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## Lucidity: A Novella

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### Recommended Citation

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# LUCIDITY: A NOVELLA

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in English – Creative Writing  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in The Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2013

Thesis Chair: Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés

## ABSTRACT

“Lucidity” is a novella set in the near future of a man living in a city in the United States as a successful businessman. The novella criticizes the idea of consumerism through Aurora, a character who believes that a drug is being introduced into the water and food supply by the corporate-backed government. Characters find advertising to be almost irresistible, experience strange cravings for things like cheap beer, and are generally preoccupied with the latest products.

James Simmons, the protagonist of the novella, finds himself in the lap of luxury. He has a job that pays well, a penthouse apartment, a fast car, and women. Even though he has the material riches that society tells him he needs to be happy, he knows that something is missing, something is wrong with the world in which he lives. For reasons unknown to him at the time, James is fired from his job and sets out on a journey to discover why. Over the course of his journey, he is finally able to begin piecing together the nature of deeper questions about himself that he never had a chance to answer.

## DEDICATION

For my family, who have been and continue to be steadfast supporters of my literary, academic, and personal pursuits of growth.

For the teachers that believed in my vision enough to stretch their own abilities and imaginations to help me create. Without their guidance, this work would not have been possible.

For the friends who cared enough to keep in touch from time to time, thanks for being there to remind me that I'm not alone in my struggles.

For those people searching for meaning in an increasingly chaotic world, that they may find wisdom in art of any form and use it to be happy in their lives.

And for all those that have striven beyond their own capacities in the hope of becoming something greater, you are the ones that inspire others in this world.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express the deepest thanks and gratitude to my committee members, who have given of their time, energy, resources, and wisdom in order to make this thesis possible. Special thanks goes to my thesis chair, Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, for her undying advocacy and enthusiasm for her students and subject of instruction. Thanks also goes to Dr. David James Poissant, for passing on his passion and guidance in the practice of writing.

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## Chapter 1

Deep, throbbing bass is the sound of money being made. I stood at the edge of the dance floor of Mansion nightclub on South Miami Beach, watching Robert, my friend and coworker, writhing his muscular body against a woman he had just met, her curved Latin body wrapped tightly in a yellow tube dress. Her straight black hair hung down her back and swung by her waist like a horse's tail. Nearby, a fair-skinned woman in a zebra-patterned skirt gyrated her hips against a man like a stripper that loves her pole. The guy's ambivalent face gave away the fact that he was gay. Her friends grasped their twelve-dollar drinks in delicate hands adorned with jewelry and shrieked with delight from the bar. I sipped my Bombay and looked out over the dance floor, trying to decide which woman I'd be taking home with me tonight. This was every night, this was my life, beautiful, and I didn't know why.

Over the course of the night, I lost Robert as usual but succeeded in finding a woman to come back with me. She was a cute, petite twenty-something with a brown bob haircut and a round face. Her hazel eyes reminded me of my mother. I always went for the hazel eyes. I didn't catch her name, though. When I asked her what she did for a living, she said she was a musician. She tried to explain how she was going to create this new version of house music. She said that she would sample things like the doors closing and opening, windows opening, microwaves beeping, turning on, heating things up, stoves turning on, refrigerator compressors starting up,

and use each of those samples as a type of instrument. She could loop the sound of the refrigerator running, for example, to create a build-up in parts of her songs.

At least she sounded intelligent. It was music preserving an age where appliances made these noises, a time where things that people no longer noticed were the things that made up the music that people moved to. It was people creating machines that created sounds that we put into other machines to make us dance. Machines, intricate circuits and wiring, running our lives. This was music of the future, music that had the same nostalgic element found in other forms of popular music which sampled older popular tracks. Only this was the nostalgia of living. Nostalgia of appliances, of refrigerators, of microwaves, of slamming doors, of living in domesticity.

At 2 A.M., Robert and I met outside of the club and walked with our women towards our cars. As we passed an alley, we heard a man shouting “Gimme your fucking watch” followed by another man saying “You got any money in your wallet?” When I looked in the direction of the voices, I saw two men in spandex body suits beating another man against the wall. Robert, the girls, and I stood there watching in drunken, numb fascination. The muggers looked up, saw us, and gave the man on the ground a kick in the ribs before running down the other way. On the wall high above the unconscious man's body was a larger-than-life-sized poster of Madonna in black-and-white washing dishes looking over her shoulder in a pose of sexualized astonishment. Below her waistline were the words DOLCE & GABBANA. There was something wonderful about the scene, some kind of truth speaking to me that I couldn't put my finger on at the time. Robert said, “And that's why you don't walk alone at night in Miami, ladies.” Everyone laughed, and we went on to our cars.

