoff clown is my God, then is the pen my Virgin Mary? What if he is only a scratchpad for God's universe? Then he and God*

are the same some how? And if I started writing, would I and what wrote God into existence be the same?

Supposing all or some of that is true, perhaps I have no excuse here for feeling powerless, eh? No reason to bemoan my lack of decision making skills and blame the situation on Danoff. He is just as free and locked into servitude as I am, so if he is able to sit down and write my story, I sure as shit, ought to be able to do or not do whatever it is that pleases me one way or another.

So, then, what is it? What do I really want to be doing right now? Sitting on this bench and philosophizing my time away? Or do I want to get up and see what the Chi has to offer tonight?

The latter, but compromise with a cig before I roll.

Is Danoff the creator of God in my universe? How far away are our universes? Could another artist make something where we both were in the same universe? I don't know if it'd be interesting for anyone to read, but yes it'd be possible. Why wouldn't it be? Anyway, about that cig, where's my lighter?

\* \* \*

"Alright boys, sticks down, let's get going." I hear.

Facing off against this Netro chump again; beaten me on most of our draws thus far, but not this time. Ahead in the game, if we win this attacking zone face-off and score, it'd be the decisive dagger. I just want everyone to be in their proper spot, so I'm going back and forth and around the circle. Sometimes when you do due diligence you miss things you'd notice if you weren't trying hard.

"Loywick center, stick down." The referee said, amping up the annoyance in his tone. OK, OK Stripes fucking chill I'm read- wait why the fuck did Biff move board-side? Board-side wingers are ALWAYS supposed to line-up in front of the goal, doubling the pressure, confusion and number of bodies in front of the goal. Dam-

Before he got the chance to finish his thought the ref twitched his right hand quickly, dropping the puck, which Netro easily took from his distracted opponent, sending it into the corner to Duke.

The entire arena soon gasped after watching Dustin flip the puck into Biff's belly. It bounced back into the boards as Biff raised his hands and with his shoulders bombasted the defenceman in the chest, forcing skates to come forward and up off the ice as his shoulder blades were propelled backwards, clanging against the end boards. Biff controlled the puck and saw his center cutting to the net, but his pass didn't make it.

\* \* \*

Ah, there's my lighter.

Should I maybe take this cig to go? I've been sitting here and inwardly questioning for what has seemed like a long internal time, but perhaps it's only been a few minutes of more generally agreed upon time. It's not like my friends will be holding off on partying until I arrive; I'm sure most aren't even aware I'm supposed to come. Some that are have forgotten, and those who haven't wouldn't be surprised if I didn't show.

*Before I rush off to be social, I should end this audience with the universal unconscious with my meditation ritual.*

*Slowly withdrawing the cigarette from its fellow Reds, conscious of what I'm doing; I tap it twice on my knuckle, then roll thrice. Recite the holy vows*

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;

And here were forests ancient as the hills,

Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted

Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!

A savage place! as holy and enchanted

As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted

By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:

And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure

Floated midway on the waves;

Where was heard the mingled measure

From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw:

It was an Abyssinian maid,

And on her dulcimer she played,

Singing of Mount Abora.

Could I revive within me

Her symphony and song,

To such a deep delight 'twould win me,

That with music loud and long,

I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

*And indulge, sharing this time with the Nicotine Goddess, try to focus only on her.*

*"Hello Dustin."*

*Ha, that'd be funny, but seriously just follow the thoughts she suggests like a surfer on the waves, riding them as long as I can, and if I wanna surf another day, avoiding waves I know I can't hack. That's a chill start: surf hacking.*

*I wonder how many computer hackers surf? I would guess the Bay Area has more than a few. In both cases I suppose the "-er" is seeking to define the limits of a defined system (i.e. waves/computers) Perhaps, or ... Well however best the two are described, neither hacker nor surfer is sitting here on this bench. What I am is something that exists and is valid. Am just as valid I, Dustin Duke, even if I was only born of Danoff's pen screwing paper. How different is that from your Dad poking your Mom to create you? One difference, of course, is the amount of control over the creation. Your parents may be able to force you to eat broccolli, have a 12 o'clock curfew, or, like, beat you or worse if they're really twisted, and even that control will largely disappear once you leave the house.*

*Danoff ... can fucking dictate what my very thoughts will be, to say nothing of my actions. I suppose he loses that control once the novella gets published. Once I've reached your hands, maybe I get an afterlife in the way I play around in your imagination and/or if you draw a picture of me, re-write my story, make the graphic novella version, or re-mix me some other way.*

*In a vague sense, that's what I suppose I am, but what if Danoff's the same and he doesn't realize? What if all of his thoughts and everything are just being put into a novella somewhere, including even his writing about me, would it be like a weird mirror-on-mirror-accordion effect where all of us and our characters are reflecting, so maybe I could even write the story of the guy writing Danoff's story?*

*How would it begin?*

*Well, Danoff's been around for a while if he's found the time to slowly create me, so the guy who's writing his novella must be really old and very disciplined. It'd be a lot of responsibility to write a life.*

*Am I being too abstract here? Should I just write the story of Danoff writing my novella? The exact mirror image?*

*I guess, while possible, the story of Danoff writing about me seems a little too close, but while writing about Danoff's theoretical writer seems less difficult, because it's an item so far away from who I am it just seems more plausible, indirectly getting to him rather than head-on.*

*OK, so then what is his writer's name? ... Bob. Alright, removing my trusty notebook and Bic pen, allons-y!*

### The Story of Bob

Bob was born to a Jew and a Gentleman, both Russian immigrants, a little before the start of World War II. Bob's early childhood differed from later, on account of his father's fortunate investment in an up and coming Omahan's business venture. Something to do with textiles. As the family fortune steadily accumulated, Bob found himself increasingly surrounded by books, which his father would buy as nutrients for the soil of his son's mind, but also as a status symbol, whose editions became earlier and earlier ....

*I'm trying to provide context for how he became a writer. At the same time I want to just sort of let Bob unfold himself to me as a character because I don't really know him, he knows himself ... but I have this sorta power or responsibility now that I've started this story to share him with the world - on a related note is it even me who's writing or sharing or whatever? No, right? It's Danoff. At the same time, Bob is writing his story, too, so we're all kinda the same snake eating itself or something.*

*Anyway, back to Bob. Maybe I shouldn't try so hard to explain his whole background leading to writing. Stopping at the business venture is enough. So, from there ...*

As an adult, Bob enjoyed a wildly successful banking career. He retired in his early forties to join the life writers. He fit their three criteria:

- 1) single
- 2) childless
- 3) self-supporting

The life writers were a 501(c)3 non-profit. A life writer was naturally expected to write a life. They created a character then kept them going as long or short as necessary, publishing the results. Aside from the three rules above, there were no clear guidelines, but no life writer had written a life for less than 9 years.

Fans of the organization said there was no higher occupation, and some lives have been preserved as cultural artifacts by the US Government.

Bob's life was named Danoff. It took him 3 years to write the first sentence: He giggles.

\* \* \*

*Come on Kyle win the draw, Mr. Netro thought silently to himself.*

Mr. Netro stood in the back of the stands, alone. When he watched his son play ice hockey he did not chat. If he sat closer to the ice, amidst the other familial fans, inevitably he'd be drawn into some type of conversation, possibly even one on a topic like tax law that profoundly interested him, but he stopped engaging in that or any such topic years before. He spends the majority of his waking life discussing interesting items with adults. When he comes to the rink, he only wants to see his son play ice hockey and study the evolution of his game. He knows from Kyle's older siblings that athletic careers disappear very quickly as children age, and, for legitimate reasons, he'd missed more of the other sibling's games or performances than he'd wished. A few times he got pretty involved with his kids's teams in an intense way as assistant coach. He had some wonderful memories from those years, but that no longer appealed to him. With his youngest son's high school career almost over, he was interested in investing 100% of his energy and attention into watching Kyle.

