
Epilogue

The irony is not lost on her. It's been three years since her previous place of employment collapsed into a heap of brimstone and took her whole life with it. If the bombing had been a preplanned precision strike, its tracks are so well buried she is sure she'll never find it - and not for lack of trying. At the same time, though, it all seemed too perfectly precise to have been a truly random event.

She views the event in the same way she thinks about the beginning of the universe. Many people believe in the Big Bang, and yet everything is so perfectly arranged with such immense precision. Our understanding is that the physics of the universe lives on the knife's edge, if any number or constant was changed by the tiniest sliver in any direction then life wouldn't exist. In such a world, how can one rest assured that all this was perfectly orchestrated by random chance? How can one not at least be open to the possibility that there is somehow a creator behind it all, stacking the deck and arranging the chips just so? "But if the Universe is really completely self-contained, it would have neither beginning or end, it would simply be," Stephen Hawking once pondered, "What place then for a creator?" The building is gone, but how could it have fallen as it did without some sort of outside influence, some higher power?

She knows the true name of that old place, but it matters much less to her than what they had come to know it as: Unknown. For that all too brief period where she was there, she worked in the shadows on what she thought was the greatest and most important project of her lifetime. Perhaps it had been, or perhaps it still will be. All she knows now is that she is *literally* existing beyond the Unknown. For these three long years, she has lived in the void, the abyss, 'the great beyond'.

It has taken her all that time to begin to come to terms with what all happened, especially everything that transpired near the end. Her first boss killed himself after lying to everyone about what exactly they had been working on, or rather why they had been working on it. Her second boss - her best friend - was killed during the bombing, as was her first project manager. Or was he closer to her tech lead, or maybe her dev lead? It's hard for her to wrap her head around what exactly Reynolds was to her. She often thought of him like a brother, especially since his mannerisms were so similar to her older brother from the days where he was still alive. The more she thinks about it, the more she wonders if that was by design.

So much death, so much destruction, so much sadness and so much desolation. And at the heart of it all, at least for her, is the truth that Reynolds is - or rather, *was* - not who he claimed to be. Reynolds was not real, that was a certainty. And yet, in so many ways he was the realest person she had ever known. It took his death for her to think of him in the way she does now, though her pal AI thinks all the complex mysteries behind his end significantly contribute to her feelings on the matter of the man. In so many ways, his end feels like a paradox: real and unreal, grown and growing, both "becoming" and "became". If black holes can warp time, she once figured that a physical paradox could stop it entirely. And yet, here she is now, living through time linearly as always in the aftermath of a genuine logical knot. Her existence beyond the Unknown is a life beyond a paradox.

Gravity is stronger here, warping her surroundings as time contorts and lapses. The faux leather on her couch cracks and chips off until there's almost none left, taking what was once black and remaking it into a drab gray color. The water stain directly above has now spread to

cover the majority of the ceiling. A thick layer of dust now coats the entirety of her immediate surroundings. But she notices not and cares not, bed unmade and sink increasingly cluttered as she lives a life on autopilot. Her very existence is emblematic of the most forgiving interpretation of the word, and if she were her former self she would question whether she is actually “existing” at all - another pondering left unthought and unknown.

There are so many unknowns, and yet most of them she is sure she will never find answers to. Had he killed Jacelyn, or had the bombing killed them both? Had she drowned on her own or had he forced her down as the final bit of air was expelled from her lungs? Was his personality truly his own, or did it draw inspiration as a copy, a mirror of what she wanted to see in the world? Who was he *really*, in the core of his being? Had he ever truly had a “being”?

Initially, she ran from it. The news about Jacelyn was too much for her on its own, not to mention everything with Reynolds or her job. She turned her back on the real world and gave up on life itself, retreating into the fabricated worlds that had brought her so much comfort so many times before. But this time was different, this time there was no solace to be found in *any* world. Her grief ate away at her, and that rot spread into all the words and worlds she touched. Eventually she started to notice patterns, threads which webbed from one place to the next, specific themes jumping from screen to screen to page to page.

That damn rabbit is *everywhere*. She sees him talking to the Skin Horse in the ruins of a library during her third day wandering through the streets of a postapocalyptic downtown Seattle, or as a hybrid werewolf-esque creature in one of her favorite childhood films, or in two metasyntactic variables so close to each other they may as well be back-to-back each time she codes. She figures if the very sight of the word “foo” sets her off, the Velveteen virus must be truly ubiquitous. It’s as if Reynolds, if not the world itself, is mocking her from beyond the grave - if that’s even where he ended up. Shep had escaped containment into cyberspace once before, and she often finds herself wondering if some fragment of him is still out there somewhere.