This was the way of things. This was the dream given to me by my friends and parents, posters and commercials. I'd lived here all my life and it was an endless cycle. You make money during the week, then on the weekends, you spend it.

I was adopted when I was a year old and grew up in a suburban house in Coral Gables, Miami, half an hour from the beach. We went to church every Sunday and said our prayers before dinner. My adoptive parents loved me. My father worked at a clock repair shop down Kendall Drive by Dadeland Mall. He'd always wanted a son. My mother worked as a real estate agent and was faithful to my father. Their lives were complete and comfortable. They moved from Maryland to Miami in the hopes of experiencing the exotic city that had once pampered the elderly and retired. In a way, they did get that. For them, the mysteries of life were now solved; tucked away behind professions, loans, a house, and dreams fulfilled.

Coral Gables was separate from the frantic cultural scramble of downtown. Instead of government-designated numbered streets, we drove down Grand Avenue, Le Jeune Road, Douglas Road, Alhambra Circle. Hidden in a maze of roads with multiple personalities, lined by banyan trees and renovated homes from the 1950s, you created your version of paradise there. The mundane lay outside the Gables, the world of family-owned shops with fading handpainted signs, new cars in front of decomposing houses, and a deteriorating sense of language and culture. The multicultural chaos milling about 8th street that had their clothes washed in *tintorerias*, made fashion statements in cramped and cluttered *joyerias*, and lived in little rowhouses with iron bars on the windows and doors. Everyone there is scrambling to get out, but they're not in the ghetto, and they haven't quite made it yet. So they stay.

My parents wanted me to live apart from these things too. They wanted me to be able to drive by the bustling Cubans, Colombians, Venezuelans, Puerto-Ricans, and Mexicans sweating in the humid, fume-laden Miami afternoons with air conditioning on and a stick of gum between my teeth. I think they at least wanted me to have freedom of choice. But there was always something missing. A question that I wasn't yet asking perhaps. And that was the burning that depressed me, moved me, urged me, filled me. It had something to do with purpose.

I was brought up on prayers before dinner and bedtime, church on Sundays, catechism, little crucifixes that hung around the house like baby portraits, say please and thank you, shake people's hands, look people in the eyes when you speak, tuck your shirt in, wear a belt, don't masturbate, don't lust, drink wine with dinner but not too much, give thanks for what you've got. I was a nice Catholic boy. Jesus, we were the centerfold in a *Family Life* magazine.

Growing up, I wondered why I was so different from everyone I met in school. Like why the other boys talked about whether masturbating in the shower or the bedroom was best or which porn websites were better. Why no one that mattered in school believed in Jesus or why my prayers for a cute girlfriend were never answered. I questioned why my prayers did nothing to keep my uncle from dying of leukemia, why my prayers couldn't stop the loud news reports of murder and genocide coming from the TV in the living room, why God was so absent everywhere. I questioned when I saw angry grown-ups and teenagers with their fists in the air. I especially questioned when I read started reading Kant, Marx, and Weber.

I was then thrust into a world of stimuli, a world manufactured for the five senses, forget the sixth. Underneath the fleshy shell of my body lurked a misplaced psyche. I was taught to

recognize emotion, actions, cognition. I lived each day, a questioning organism developing into a nice young man.

I have become a stream of collective ideas. Healthy grass is green. Green is the most relaxing color. Relaxation is the best state of mind for creativity and processing ideas. I think, therefore I am. God is dead. Don't be a phony. Be true to yourself. Treat others the way you want to be treated. God exists inside you. I am what I have chosen to become. Live like your parents are dead. I shave every morning because a first impression is how people will judge every action I make from that point on. It is important to be liked. It's not who you know, but who knows you. Invest in yourself, earn interest.

After knowing all of that, I wonder why. I feel like everything spins and whirls constantly, I watch as if from behind a 5-inch plexiglas window and then realize, like someone's shaking me back to reality: I'm here. I'm here. Welcome home. Welcome.

The door I see in my head opens, and outside there are people lined up; arms held out, displaying the world I've been chosen to inhabit.