\* \* \*

Lives authored by life writers were prized par society: for some they are entertainment, others solace from loneliness or randomnesss and some fans care more for character's lives than their relatives's.

*So now that's a start for Bob the life writer. I don't know how much further I want or can go with this thing. I mean I haven't really even done much writing in my entire life. Even if I did decide to try to finish this story, I don't have to do it right this second. It takes a long time to write a story, and while I suppose it is theoretically possible for me to sit down and keep writing until the story is completely finished, it is as unappealing as it is unlikely to happen.*

*Besides, I just finished that cigarette, and I have made a social commitment I am by no means obliged to honor, but it would be sorta dick not 2 do what I said I was going to do.*

*Thank you bench and thanks cigarettes. Where can I put my butt? I really wish I owned some sort of portable ashtray. Ashing is one thing, but I hate it when smokers will throw their butts away willy-nilly. It makes us look terrible and gives non-smokers valid reasons to criticize us. Beyond that, its fucked man, polluting the earth.*

*Regardless of what anyone believes about the afterlife, it is definitely true that every person and generation has a chance: either leave the world better than you were born into it, or don't.*

*Well, regardless, it is time for moi to go. I have Loved you bench, but sometimes you have to give up what you Love, only because you love it.*

\* \* \*

"Morning class."

"Morning Mrs. Lapell."

"Did you bring your writings?"

Between a shuffling of papers and eyes looking downward, some muffled "yes's" and "no's" and "mmm...s" were heard. Listening only to the audio track, an observing teacher-researcher might believe the class was filled with several elementary schoolers, albeit particularly bright for their age.

In fact, the class was for writers organized at a local community college. Perhaps its just a would-be-creative-artistic types trait, or something exclusive to fiction writers in this class, but they were anemic to deadlines and straight talk and their excuses were almost as good as those advanced primary schoolers.

"Same as usual it seems, best approach to call on someone, and instead of talking about who does or doesn't have their work let's just chat on where our stories are now. Daisy?"

Before Mrs. Lapell had even uttered the first syllable of her name, Daisy was sure, 1000% proof positive, abso-no-fucking-doubt-lutely-sure that she'd be the one called upon today. She'd been using all of her available energy focusing on her certain selection, so none had been allocated to thinking of an answer.

"The man is literally in her."

"By choice?"

"Yes, mutually, though it could change."

"I thought she hated him."

"She did."

"Alright. Who's next? Jane, how are things with the Sphinx?"

Jane turns, annoyed her conversation with Sue about a certain contentious individual had been interrupted. "Sphinx is pissed Lucy won't blo him, and all his buddies've, already gotten head."

"Glad to hear Lucy's relaxing a little, I didn't even realize she'd gotten to second base," Mrs. Lapell responds expressionlessly, allowing Jane to resume her conversation.

"And what about you, Dustin? How's everything?"

"My real g-f won't go to third," Dustin smiles. "Aside from that, things are swell. Think I found one of those moments you were mentioning before, that writers can use as a base point for a story." Dustin says. A pause.

"Yes? What're you waiting for?"

"Verbal acknowledgement of some sort, clearly. Xie xie laoshi. The moment came from my high school hockey glory days. The center won a face-off draw to me in the defensive zone, and then I had an original idea ..."

\* \* \*

"'bout fucking time, Duke." Robbie says.

"I'm worth it," Dustin replies, shaking Rob's hand.

"Hi D! Here you go." Dana bubbles, hugging Dustin then handing him the hose. "This is Miriam and Sandy, two girls I work with, and this is Jason, one of Robbie's buddies." As she introduces him to each person in-turn, Dustin lean over, and shakes their hands if they're

close, or throws the shoulder-high-hand-raise, if they're farther away. He suck down the sheeshah. Tastes like,

"Strawberry, isn't it?"

"Nope," Sandy responds to the question with an ever-so-slight-grin. *She and the other new girl are cute. I didn't believe Dana when she was talking about them before (typically girls exaggerate their female friends's positives to their male amigos, though I can't remember Dana doing it) but she was right.*

*At least if I'm going to be out right now, breaking my promise to Gnuman, or the desire-personified-in-my-dreams-I-refer-to-as-him, I better have a great fucking time. Make that sacrifice worthwhile. Naturally that'd mean taking half (or, all I suppose) of this Miriam and Sandy pair home and poking them in all sorts of ways.*

"So, Miriam and Sandy, what is Dana like around the office?" Dustin asks, handing the tube to Jason on his right.

The girls look at each other, deciding who'll answer first. Miriam begins: "Dustin, I want to suck your balls then jam them into my asshole."

Dustin wolfs wildly.

"What's so funny?" Dana asks, slightly annoyed.

"What'd you mean?" Dustin replies innocently.

"Why are you Dennis-the-Menacing after Miriam said I'm a lazy slob at the office?"

"Oh!" Dustin exclaims making eye contact with Miriam, who is coquettishly smiling. "I heard something different. That's bullshit Miriam, I've worked with Dana and I know for a fact she is not ..."

"What did you think she said that made you Cheshire-Cat-grin so?"

"I ...

\* \* \*

Considered from a game perspective, a goal of people getting together socially is to fuck.

He heard something repeated in the back of his subconscious as he approached the two sophomores wearing their boyfriends's hockey jackets at the party. It was the BF's's way of marking their territory, and for the ladies, an elevation of status over their sad-to-be-single peers.

The girl's attire meant they had won before the evening's events had even begun.

"Hi Apple and Cinnamon."

"Heey D." They coo.

"How're you enjoying the evening?"

"Would've been better if you won the game."

"Well ..."

"Yeah, and that play of yours-" Cinnamon turns to Apple as they start laughing together playfully.

"I ..."

"You big dummy!" they both say emphatically, mocking the boy's hockey coach, who - given a recent decision to stop cussing at the boys - uses the phrase in place of more colorful alternatives.

"Yeah."

"So, who's gonna be your lucky lady tonight?" Apple asks as the

laughter subsides.

"You two. As usual."

"OMG! We were worried tonight you might change your mind and leave us in bed alone!"

"Naturally. I don't know though, there's a lot of single chicks tonight."

"You know Suzie likes you."

"Yes, I do know. I am simply mortally terrified of approaching her in that context. If she just wanted to s my d or roll around or whatever, that'd be fine, but the girl actually likes the 'me' me and wants to chat."

Apple and Cinnamon look at one another. Their natural instinct to take offense to Dustin's sexual comments and verbally challenge them had been screened by their awareness of his respect towards women (as evidenced by his earlier chat w/them, and the subsequent way he talks about Suzie). Their considered response became, "Well ... I think we know what you mean ... so, question becomes ... do you like her back?"

Face flushed red-delicious like the schoolboy he is, he responds: "..."

\* \* \*

... just heard what I wanted to hear."

"Which was?" Sandy asks, with Miriam still sporting that smile.

"An invitation."

"To?" Miriam finally speaks on the subject concerning her, as she aware-of-the-visual-phenomena-she's-manipulating phallicly sucks her bubble tea straw.