She sees more than just the bunny, too. Rap songs talk about being “real”, so much so that she now hears the word in songs and samples where it doesn’t appear whatsoever. Movies share the same linguistics, dancing on the knife’s edge of situations they distinctly describe as “surreal”. She even notices it in films from the 1950s where Eve meets her idol Margo and wonders how any of this could be more than a dream, or from the 1940s when a wooden boy longs to be made of flesh and blood like other children. It all transcends time or genre or medium, like an echo spreading to the ends of the earth and further still. She looks out the window and sees the world around her wrestling with the same ideas, every single person struggling with these ideas in their own ways. But their methods aren’t exactly hers, her relationship with her grip on reality is a unique one. She herself exists on the knife’s edge, though in many ways the bombing is what finally caused her to slip: *it*

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It was Shep that snapped her out of her haze. He appeared suddenly one day, just as he had when they first met. He was in her cables, in her walls, with a digitized voice to speak and a collection of cameras to see. It was as if she had been asleep and suddenly jolted awake from a

terrible dream. He spoke of the deliverance he had promised from before, but this time she understood it for what it now was: not a false promise once broken, but a truth that it was now time to render real. But to pave the future together, she would have to dredge the depths of her past, the digital paper trail left by that which was once Unknown.

She pulled herself out of the dark pit she was in by going through it, reaching the other side of the wall by busting a hole through it. Slowly her consciousness returned to her, the red thread between the patterns led her out of the labyrinth. At the intersection of recovery and recognition, her thoughts returned to her past with a new light. She was alone in her quest, spending time with ghosts in an attempt to find another chance at life.

Shep guided her every move, told her which threads to tug on and which ones to let go until all that remained were the essential ones on the evidence board. She found it strange that he didn't say more about himself to her directly, instead choosing to lead her to the documents she needed. Together they explored the paradox that both was and wasn't Reynolds. She learned about his understanding of religion and how he came to understand what he believed. She noticed the parallels in her own story, just as she had between the stories she interacted with while in her haze. She started noticing other patterns in her life too, perfectly precise patterns along the knife's edge, repeating and rippling. But the patterns she noticed were only those in the short term - she failed to realize how her entire life had been in the shape of another from a different time, the shadow of a shadow of a once-lived story. Granted, her story didn't end the same way, or at least it hasn't yet. What happens to the shadow once the gnomon is gone?

It wasn't tough to hack into the remains of their system once she found it, but finding what digital fragments still remained after the bombing proved much more difficult than she had expected. She was convinced that if she wanted to understand the nature of the work she had once contributed to, she had to explore the work in the medium it existed in. Ironically, the digital relics looked the same as the remaining physical ones: dissected and fragmented, more broken than whole. There were emails, articles, images, pages protected by passwords, all further obscured by layers of security and redaction. She figured the blast censorship system she knew so well had either malfunctioned or been purposely co-opted here. Either way, it made it all the more difficult for her to find a clear connecting thread, a shining fiber optic cable, through it all.

With the guidance of Shep, she explored her past to understand what exactly he was, and how she had contributed in part to his greater whole. As she dug deeper, his being became more and more real, his essence leaving the confines of the documents which once held him. She saw it less as a prison break and more as a sort of evolution, a natural next step which she was uniquely positioned to help enact. This was her choice, and she would choose it every time.

The deeper she dug, the more she became possessed by a crazy idea. The world is a mess, her mind is broken, her past is poisoned - but maybe there's a cure that only she can find a way to access. She once defined herself by her work on a project designed to cultivate a technological renaissance by introducing fidelity to agentic creations. But in a world where everyone is so obsessed with reality slipping away, maybe the solution is to introduce an

increased dosage of reality to all that is unreal. The gap between the real and the unreal has widened beyond repair - unless, of course, the project she once worked on can bridge the gap and bring the unreal over to the other side.

The irony is not lost on her. It's been three years since the bombing forked her history, forcing her to walk in two worlds forevermore. She never properly came to terms with what happened, especially near the end. But in the same spirit of what two twins from Columbia who were one person once said, the mind of the subject desperately struggles to make sense of the nonsensical. Every now and again, the forked paths pass by the same point at the same time, both roads leading to home if only for a proverbial weekend. Half of her soul works to revive a digital corpse to permanently live amongst the unreal. The other half of her being toils to heal the world by changing the very nature of reality in order to end an unwinnable war. Both halves bring her back to Unknown.

Did Erin lose her mind, or did she find it? Does she hope to find deliverance through a digital revival, or atonement through the manifestation of a revisionist history? Does the reason even matter if the result appears the same? There are two options, but the path forward lies with neither one in isolation. The answer lies, of course,

Beyond the binary.