I'm taking in the conversation I had with my mother the day I moved out, The facial expressions, the voice tone, the eyes. Those watery hazel eyes, her shoulders-back-chin-up posture, composed. Everything I'm trained to take in. My mind wanders from the candle burning on the counter to a bonfire I was at when I was six, and the fact that I can only remember the image of an orange flame licking up into the sky reminds me of how memories fade over time and how time keeps going on. And then I realize that this is just another déjà vu. Another dream, another recurring thought. I've lived this life before. Open your eyes.

Wake up. It's 10:30 AM, and it's the 28th of December. I'm 10 years old, and I open my eyes, smiling when I remember all the presents I've got, the new toys to learn about, to explore. What's future? Something far off, already taken care of. My mom and dad are off on the back porch having a late breakfast, laughing about the latest Christmas special on TV. In the living room, the television is still on, I can hear its background chatter denying any possibility of boredom. I rub my eyes and shuffle in, oblivious to everything that will be stuffed into my head soon, all the bits and pieces that will litter my inner room and spin me round round round and forget my intelligence because I'm so smart, I confuse myself.

Wake up. It's 7:30 AM. I'm 16, and my eyes are weary. My mind realizing one more day of watered down curriculum, emotionally blunted classmates, disinterested teachers, time taxing assignments, backward glances at girls. I know I'm supposed to have a girlfriend at some point, but sex is bad. What do you do with a girlfriend? What is the point of getting married and having kids and getting a job? I'm bundled in the angst I know is developmental but oh-so-inexorable and set in the mind. I go to class. It's a psychology course. The teacher asks "Do you know who you are?" and it trips me out because I realize, I know I am 16 and I'm a boy and I like girls and reading and music, but I can barely grasp the concept of self. I look in the mirror at what I've become and I don't recognize the changing face. There are creases between the eyebrows showing how often they are squeezed together, my face seems longer than the one I see in pictures around the house. My parents tell me they hardly know who I am anymore. What happened to the happy boy they used to know before he started reading grown-up books?

Wake up. What's happening to me? Where does it all culminate? Where does it all end? These questions invade my mind like tax collectors and lobbyists tapping their fists on humble home doors lined up in perfect suburban rows.

Profit from my insanity. Here's the product, complete with chapters with names like "All [Interest] Groups Require Money and Leadership and Most Need Members," and "Group Membership Has An Upper-Class Bias." Welcome to my protest, with my one hand opening the door for you to step through, other hand outstretched, displaying what lies behind. Try to pause everything in your head for a moment, put the world on mute. And you realize you can't.

This story is about being confused, about trying to find the answers to the confusion, and about appreciating the organization of chaos. I am James Simmons. Age thirty-two, parents deceased, resident of the Vizcayne penthouse on Biscayne Boulevard.

## Chapter 2

When I walked down South Miami Avenue that Monday morning, I didn't watch my polished shoes carry me where I knew I would go as usual. Instead, I allowed my eyes to jump from one face to another like a promiscuous honey-bee, gathering quickly what I could, stopping just long enough for a quick snapshot and to avoid facing my subject's own judgments. I hid behind my appearance, shirt tucked, ironed, and neat. A tie hung perfectly down the front. Hands at my side, fingernails trim. A hint of cologne.

I noticed the middle-aged man walking past me with a face that's wrinkled from too many days in the sun and hands that traced stories of his past, wearing a nostalgic t-shirt with a faded image of Cuba. I saw the eyes of an old woman sitting on the sidewalk begging for change, blue gems stuck next to the sunken cheeks and jutting chin of a starving body. I took in the sounds of the cars sludging their frustrated ways through the congested downtown streets, food vendors selling arepas, pastelitos, tostadas, crepes, and breakfast burritos, people talking loudly on their cell-phones in mixtures of English and Spanish that blended together to a cacophony of commerce. The whispers, beeps, growls of machinery, yodels of men and women bounding through the downtown corridors all vying for the almighty dollar.

There are many things you can learn from a person's body. It is a constantly morphing signpost, broadcasting to all who observe what's going on inside, a radio station of the soul, complete with FCC regulations and censors. Fidgeting fingers, bitten fingernails, hangnails, and

sweaty palms show nervousness. Blank expressions convey apathy, defenses, shock. We know all these things. We speak the same language, or at least our bodies do. But it's easier to ignore this language. Everyone wants to be unique, and it's easier to feel unique when you have a language only a select few know how to speak.