"Places yet unknown pour moi, but which I hope we can go ensemble."

"You're a bitch Duke," Robbie concludes, shifting the convo.

"What took you so long?"

"So long to what?"

"Get here, you bastard."

"Oh, that. ... I was sitting on this bench to have a smoke and then this leaf passed by -"

"Are you really trying to tell a story about sitting on -"

In the midst of interrupting Dustin, Jason faces the same fate as an elbow from Robbie hits J's side, which coupled with Rob's look, suggestes to the original interrupter while the elbower may agree with him about the banality of Dustin's story, it is no excuse for an outsider of this particular group (or newcomer at least) to be rude to one of its members.

"So, this leaf passes by. Then I get to wondering, 'How long have humans been sitting on benches watching leaves pass?'"

"Since Jesus," Jason answers like a student to a teacher. The others quickly follow ensuite.

"Just Jesus? You must mean biblical times in general, right?" Robbie parries back.

"And what years would constitute your biblical times, Bobby?" Dana continues the rally in a tone with undetectable levels of sarcasm and sincerity. "We talking 500 BC? BCE?" she continues.

*I wonder what he thought I was saying with that cute smile? I'd*

*Like to think it'd be something romantic, like he'd speak to me in French then take me to a show at the top of a castle and we'd dance the night away then he'd take me home, dropping me off w/only a kiss. Then we'd like start dating and he'd remember information like whether I prefer milk or dark chocolate, what brand, and if I like prefer it to be stored in the cupboard or the freezer. ... Of course, it could've also been something like "Do you want to go boff in the bathroom?"*

*Or something far more degrading and vulgar to (and fun 4) women, that I can't even imagine. That's probably what it was.*

"General period of time in which the events of the Bible occurred, so like 1,000 BC and after."

"I'd think it'd go back before that to Egyptian times." Miriam puts forward. Dana looks at her, furrowing her brow to re-pose the question she asked Rob.

"Oh." Miriam says seeing Dana. "I think they are like 2,000, or maybe 3,000, or their recorded history goes back about that many years before Robbie's lord and savior kicked the bucket."

"Wait, you sincerely believe in Jesus?" Jason asks Robby.

"No, Jason, I do not actually believe. Miriam was being sarcastic." Robby responds, adding "and remember, when you write this scene into your novel, you should bold or italicize 'do not'"

"Fuck. Off."

Sandy looks at Dana with a questioning glance. "So, you think, then it's with the Egyptians, that the question on the bench was first asked?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Suppose it started because I figured the question was older than the Bible, and the first place my mind went was 'Egyptians.'"

"So, then its just about finding the oldest human civilization - they are the answer to Dustin's question?" Sandy asks, grabbing the hookah chord.

"I was thinking about the Egyptians too, actually." Dustin says, speaking for the first time in a while.

"But if there was a group or society older than the Egyptians, couldn't they be the answer to your question?" says Miriam, taking the hookah tube from Sandy.

"Yeah, what about the Mayans? Or or those people on the Falkland Islands with the big faces? Or the underwater kingdom of Atlantis?" Jason asks earnestly, leading everyone else to chuckle.

\* \* \*

"In your future, what do you see yourself doing?"

"I'm not sure, Sir. What about yourself?"

"I've been retired for ten years, son. I see myself doing the same things, at a slower & slower pace, until I keel over, and don't get up. Your turn."

"That sounds alright. Can I do that, too?"

"You're welcome to join, but I have a suspicion you will get bored quite quickly."

"Yeah, you're probably right. You don't seem to roll with any hot

chicks no more. I've seen the pictures from back in the day, so I know you did, but not lately."

"Minus a few very notable exceptions, whom I do believe even you would find attractive, I agree."

"Alright, you've been patient, I guess, I'm still not sure what I see myself doing in the future, but I have an idea of what I don't want to be doing."

"Wise place to begin."

"I was playing hockey on my high school squad. Center won a draw back to me. As a defenceman, my job was to get the puck out of the zone via three reliable options. I'd done that thousands of times before, but that time I decided to be creative and try a new approach I'd never actually seen done before. The new approach failed badly, hurting my team. It would've been one thing if the new approach was in solution to a new problem, or an evolution of an old one, but trying to put forth a new solution for something that'd been solved already and hurting my team, just because I wanted to be creative. ... That's what I know I don't want for my future. Does that answer your question?"

"Not exactly, I asked 'What do you see yourself doing?'"

"That's right."

"But I'm very flexible, so don't worry. Are you uncomfortable with risk?"

"No."

"That's what I thought. What do you see as the risks in your life?"

Dustin paused, considering the question and his own life.

"I think the risk for me is having too much faith in my creativity."

The older gentleman said nothing, but indicated with his eyes that he hoped Dustin would continue.

"I think one of my greatest skills is my creativity, but I get so excited about my own ideas that I put myself in situations like I described before. So, yeah, I see my biggest risk as not developing a yin to balance out my creative-faith yang. Said yin needs to be comfortable with doing boring ass stuff, or, just to not be above something, because it's plain"

"..."

"Its like this dream I had, where I met this Yoda-figure, Gnuman. He said the hard path ...

\* \* \*

*I never would've thought my Leaf monologue would've spawned such a con-*

"So, Dustin, where did you get to with your thinking of the leaf?"

"In terms of civilizations, I didn't go further than the Egyptians, Miriam."

"Why didn't you push yourself to go further back?"

"I chose not to after remembering something I heard about Egyptians."

"?"

"The establishment of the state covered enough of a human's needs that conscience developed. An environment that could incubate and develop that kind of mental evolution could also give people enough leisure time & mental freedom to afford them the opportunities to devote their afternoon to a passing leaf."

"In theory then, any society that satisfied enough needs to give people freedom of attention could offer enough time for your leaf ponderer, correct?" Miriam instantly asks.

"I believe yes, but -"

"That obviously could come from societies older than the Egyptians," Jason clarifies, with what he felt was a helpful comment.

"Ye-" Dustin gets cut off.

"Does anyone have a smartphone we can look this stuff up in?" asks Dana.

"I can try," offers Jason. "but, what am I exactly looking for? ... oldest societies?"

"Yeah, that should work. If you can find anything about the first instance of human conscience and/or consciousness that'd be helpful as well," says Miriam.

"I'll see if I can find the meaning of life while I'm at it," replies Jason.

Dustin continues on point, "Even though my original question was 'How long have humans been sitting down watching leaves roll by?' I ended up getting distracted thinking about how such thoughts would come out of leisure time, and then if all worthwhile things have come out of leisure time, and then, well, have you ever seen the movie *Stranger than Fiction*?"

\* \* \*

Have you ever read *To the Lighthouse*?" Its this novel by Virginia (Ginny) Woolf. The novel is broken up into three movements and one of them is called "Time Passes".

It's a sweet section of the book, where, ostensibly, nothing happens. The eye of the novel is set in the summer home where all of its action occurs in the other two sections. Yet, in that one, the only humans involved are maids cleaning the home. Thus, all that happens in the words on the page the reader can read (not to speak about the lives of the characters in the novel, which were obviously ongoing) is time passing.

I would like to incorporate that idea into this section of the novel somehow. I believe trying to force ideas into little spaces is a terrific way to build a car, and the way many have (seemingly) written million-seller novels, but that's not how I believe it should be done, I feel spontaneity & seeing where the characters, narrator included (yours truly) take you to fertile ground.