Walking down the street that morning, I noticed a woman looking about thirty years old with baggy eyes and unkempt, shoulder-length hair wearing a dark dress walk hurriedly out of a pawn shop, one of her hands tightly clenching a wad of money, the other balled in a tight fist. Her eyes darting like a metronome ticking at 200 BPM, knowing not at all what to do and at the same time knowing the exact next rigid step. Jaw set, and neck like a spine-tight android, a miraculous scientific beauty. She was a black polka dot on this world's uniform sheet of white. I lost interest in all the other subjects and felt an undeniable gravitation. Not one of love.

One of terrible, sickening, insatiable urgency. She seemed familiar, though I couldn't match a place with the face. It wasn't long before this urge bloomed into a mushroom cloud of curiosity and turned me from a man into a bee seeking every last drop of nectar from the only last flower. Lingering to taste something that I could only sense was fleeting, like a one-night-stand with a virgin or the last underground gathering before the corporate takeover of a counter-culture, an addiction to knowing and having everything at least once before it is gone forever. And this flower's name was Aurora.

Love is accentuated by an increase of dopamine, nor-epinephrine, serotonin, oxytocin, and vasopressin in the brain when one lover is in the presence of another. It is the feeling which persists beyond boundaries of infatuation, a chemical explosion expressed in the mind as a transcendental connection. Aurora was not Love. Even so, I felt my legs speed up, felt the word

"wait!" leave my lips, accentuated by an elevated tone of voice, a frantic wave of my hand, and raised eyebrows. She turned as I approached, looked me in the eyes, and handed me a card with an address, phone number, and two words: *Hello James*.

Then she crossed the street and a torrent of cars stopped me from following. I looked at the card, puzzled. Then my cell phone buzzed. I was late.

### **Chapter 3**

When you work for C.E.O. John Porter, you learn to redefine and readjust your life. You wake up at 7 AM, you get one-hundred dollar haircuts once a week, you get your designer suits dry-cleaned, you keep a cell phone on you at all times. You learn that fear is the fuel that society runs on. Get to work late and you'll have to deal with the boss, miss a deadline and lose your professional reputation, turn in work that's not in Nimbus Roman No9 L font and there will be a reckoning, make friends with people that aren't discreet and you'll be ostracized, fired later.

I imagined John Porter, if he were in a movie, to be the the actor to end it with a backwards look and a line like “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” Sure, he paid us well. We filed reports, managed portfolios, kept stock statistics, brainstormed, advertised, wrote memos, answered phones, refused calls, forwarded calls, composed emails, reviewed company policy, managed refunds, made deals, adjustments, compromises.

At the beginning, being a businessman seemed like a perfect job for the aspiring American middle-class man like me. It came with a high profile, a job that promised good money for my ability to manipulate, lots of it. The lifestyle made sense too. You wake up, go to work, clock in, work for eight hours, clock out, get paid. A better version of a factory worker. Classier, like a sky-blue collar worker.

But I quickly learned that if I wanted to be successful, I was going to have to be a dick. My boss's only purpose in my life was to provide the direct deposit receipt at the end of the

month with five figures situated to the right of an S with a stake through it. Upon joining his corporation's work force, there were several rules he made his employees follow. One of them was to be prompt. Lateness was weakness to him, a sign of a lesser form of human. Another requirement was immaculate attire. Shirt, tie, short business-style hair, polished shoes, trimmed nails, pleated slacks. And to always have a company cellphone on your person. I learned how strictly they were enforced by watching others.

When I first started working for Mr. Porter, I met Mike, who sat in the cubicle next to mine. He was a meticulous light-skinned man with short hair on the sides and long on the top who liked to wear striped shirts and solid-colored ties. He punched his card a minute late one morning and was called to Mr. Porter's office by the secretary over the intercom. Her voice had this militant sexiness to it that got me imagining her in bed with me. Mike came back to his cubicle twenty minutes later sweating bullets. He didn't say anything, just packed up his things and left, arms full of jumbled office supplies and personal effects. I later found out that Mike missed six office-related calls on top of his tardiness.

Then Theodore, who went by Theo, took Mike's cubicle. He was a stout Colombian that loved the job. Despite his accent, he did well on the phones with clients and got his point across most of the time. He was easy-going and took every opportunity he had to tell me about his latest weekend escapades with his "broders". Though his personality was colorful, his clothing didn't reflect it. It was always white shirt, blue tie for him. He liked to drink coffee and take regular cigarette breaks.

After working for two weeks, he was warned that if he couldn't control his bad breath, he would lose his job. The first time they told him about it, they docked a day of his pay. The thing

is, this kind of information puts stress on a man. So, naturally, Theo began smoking more frequently to deal with the stress and was called into Mr. Porter's office again. This second time, he was fired.

Then came Robert. He was American, with long-forgotten family roots in Europe somewhere. He told me that he'd just moved to Miami from Chicago, where he'd worked for another office but had gotten tired of the weather and wanted to be around more Hispanics. Why an American would move to the epicenter of a cultural disaster was beyond me. He was the longest-lasting person to occupy the cubicle that I believed to be cursed (after working there for five months, I'd seen five different people work in it). He followed the rules but complained about them just as much as I did. On difficult days, we'd help each other out.

I figured out how to change the clock-in times on the computer system in case one of us arrived a few minutes late (anything more than a few minutes was obvious); Robert would distract Mr. Porter if he came around and my nails were unclipped so I could clip them quickly and look presentable by the time he turned around to inspect my area and attire. We shared clients in order to increase our quotas. This was, perhaps, the most dangerous offense because we were all supposed to be in competition against one another.

Our company made money by selling, trading, and managing stocks for our customers. And one thing vital to the company's success was constantly acquiring “genuine” new customers. This meant that the new customers could not be directly referred by current customers. Mr. Porter didn't count referrals because commissions were half that of new customers. So, Robert and I would use our current customers to get others to join based on incentives and then refer those newly-interested customers to each other. For example, I would speak to my regular customer,

Mr. Santos, and tell him that if he referred a colleague to the company, he would get his service fees waived for a given number of transactions. When Santos' colleagues called me to open an account, I would refer them to Robert, thus removing the link between my customer and his colleague and making it look like someone randomly decided to do their stock trading with us. Together, we moved up quickly.

As with all self-made multi-billion dollar business owners, Mr. Porter liked nothing better than to oversee. He'd hired the best in the field and he'd already made a name for himself, so all he had to do was sit and watch. He watched us all for violations in company policy, watched our activities on social media for inappropriate behavior outside of the office and attire in our social lives. I hated him. He was a short, as if his body had decided early on that it had no intention of making him halfway respectable-looking and stopped upward growth, leaving him with a width that bulged off the sides of his slacks, threatening to pop his buttons and flop down. His face always managed to harbor stubble by 3 o'clock and his short, greasy black hair was perpetually gelled forward in a duck's beak towards the front.

Mr. Porter didn't like anyone, I didn't know why he would like me. Treated me like a son or a relative that he was training to take over the family business. One afternoon he called me to his office and said he wanted to talk to me. He offered me whiskey, which he poured into a Waterford Crystal glass. I declined politely before sitting down.

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged, then studied me for a moment. “You've got to have a plan in order to have successful career,” he said in his guttural drawl, the side-effect of too much cigar smoking. “At the very least you need to know what you're going to specialize in. Right now you're doing the general work, moving up. But soon you'll be at a point where you'll need to be a

resource all on your own. You've got to figure out what unique thing you're going to bring to the table.”

What he was saying made sense. I was reaching a ceiling in the basic work I was doing. It was getting to the point where I needed to bring something new to the table that the company—or better yet, the industry—didn't already have. I asked him what kind of resources he was talking about.

“You know by now that I don't like just *giving* people the answers to their problems if I want them to grow. I do that for stupid people, the ones that I know aren't going anywhere.” He took a sip of his whiskey, exhaled thoughtfully through his nose to let the whiskey's accented spirits fill his nostrils, and then continued. “Think about it this way: there are some people that are supposed to live their whole lives depending on a nipple to give them what they need. There are other people that realize, after a little while on that nipple, that they can't be sucking on their mom's tit for the rest of their lives. So they get up and start looking for nutrition somewhere else. They figure out what they're good for, and they're the ones that determine how things are gonna be run for the next few decades.”

“And that's what I've got to do,” I said in an attempt to show I was following along.

“Exactly.” He raised his glass toward me.

The advice wasn't bad, but I still hated him. Mr. Porter was one of those businessmen that started with nothing and worked his way up the ladder. He believed in the social structure, the privileges he now enjoyed, and in the system. Hard work will set you free. He thought he understood how people worked, and as an extension, how advanced capitalism worked. I thought about what he said. It was an interesting thought, that if people don't put the effort to look for

enrichment on their own, they are fed poison. Dead-end jobs, drug addictions, fast food, alcoholism, television, pulp fiction, trashy erotic novels, bad music, indoctrinated truths, religious extremism. These are the things people stumble into unconsciously and get comfortable with.