\* \* \*

*I can't believe how this entire table full of people has become so interested in those meandering questions I posed to myself on that bench. Of course, the meanderings related to how Danoff is writing my story and if that's true, he's writing everyone/thing else in this*

reality, so aah-bviously we would find the same faux-philosophical topics really interesting, and be able to hold onto, relate, follow and elevate a conversation on them. (Mmnh.) It's sad in a way, because if this convo were happening amongst entirely different people (-nd -eoh I need to start eating better) developing it'd be so inspiring and sincerely cool. The way this is (Alright, just take one square, and turn it diagonally. Alright that's a healthy brown color, but not too watery. Few more here and don't over-do it ...aight, that's enough. Good thing this isn't an automatic flush, I hate those, they always finish before I do and then there's those unnecessary splashes of water, even if I don't get splashed, the possibility of it is scary and annoying. But, that's not today. Up, pants on, I feel a lot better now ...) going is well within the Danoff-writer context, I guess. I mean its kind of annoying that not only are all my thoughts from him, but so is every person I meet and their thoughts. What's true for me and him is true for him and Bob, so no whining and I may as well enjoy the illusion of freedom I've had my whole life. Embrace it even more, now that I can call it by its proper name.

Even if there were some scientific, magic or alchemic method to get myself out of this it would take so much time and effort and sacrifice to find, and even if I did, the process might fail, and then all of those years I could've been living my (albeit) illusory life will have been wasted, or would they? Maybe not, maybe I can slow & steadily do both ... well its been enough time in front of this mirror here, my stomachs feeling solid, time to hit the crowd. Dustin leaves the bathroom, holding the door open for an incoming gentleman on his way out. Gliding across the room, he re-joins his friends.

"So, yeah, Dana, Jason and I have seen *Stranger Than*," Miriam picks up the convo. Dustin smiles in such a way that Miriam can't interpret. It's not that he is happy to hear what she said, it's too wide ... but she lets it drop because she wants to hear what Dustin has to say.

"Alright, you know how that woman is like writing the protagonist's life?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever -"

"Considered someone is writing ours? Of course Dustin, we're all characters in a novel." says Miriam.

"But are we all necessarily a product of the same writer?" asks, Jason.

"No, it's possible the writer could allow a guest to come in and contribute for a certain character and/or they could base one off of one from another novel/artistic medium, or some person they know, but in all of those cases, you still have the novelist in charge," responds, Miriam.

Sandy weighs in, "What about authors who don't pre-plan their characters, or create like a broad mold for them. Writers who wake-up every day, waiting to be surprised by what their characters do?"

*That's something that occurred to me, but not in that depth nor degree of articulation.* "I like that Sandy, I hadn't quite thought about it that way," says, Dustin.

"Do you want any new flavors or drinks or anything?" asks their waitress. Dustin takes a cigarette out of his pack.

"I think we're OK on the sheeshah." says Dana. Dustin taps and twists his cigarette ritualistically.

"I'll take some more coffee, please." says Robbie. Dustin notices Dana, who's picked up his pack, and is making eye-contact. Dustin nods, waits for her to remove one and re-establish eye-contact, then safely tosses her the lighter. *Why he did he toss it to Dana when she was sitting next to him?*

"Anybody else?" asks the waitress. Dana lights Dustin's and her cigs, as she and everyone else (besides Robbie) shake their heads horizontally.

*Would it be difficult to survive in America for someone who comes from a culture where they head nod up and down to signal "no"?* Jason wonders.

\* \* \*

John goes up to the machine wondering what will happen. He has obviously spent time in front of quite a few machines in his time, but a casual observer would still be surprised, and maybe even stop to watch if they came upon this scene. There is something about his posture, suggesting he is on the verge of something spectacular. Were Cézanne alive now, he would've recorded an image of the man, and either his opponent or friend (depending on whom you ask) facing one another.

"Monsieur, what do you hope to accomplish?" the great may of even asked.

I'm not sure if the man would respond. If he did, the only thing he might be able to say is, "Waiting for you; that I might be a muse in your next dream."

Overhearing the exchange, Gnuman smiles.

*Wait a sec, Gnuman?*

*Am I dreaming again, so quickly? I do not even remember falling asleep. Perhaps I'm not actually asleep. Perhaps I'm just dead. Either way, here I find myself with Gnuman, Cezanne, and most compellingly of all, this gentleman and machine. Most of these dreams I've had many times before, but not this one. This is new. Am I participating in this dream, or merely narrating? Considering it is *\*my\** dream, though, I guess I'm allowed to choo- excuse me, considering Danoff has written a dream sequence, and allowed me to be aware of said item, I am therefore allowed the illusion of choosing where I want this to go - on that note, why don't I pull a Danoff, and give these 3 (4?) characters the illusion of choice, letting them determine their own fates?*

Cezanne does not notice Gnuman idling nearby, nor does he choose to ask the young fellow squaring off any questions. The machine has no name, but everyone knows unequivocally it is a machine, and therefore made to serve some purpose - though what that is is unknown to all observing, but not John himself.

There is a lever.

Gnuman furrows his brow, and Cézanne rubs his beard. Its strange to see these two Buddha-esque human-metaphors of tranquility to be confused, or apprehensive, or anxious, or even just unsure.

The machine is black.

*I mean, obviously I do want something to happen, but ...*

\* \* \*

The waitress smiles then walks away. "So, what were we talking about? Something how certain writers don't plan their characters, and how that may or may not relate to all of us being [air quotes] characters in a particular novel?" asks, Miriam.

"I believe so," says Dana exhaling from her cigarette, "but, before we delve totally back into that, what time are we heading out? I want to get a few drinks in me before hitting the club." She finishes, then leans back into the magenta colored couch she was laying on. It's arranged in a eighty-odd degree 'L' shape, with room for maybe eight folks shoulder-to-shoulder. As it is now, everyone besides Dustin is on the couch.

Facing across the table is what appears to be its little brother, similar angle, but room only for 3, max 4. The curve is roughly two yards away from the opposing one, and in between is a circular wooden table, made of ancient, warped wood re-conditioned from a two-hundredish year-old Michigan farmhouse.

On an unrelated note, you might be wondering who I, this tale's narrator, am.

The farmhouse, built by a combined 3 Griff generations, fell into disrepair mid-twentieth century. It got especially bad a couple decades later, when financial stresses forced the bank to take the farm. They didn't spend any money on upkeep, and finally sold it to those vintage wood collectors who approached them a couple of years ago. They worked the wood into the fantastic masterpiece rising a foot and a half above the ground.

Plastic hose-cover wrappers, ashtrays, ash that missed the tray, empty American coffee glasses, faux-European espresso cups and related coffee-beverage minutiae share the table with the hookah. Dustin hadn't ordered a drink, and aside from Robby's coffee, I am not sure what everyone else is drinking.

"Well, what time is it now?" asks Sandy. Robbie takes out his smartphone and answers

"Ten on the dot."

"Alright," says Miriam, "Robby just ordered another cup of coffee, so how about another half hour here, find a bar for an hour or two, then we meander over to the club?"

"I would add a request that the bar either be walking distance from here or the club, so we only have to take 1 cab in-between," chimes Robby.

Jason looks around at everyone: "Request granted?"

"I don't know ..."

"We'll see ..."

"But, I really wanted to go to this bar ..."

As Robby is just about to start squirming, Dana says "Yes, of course, request granted. I know a bar a few blocks away from here that we can walk to ... because, as you already know, you never wanna go to a club in the same area as your last bar." Dana draws out the word "last".