After work, there were rooftop parties downtown, young women from the suburbs in tight dresses and high heels looking for men with money, exclusive clubs, nights that seemed to last for years, drugs that kept us up all night feeling good, drugs that brought us down, drugs for sex, drugs for love, drugs for happiness, drugs for thinking, drugs for lust. Robert was a strong supporter of the hedonistic lifestyle. “What's the point of having everything you could ever want if you can't play with it?”

## Chapter 4

In his office, late on a Monday morning, Mr. Porter looked at me with a face of pity, eyebrows high on his face in an expression of mock concern. "You know that promptness and proper attire are expected in this business and especially in this company. Am I correct?"

"Yes sir, you are." I said, looking out of the floor-to-ceiling window, watching a bird glide by and wondering if the bird had anything to be late to.

Mr. Porter cleared his throat. I turned my attention back to him. He looked at me with amusement, a perfect sneer curled across his pig face for a moment before continuing his look of feigned concern, a furrowed brow and narrowed eyes. I looked directly into his eyes, which seemed to say "You're just another waste of my time, little nipple-sucker." I read it like the morning paper. His Coca-Cola billboard. His Marlboro Smoker Propaganda. Triumph.

Then Mr. Porter said, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but I'm going to have to let you go, Mr. Simmons."

"Really?" Eyebrows suspended into my forehead, mouth hanging open.

He sat looking impatient.

"Just for being late?" I asked. I wondered if he knew about my tampering with the time stamps or about Robert and I sharing clients. But it couldn't be either of those because if it was, then Robert would be getting fired too. Or maybe he just suspected something and was trying to get me to tell him. I could feel my pulse in my face, sweat in my arm pits dripping.

Mr. Porter looked bored. His previous liking towards me seemed to have evaporated overnight.

I sank back slowly in my seat, a mountainous puddle of wounded ego and self-doubt. A soaked tangle of confusion and lead-weight disbelief. Something had gone wrong. I was the top-ranked employee, making more trades with clients than anyone else. Ninety-percent of the clients that I brought to the company stayed with the company. How was I being fired just for showing up late once?

“Listen, *James*,” he said, leaning over his desk, “I see that you've been a good fit here. You work hard, bring us clients. You had an opportunity to make something of yourself. But I can't run a business if people working for me don't come when they're supposed to. I don't have time for this kind of bullshit in my company.”

I left the building without another word, an outsider amongst fugitives rushing along the city streets; blood platelets flowing through the veins of an adrenaline-filled convict. Avoiding faces, eyes down. I turned corners and ducked through alleys, sprinted away from sirens. The sky was gray, humidity and pollution hung heavy in the air. I eventually stopped, my hands resting in my slacks pockets, and felt a small, rectangular piece of card-stock. I looked at the address and phone number. I didn't have much else to do, so I pulled out my cellphone but my phone was dead. I'd forgotten to charge it after an especially wild night.

After walking around the backstreets and backsides of dive bars and cheap-ass neon nightclubs, I found a pay-phone. I looked quickly up and down the alley, eyes jittering. I was too scared to take them off either entrance. I jammed a few quarters into the almost-obsolete service tool, long since replaced by self-serving advancements in electronic communication to add fuel

to the fire of evolution. Once the dial tone clicked on, I entered the phone number from the small card. The ring didn't even last for a full tone before an even, silken voice simmered onto the line.

"It's about time."

## Chapter 5

Good parents tell their kids at a very young age never to get into the car of a stranger. They tell them one or two horror stories about little boys and girls that got kidnapped and chopped up into little bits to justify their commands. It is their job to indoctrinate their children into the culture. They teach their kids how to assimilate television, advertisements, conversations, what economic group they belong to and how to act accordingly. They teach their children everything that they have to lose. Money, pride, dignity, cars, a home, income, comfort. The things we have to lose are the things that distinguish us from the rest.