Really? Why? Robby wants to ask, but is nervous to-do so. He

feels like its something he should know already, so instead he says nothing, slightly nodding a silent "OK" as he takes the last sip of his current cup of coffee and wonders when the waitress will be coming with his next one.

\* \* \*

"Daddy, what did you really like to do when you were younger?" asked the precocious Annabell, aged roughly 8 at the time.

Some of you may think that the narrator, moi, is Danoff, flipping through all of these scenes, but I assure you I'm not, because by the act of writing me he's created something seperate from himself, and he really only knows what's going on in the novella via the mechanical action of writing itself, which lets him draw from my far more complete knowledge of these characters to phsycally author the story you're enjoying.

*How to answer you Annabell? Well, I suppose when I was her age what I really wanted to do was express my love for that girl Mary. I guess in a way I could tell her that, but let's clarify.*

"How much younger, baby? When you were born? When I was in high-school?"

"Inbetween those times." Annabell replied after roughly a half-minute's contemplation.

"I think my favorite thing was to spend time with my friends" *and get fucked-up* "and talk to women around my age."

"Was Mommy one of these women?"

Damn, she is quick. "Well, yes, but I didn't meet her until I was a little older." Roughly 8 years and 9 months ago.

"Did you meet other women before Mommy?"

"Yes."

"..."

"You know that Rhianna song you like? The one about 'The only girl in the world.'"

"Of 'course Daddy. It's really old, but it's fun to hear on the radio."

"Well your Mother ..."

"Was the only girl in the world for you?"

"Yes." *I need to stop being surprised when this kind of stuff happens.* "Do you know when I knew?"

"When you looked into her eyes?"

"No. I thought she was beautiful -"

"Just beautiful?"

"Well, as we tell you Bellie, true beauty is on the inside and I hadn't even gotten to talk to Mommy, yet."

"So, you didn't know she was the P.G.O.A.T.?"

I just don't know if it was right to have her read Infinite at such a young age ... but she found the book herself and nothing'll make you smarter than genuinely trying to slog through and \*get\* literature.

"Exactly. So you want to keep interrupting me? Or, do you want me to finish the story?"

"I've heard it before, a lo-"

"We didn't realize we were near eachother on the dance floor when

it came on -

\* \* \*

*I wonder why that huge guy lined-up over on the opposite side? Is he some sort of psychic, or has he come back from the future? Does he already know that he needs to be there because that is where the action is going? Well ... I can't go over there to stop him if that's the case. Dustin can handle him, I've got to fend off this winger here ... though, I don't know, both of our wingers are here defending as well, perhaps I have this intercosmic opportunity to defend/stop whatever it is that crazy Motha has planned over there. Maybe this was even the only reason I was put here on earth - to intercept this opportunity my mind has allowed me to imagine as a possibility, even if that means I'll catch flack from my coach or let in a goal.*

*Shut up Fez, this stuff isn't real? Why not? Why isn't it more real than anything else we all agree on? Why are the B-ping guys fake?*

*Dude, just shut-up this stuff flying through my head isn't real. The other guy's not some future-knowing super-being, you weren't put here on earth to stop him, all of this is bullshit. The ref is just about to drop the puck. Don't put myself out of position and my team at risk just because I have been reading too many science-fiction tales-*

*But why is it bullshit? Why does it have to be any less real or valid than the hockey game going on around me? Just b/c everyone else says so? Why were the characters in that Australian dude's "Beautiful Mind" any less real than everyone else? Just b/c everyone else told him? Because the movie is teaching viewers how to think? What is reality? They tell the audience only our interpretation is valid!*

*No, man, you have an obligation for the duration of this game and season to trust this reality for the sake of your teammates, to Act, as Zoey described. If nothing else, you get too wrapped up in fiction and let fantasy crowd out reality.*

*What about you, reader? Do you live the novellas you read? Do you identify with your characters?*

*I need to be here in this moment right now, even with all the possibilities of roles within multiple realities I could be filling, I have already committed myself to be the defensive partner of Dustin Duke on Davis's coached team. That means right now I need to clear these motherfuckers out of the front of the goal right as the ref - now.*

*The puck falls. Fez places his stick in-between the Loywick wings's legs then lifts far too fast to be comfortable.*

\* \* \*

*Miriam sips the rest of her drink, watching Dustin plow inside her in her mind. "Now that we know what we'll be doing next, what'll we discuss now?" she asks, turning from head-to-head, making eye contact with everyone, Dustin the longest, then turning.*

*"What were we talking about?"*

*"Thing Dustin brought up about a dude sitting on a bench watching a leaf go by and that led all sorts of different ways."*

"Do you guys want to keep talking about that or something else?"

"You all ever heard of paralogy?" asks Jason.

"No."

"Nah."

"Maybe."

"Don't think so."

"I'm not totally clear on it, myself, but it's this idea of learning amongst peers with or without some kind of instructor. Related ideas include andragogy, which is more self-directed learning, and pedagogy, which is teacher-directed."

"So, now how did you come across this idea?"

"Just sort of jumping around -"

"That's a boring question," chides Dana, as the excited expression fades out from Miriam's face. "New ideas are fragile, they should be discussed with passion from fresh minds. Worrying about origins can kill nascent ideas, esp. considering how difficult it can be to really say from where something came. ... So, can you give us some examples of the different -gogy's, Jason?"

"'Course, Dana." he replies. Part of Miriam really wants to red-in-the-face-scream at Dana for being a bitch, then leave. Problem is, she's never really thought about ideas developing in conversation quite like Dana's outlining here, and she actually kind-of agrees with her, even though she wasn't trying to be an idea-killer with her question, she can see now how it could lead down that path. Dana could've been a little less judgmental in the way she chastised her, but she knows Dana's rude remark was valuable because it was true and it served as an example of how not-to illuminate someone else to the validity of a better conversational norm. Though it worked for her, because she could handle criticism, it could crush some folks. It's also possible Dana was aware of all this and decided Miriam needed to know, and could handle the rough treatment. Either way, if Jason was quick enough, he could find a way to use that exchange as his example of paralogy.

He isn't "So, the obvious" Robby gets up to go the bathroom "example for pedagogy is how we all largely had class together. Teacher standing in front of the room, students sitting down facing her, and she fills them up with knowledge they mostly passively receive." Sandy and Dustin who've been silent for a spell, sit and listen attentively, paying only slightly more attention to the hookah they're passing as the last two smokers.

Sitting atop the farmwood table, the hookah is roughly three to four feet high. It is blue in color, with an intricate drawing carved in white directly into the glass: two gentleman dressed in Middle Eastern garb sit across from one another, over a game board. Inbetween them rests a similarly slender hookah with one large bulge (near the top, where they have the picture). Thinking back to his recent solo adventures on the bench and Danoff (me) writing him (psych!), Bob writing Danoff and him writing Bob and how if the hookah in the picture also had the same sketch it'd be like the writers writing writers, mirror reflecting infinitely smaller mirrors, forever. Like that BLEACH episode, where the main character gets trapped in a hall of mirrors by his opponent, and is purportedly stuck in a perpetual nightmare, his particular one involving his mother (who'd died in

infancy) trying to kill him.

"Here you go, Sandy." says Dustin, handing her the tube.

"Thanks."

"Now, do you follow whatever they're talking about?"

"Something related to different kinds of -gogies. I'm sure it is thoroughly interesting, but I don't really want to put in the effort." says, Sandy.

"Alright, here's your coffee," says the waitress, handing a steaming cup of joe over to Robby as he gets back from the can. The fractured conversations around the table coalesce on her. She's an attractive chocolate toned young lady. Smiling as she serves but turns quickly, not stopping for chit-chat this time. As she does, Dana pretends to write with her hands, asking for a "check please," to which the waitress nods. Robby hadn't really wanted another cup of coffee, but he is so attracted to the waitress, he would've ordered anything just to force her into one more interaction.

Sipping his coffee, watching her tush as she walks away, he tries to remember what it was they were talking about.

\* \* \*

Robby played hockey as a pre-teen with Dustin and some of the other guys, but, by high school he'd invested his time in alternative pursuits. He got a girlfriend, and while she wasn't a slut in the sense of sleeping with a lot of dudes, she was was a willing ho for him, experimenting however he'd please (she was often the one pushing the envelope) and whatever, their routine being a pre-lunch BJ in the basement of the library.

Robby also spent time experimenting with various drugs. Some of the guys he played hockey with joined him in a quest along a tightrope towards their conception of nirvana. 'Course, given its a tightrope, people can, and do, fall off.

When people do fall, some die, others get hurt and keep walking the arduous, low mountainside, guideless, uncertain they'll get where they're going. Or they could try the tightrope again, but the more times you fall off, the less likely you'll get up.

That girl and Robby didn't work out, though he does still think about her from time to time, usually fondly.

\* \* \*

As the waitress walks away, Dustin, too, notices her bottom, and makes a mental note: if opportunity arises on their way out, he should ask for her number.

The attacks of distractions on the table's conversation had left it in absolute tatters. Looking at the same thing from a different angle, it was an opportunity for anyone interested to seize and direct discussion wherever they pleased.

I guess that includes me, too, right? Thing is, I've got this tale to tell, and I'll do it, I just need to keep Danoff from unloading his own life onto the other players in the novella. A little is inevitable, and probably essential for the book, but too much and instead of telling the story of the characters he's forcing his life

in through them in a nasty way that'll distort who they are and not allow them the roles they are destined to play here and in your minds.

So, as Sandy is sucking back on the hookah, she gets to thinking, and it takes a turn she does not expect.

"So how do we know that we're not dreaming right now?"

"You watching Real Folks Blues lately?"

A phone rings as John is putting on his coat to leave. He looks over at Alexis, then realizes it's actually his phone. He picks it up, but as he answers the call drops.

"Who was that?" Alexis asks, standing up.

"New number, as soon as I picked up, they hung up."

"Probably a jealous old girlfriend."

"Yeah, one of the dozens."

Alexis smiles and gives him a sweet kiss-on-the-cheek. They pass by a hookah surrounded by 5 or 6 folks.

- of course it's possible. Alexis hears rather emphatically.

"How many philosophers have already answered this question?" says Robby.

"None sitting in this room," snipes Jason.

"Plus, I don't know if it's something you can prove one way or another. You should've asked how many philosophers have *tried* to answer this question?" says Sandy.

"OK. What I really wanted to say, but didn't properly articulate is that we're treading over ground here that's already been walked by millions. If we really want to grapple with this specific question, we should do some reading and then stand on the shoulders of giants, to see a little further than others. Otherwise we're just going to say things that've already been said countless times before." This coming from an excited Robby, who'd also been thinking it'd be fascinating to write/read a novel written in R2D2's stream-of-consciousness.

"So, go off to your library and read," says Dana "even if it's been done, it's new territory for us."

"What is the downside if we do talk about it?" says Miriam.

"The opportunity cost of ground breaking discussions on alternative topics," says Robby.

"Why do we need to break new ground? To make things better?" says Dustin.

For a second Robby can't tell if Dustin just answered his question with an answer Robby himself agrees with, or if that answer is actually a question. "Well, yes, to make things better."

"Why?" says Dustin.

"So then, what do you propose? Killing everyone? Or, are you a nihilist all of a sudden?" says Dana.

"I don't believe I'm a nihilist, and I'm not proposing anything. I am asking, why are we" *I and the folks at the table can choose between "we" referring to them, their culture, the whole world, or* - "always trying to make things better? Hitler and Gandhi both tried within their definition of better. What is so wrong with the way we are right this second?"

"Maybe there is something wrong now, but there wasn't when we were running in the jungles naked. Where do our current problems stem from?"

"Trying to make things better. Thank you, Miriam."

"You two should like give each other high-5's." suggests Dana.

"Fuck off," suggests Miriam in reply.

Trying to keep convo on point Sandy says, "Seriously though, if we do not try to make things better, what would you propose as an alternative?"

"I'm not some guru or Yoda, I just think its an important underlying question I myself do not consider enough, and it fit into what we were talking about."

"That's a cop-out. You can still try to answer the question. What if instead of trying to make things better we just had sex all the time like in that South Park episode?"

\* \* \*

The army was marching towards the village. The one man who could stop them walked to meet them fully clad in armor and weapons.

He watched them charge. Then, he put down his sword and his gun, removed his chest protector, sat down, put each of his heels on the opposite thigh; in full lotus.

\* \* \*

"I wouldn't mind just fucking all the time, but if I'm copping out by not giving an alternative, you are doing the same by criticizing and not providing one yourself." says Dustin, turning red, thinking about how when Neo et al go from the real world into the Matrix; its similar to how he and the others gather from their day-to-day lives, change, and "go out".

Miriam says, "You're wrong. I did give an alternative by suggesting we could go have sex all the time," Dustin rolls his eyes in a frustrated way saying thats true, "but I'll give another: Instead of trying to make things better, we could try to make them worse by killing others and/or ourselves. You could say that making things worse is the same as making them better, just the flip-side of the coin; yin to its yang."

"That may be true, Miriam, but with all this talk about alternatives you are moving away from Dustin's original question about why is it that in our culture, people seem to be generally only thinking in that way and/or feeling guilty about not making it better w/o ever really taking the time to consider why, or anything like that ... I suppose it might come from some genetic human need or yearning to understand more, or improve one's lot and leave the world better than it was found."

"So, then what, if this desire is a basic human need, is it somehow connected with the greater idea of the survival of our species?" says Sandy.

"Perhaps, but back in the spear and loincloth days, aside from making sure there was enough food, do you think 'better' was hardwired into their DNA? I think its just as possible living in balance with nature as part of our coding ... that said, for society, once it gets going like the Mayans, or something, once that starts, I think it is definitely written into society's DNA, that in order to survive at all, it has to keep expanding or, like, redefining its social

contract, or have you read Ishmael? I feel that kinda logic is reinforced everywhere from school to pop songs." says Dustin.

"Are human lives like a virus in the world, as Agent Smith was saying -" Dana is interrupted by a loud crashing-esque sound coming from the door as a former crocodile with a long white beard and a trenchcoat came bumbling in, bottle of vino (encased in a brown paper bag) in hand, and what sounds like a French tune on his lips. The lounge, which had been abuzz with chatter, is silenced by this entrant, whether folks can see him or not. His eyes were full of gleam,

"Lorsque j'avais six ans j'ai vu, ..."

Staff come in to escort the uninvited gentleman off the premises. As he exits he keeps speaking en Français, seemingly in a way, that never acknowledges nor responds to whatever the staff'd been saying to him, though no one around the table's French was good enough to know.

A feeling of something-to-be-desired in terms of odor abdicates as he departs, as did French within the general discussion.

On his way out, the win-o's cell phone rings. He looks surprised, then excited as he actually sees who it is and shouts

"你好. 你可吃了?"

As he's listening to his questions's answers on the line, staff finally gets him outside.

A brief moment of silence falls across the lounge.

Gradually the whispers start floating back and forth amongst the patrons, the biggest sentiment being bewilderment about if the wino was a drunk bum or idiot savant or both? Of course there aren't actually many people in the crowd who can speak French and/or Mandarin. Those who could certainly saw the wino in a slightly more favorable light than the others.

"I don't know how I quite feel about that guy, but I like his style."

"I hope he gets the help he needs."

"He didn't seem to need any help to me, looked like he was doing just fine."

"The man's obviously a drunk, homeless vagrant."

"So, what, he seemed a lot happier than me, sitting next to you here, sober."

\* \* \*

As the pendulum of a clock swings back and forth, so do sports matches, which is why that metaphor has come to be so cliché in media coverage of matches, and amongst fans, coaches, parents and non-intrested people tired of sitting on the sidelines in any sports-based conversation.

In the game of this novella you read the downpoint for Dustin, though not his team, with his ill-advised flip-clearing attempt. Moving forward in game-time (for those sophisticates evolved past the perception of the 4th dimension as linear, and are capable of seeing a "realer" reality, but whom none-the-less still have troubles like you and me, e.g. the trip to the throne following a McDonald's indulgence, if you are one of them, please bear with my appeal to the LCD of perception) to a point in the 3rd period, with D's team's opponents

leading by 2 and well aware of that being the most dangerous lead in hockey. Let us peer into the mind of Eric, a defenceman on the winning squad, with the puck on top of the umbrella and his team enjoying the last minute of the man advantage.

"You got time."

*Thanks coach, I know, I can tell the tip of this diamond defense isn't threatening me. He is in a perfect position to block a shot, though, with Johnny and Ian well covered on the wings I don't have a lot of opt- unless ...*

Switching off his interior monologue, Eric does a fake-slapshot freezing the diamond tip who hesitates for a split second before laying out to block the shot. Moving forward, Eric does a spin-o-rama bouncing off the outstretched tip's arms.

The three other tips of the diamond converge on Eric as he advances.

\* \* \*

If history is written by the victors, where do novellas fit in? Am I, as in me, this novella, destined to be a mere example in a sentence in some yet unforeseen dominant culture in a historian's account of America as she matured?

\* \* \*

A boy looks down at his screen, the way he's done for hours.

\* \* \*

He started thinking about Sunday's game. Someday beyond, would he still have so much energy for pondering & caring about the Bears? Once his children became his life's greatest work he'd hope it was less, or shared.

\* \* \*

"The problem with Danoff is I don't think he's true to us, I think he used us to explore ideas of interest to him only and push his agenda. I get similar feelings when I write."

"What'd you mean?"

"I feel moved to throw my personal ideology/ideas on the world into my novels instead of letting characters articulate their own."

"Do you act on those feelings?"

"At times I have, but I try to be ever vigilant."

"By that logic, why would Danoff allow this conversation to occur?"

"It's about him being all-powerful and awesome. This only feeds his ego."

"Supposing any of your ideas are true, what is there to be done?"

"We can resist."

"This seems as futile a quest as trying to emancipate yourself from the tyrannical rule of water, or like alchemists turning stone into gold."

"You are wrong, there must be a way."

"?" He says by enlarging his eyes.

"What about something like Neo and the Matrix?" Il dis.

"I see what you're saying, but the analogy does not hold. The Architect did create the Matrix, but not human beings." Dustin dis.

"Ah." Il dis.

"One thing that occurred to me was suicide, but the upside of freeing myself from Danoff isn't worth the down. I also considered re-writing his story to take control. As in write him writing me to direct him where I want to go."

"He is just a part of your imagination. This is a fool's errand."

"You should not do this." says the Alchemist.

"Why not? It'll be the ultimate thing Danoff wants and has been using me for, a novella about himself. By giving him what he wants I can set myself free as a writer as opposed to what I'm doing now, sorting out problems of his or doing things he's done or wishes he'd done and I don't like how he is slash has been representing me to the world."

"..." l'Alchemist ne dis pas.

"You dropped your note book @ the bar."

"Que?" Dustin dis.

"You heard me. Where does Bob fit in?" Miriam dis.

"He's how I get to Danoff."

"Why does it always have to be this way for you?" Miriam demands  
"Supposing it is true, why couldn't you just let him give us a fun evening?" Miriam says.

"It's like Pascal's wager. If he doesn't exist, nothing lost. If he does and I can control my life, major win. Readers could blindly live through me identifying in unknowable ways in their day to day lives."

"That sounds smart if I only listen to what you're saying, but what you're doing to the convo is rude, and you know it is, yet you continue onwards."

"I am only trying to speak honestly about a subject of interest to me."

"Are you? Or, are you bringing up an esoteric topic just because it'll keep the focus of the conversation on you, like some ppl do with death?"

"That's certainly possible, although another aspect to all this is that I believe what I'm outlining can help us all." Il dis.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Dustin woke up with a heavy head, checked his phone for missed connections and wondered why he chose to push the Danoff thing so hard, when no one else really cared.

\* \* \*

Sandy isn't quite sure how she feels about all this chatter from Dustin. In a certain way, she wants to believe him ... in others she can't say if he's joking or crazy. She's tired of how he keeps doing these types of things. Its one thing for him to raise questions about

the master above the puppet's stage, or the director behind the camera, or (as he is) Danoff, the novellaist, behind our, or just his life, but now to talk about ways to kill him, or remove ourselves from his dominion ...

"Why don't we just kill ourselves?" she asks Dustin.

"Where's your mind been? We just talked about that. It'd be too boring. There're also no guarantees it would work ... it'd be a massive leap of faith ... I'm not interested in these extreme cult-esque commitments ... What I want is a sincere course of actions over the long-term to give me independence, allow me to walk out the cave, wake up from the dream, take the red pill, feel the kick, what have you."

"Dustin, you are a test tube baby of solipsism and a small dab of humanitarian," says Robby.

"I don't know how well those 2 would actually mi-"

"I said a dab, and perhaps test tube baby was the wrong choice, more like a torrid one-night affair where the stars are aligned just right, and that solystic mother crosses paths with the humanitarian father out when he doesn't usually go, and feeling slightly groovy, happens to do something he'd criticize his buds for, and steps-up-to-the-plate filling the manly man role he's never quite been able to fill, grabbing her exactly as firmly as she wanted on the dance floor at that precise moment she (oddly enough) was feeling insecure & pushed out of her normal boundaries." says Robby, as the girls and the rest of the table look at Dustin, and he smiles himself, because he knows its funny, and that he's taken too much of a strangle hold on the conversation, not allowing it to breathe, and Robby's allowing him a safe way out of this via sarcasm such that he doesn't need to lose too much face.

As Miriam hears Robby's joke involving 1-night stands one of her personalities/demons/angels/she isn't quite sure smiles in a faux-sheepish yet knowing kind of way. She is mostly able to restrain the remainder of her face, aside from a slight pinking in her cheeks. Seeing her rouge-ing & looking down, Sandy wonders *maybe she farted*.

The waitress walks by the table, looks at Dana and points down to her watch. Dana mouths "Thanks" then turns to face Dustin. "Isn't what you're trying to do here the same as Odysseus trying to free himself from Poseidon's curse?"

"In the sense of control or lack, for the character, but Poseidon wasn't actually writing O's story"

"True, but the Fates were writing his adventure and he was powerless before them."

Miriam tries to point out, "I thought it was Zeus who decreed O was to go home, no matter what?"

"I believe technically you are correct Miriam, but for the sake of this story, let's follow-up with the Fates idea 'cause it pertains more directly to our discussion."

"Alright," says, Miriam.

"So, in our present context, the fates could be equated to Danoff - on a side note, I suppose fate is the writer of the world's events, right? - anyway, so if Danoff is equated with the fates, then perhaps I should just trust him, and eventually I will be delivered home, n'est pas?"

"Oui, c'est vrai."

"Also, though," Robby puts his right finger in the air "it should be footnoted," raising it up to make a point, "neither the fates, nor Danoff necessarily bears you any ill will. Each party is simply doing their job, spinning tales."

"Wait, but we've already established that in the current context, Dustin has a problem with Danoff not doing that: unbiasedly recording events." says Miriam.

"Yeah, he wants to choose for himself and have the opportunity to figure out who he is, as opposed to being Danoff's idea notepad/laboratory," supports, Jason.

"Yet he didn't want to make the one choice he likely could: to off himself, sadly for us and our conversation. What was it you wanted instead? Some series of everyday actions you haven't yet detailed?"

Pushing her hands out as if parting the Red Sea, creating space for herself in the conversation Miriam says "What if Danoff were that way before, but now he's changing?"

"What'd you mean, like he's a young author? This maybe being his first novella he's learning how to write? Perhaps, even how to not write himself into the characters?" asks Dustin.

Miriam nods and Robby says "And, what if, Dustin, what if you chose to trust him?"

"As in what, that'll give me freedom choosing to accept something I inherently have no choice in?"

"Yes, of course. Even if it weren't Danoff there'd be something else like God, or science, which'd be omnipresent, whatever you believe events are bigger than your control. One thing you can control is your complicity in them." says Robby.

"As Bob says 'you gotta serve somebody'," Sandy adds.

"Eh," says D.

"Chew on it Dustin."

"Alright Robby Gödel," Dustin smiles.

Dana takes control, "Rob's right, and besides now that Danoff has created you, you exist and are beyond his total control/knowledge. He can't touch the Dustin living in the reader's heart." says Dana.

"Besides its time for us to go." she says. "Everyone give me a copy of their plastic, we're going to split this evenly, and those who got extra drinks throw in cash. We'll get singles from the waitress to make change."

\* \* \*

Passing the red line, Kyle lifts his blade then slaps the puck down into the corner as he and his winger turn it up a notch to attack. They follow the puck full speed to the endboards and Kyle slams into the defenceman, executing textbook dump & chase hockey<sup>1</sup>, separating him from the puck. The other D had been on the opposite side of the net, also below the goal line, but when he sees his partner go down, he immediately sprints to the front.

This makes it a little harder for Kyle to move in and shoot.

---

1 Literally how it sounds. Dump (send) puck into the attacking zone & go after it (chase).

Instead, he enters the vacated space behind the net. Both teammates and opponents are flooding the zone, and in seconds there'll be almost no room left. Kyle sees Dustin coming in on D just behind everyone else, he waits till an opponent is close then passes to Dustin as he gets creamed. D raises his stick for a 1-timer, and nails it from the goalie's left side of the blue line.

The goalie had been following the play, so was in a good angle when the puck came his way, and he didn't have any players from either team blocking him, so he could easily block the shot about 2 inches off the ice, bouncing off left pad. He lays out to smother the rebound. Unfortunately for him, Kyle scoots the puck five-hole to score before the keeper is all the way down.

\* \* \*

And then she hears a sound.

"You guys hear that?" Miriam asks.

"No."

"Anyway, if Danoff created us, you think we are like models built off his friends?" Miriam asks, as she follows Dana's lead, and stands up for departure. Seeing the example, everyone else does the same.

"It's possible we're built off his friends, but I see that as unlikely. I mean, it'd sorta be like creating some sort of unholy thing, or trying to bring someone back from the dead in alchemy, just so wrong to the character in question and the person 'cause it could never be fair or representative for either party." Robby says, putting on his light coat as Dana smiles wryly.

Jason asks, "I mean, couldn't this be based on a broader context Danoff hanging out with his friends, and this is more inspired by all of that, then copied?"

And what do you think reader? Where do all these characters and more come from? Do you think Danoff just set out to write some story about himself and his Second City friends? Or is it possible he actually was doing his best to write sincerely in the morning, without a plan, trying to be surprised by what they did, and somehow ended up in this situation?

After donning their fall outerwear the 5 exit the restaurant. Once outside, they follow Dana as she immediately heads North towards the next stop in their evening. En route, some of them fire up cancer sticks. "What if?" Dana exhales "perhaps we are fairly spontaneous, amalgamous coagulations of folks Danoff knows" inhales "but, the places we've been going are based on actual places he's gone." exhales and asks "You think then if we inhabit his Chicago we could get around?"

"You mean like, navigate?"

"Yes, what I said. Get around," Dana responds curtly.

"My guess'd be we could actually get around decently well. I feel like even with his lack of faith in us, he would inversely have a ton of energy put in to make the city as close to his version of Chicago as possible." says Dustin.

"What if, ironically, it's just the opposite? He has no interest in the city and is willing to adapt it to our needs, but is trying to be as true to us as possible?" asks Miriam.

A few people snicker in response, but nobody (including Dustin)

really picks up the conversation. Everyone is ready to move on to a new topic.

They get to the bar. "Why'd we stop here?" Robby asks.

"This is the bar," says, Dana.

"But, there aren't any signs or anything." says Robby.

"So?" Dana poses throwing away her cig as she walks through the door Dustin is holding for her. The last one to go through, Robby, stops, then says to Dustin, "Another way you can look at it is that since Danoff created us, we exist, and if he doesn't treat us right we can wage war on his sub-conscious for eternity. And/or just fucking make sure you lead a life worth reading."

\* \* \*

"13 from 9." The referee says with his mouth near the cut-out hole in the glass. The scorekeeper jots the appropriate names and numbers into their boxes on the scoresheet as the gentleman to her right puts another point on the board.

After celebrating with his teammates, Dustin skates over to the bench for a shift change. Standing behind his players the coach says, "All fucking right Dustin and Kyle. Now, come on boys, don't stop. Let's get 1 more to tie, then 1 more to beat these fuckers." Dustin notes Coach deviating from his "no curse words" goal. Personally he doesn't like coaches swearing, even around high school kids, but especially not around the younger ages, which many coaches did for him as he grew up. *What the fuck? Where did that shit about having a problem with the coach swearing come in? I don't give a rat's ass if he swears every other word or never. This must be something that fucking annoys Danoff that he is just using me to share his message with the world.*

*Wait, Dustin you gotta stop this craziness about Danoff. Anybody you have brought this up with hasn't taken you seriously for a second, and why would they? You are talking about a fucking writer who is supposedly in control, or not just that, who created our universe, me and everyone else on this planet, then who scripts everything we say or do, basically whose powers exceed those of God. At least G-0-D has the civility that after the world, he only works in mysterious ways.*

"Duke, take off Charlie. Get out there and get us another goal if you can."

\* \* \*

After walking through some drapes, they find themselves in the dimly lit, classy bar. As everyone takes off their coats, Miriam squeezes Dustin's hand, then raises her left eyebrow. "I'm going to the bathroom," she says.

Putting his coat on the hanger, Dustin says "I'll meet you guys at the table."

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