Fear of loss is an integral part of pop culture. Parents instill a persistent sense of foreboding into the child, a hard-wired safety against evil predators of the night. This is the same feeling I felt tingling in the prickling hairs on my neck, an amphetamine fight-or-flight buzz making its way, alerting me, pulsing "danger, danger." Paranoia is excitement. But without my job, I didn't have much to lose. So I got into the black hearse of a Cadillac that the woman on the phone sent for me, purring softly, an exhale of smoke perpetually sighing its way out the rear exhaust pipe. When I slid into the back seat and closed the door, torrential rain came down from the desolate sky.

The driver's compartment was blocked off by a darkened privacy glass. I sat in the back seat, alone with my fears, with echoes of my boss and my parents, with the tapping of rain and bumps of the car on the uneven city streets. In the rain, all seemed to melt by the window. One

street, then another, a red light, a liquor store, a gas station, a traffic light. We drove South on US-1 alongside the tracks of the MetroRail, passing the tree-covered streets of Coral Gables, then the malls of South Miami, eventually reaching the nurseries and farmland of Homestead. I thought about what my coworkers were saying about me. I could imagine them whispering to one another across cubicles, on the way to lunch, “he was so strange anyway.” I wondered if Robert would try to call.

The last time I'd seen him was Friday, at my place. He came over with a small briefcase and was very excited.

“You won't believe what I found,” he said, grinning.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Pure DMT.” He patted the little briefcase softly.

“Where the hell did you find that?”

“You remember that guy from work? Mr. Porter?” A mischievous smile.

“No fuckin' way,” I said as I got up from the couch to see the short-acting psychedelic more closely. I couldn't believe that our CEO had any hand in the drug trade. But then again, when you make that much money, why wouldn't you? “You got it directly from him?”

“Not exactly,” he said, unclipping the latches on the case. “it's more like he's funding the movement of this fine medicine.” Robert winked and opened the case.

Inside was a small vial of clear liquid and two syringes. We set the vial and syringes on the glass table in my living room along with rubbing alcohol. I watched and listened as Robert drew up each of the syringes and explained how to inject myself properly. As I pushed down on the plunger, I felt a buzzing sensation drizzling over my body, as if my skin were vibrating at a

different frequency than my bones. It was then that I noticed my consciousness become something tangible. A deliberate experience rather than an experience that happens regardless of want or desire. By the time I removed the needle from my arm, I was becoming aware of layers in reality.

These layers expanded to include layers of time within my own existence. I felt like a Matryoshka doll, experiencing each level of myself separately and simultaneously. A sum of all internal parts, both physical and meta-physical. I could conceptualize the varying points at which things exist, that all things are infinitely small and infinitely large at the same time. Perception is all a matter of perspective. There are infinitely many stories and lifetimes occurring at every level of perceptual observation. A cell is living out its functions to supply the tissue, which supplies the organ, which supplies the system, which supplies the body, which supplies the mind, which supplies the person, which functions as a cell in a human organism, which functions as an organism on a planet, which functions as a member of a solar system, which functions as a part of a galaxy, and so on. Each level mirrors and effects the other, or rather is a scaled version of the previous level, infinitely. Somewhere around the middle of this trip is when the terror struck me.

All reference points to reality dropped out of existence. I was nothing. I was everything. The concepts of business, economy, transactions, and material things felt foreign and insignificant in contrast to the vastness of the universe. My values were disassembled into their finer parts, revealing a sickness. I was grasping desperately to hold onto something that would make sense, but there was only a feeling of intense disillusionment. All would be at peace if only...something. The intensity of my thoughts were dulled, blurred as if I had gone mentally

myopic. There were what felt like several lifetimes in this idiosyncratic perspective before it came to a close, like waking up from a dream.

Robert and I sat on the couch watching infomercials on the TV at his request during the comedown. Robert found them to be particularly euphoric.

“Advertising these days,” Robert said, gazing at the TV in awe, “so beautiful.”

“Yeah,” I said. The commercials were indeed beautiful. Women split mirror-like across the screen, spreading out in multi-colored arrays that turned into retro dots spinning into company logos, people's fingers touched and alcohol poured from them à la Michaelangelo into perfect porcelain mouths, children leaped with joy off mountain cliffs into dreamscapes. It was spiritual, and it wasn't the drugs. There was a perfect balance to it, an order of things that you might only expect to find in nature or an art gallery. I could not help but feel disturbed while watching them, however.

There was something about reality that was threatening to come loose as the DMT was broken down by my brain. There seemed to be hinges on every color, every wall, every thought. Hinges but no doorknob. It wasn't the TV that was catching my attention, it was the feeling that this life I was living was a plastic distraction from the journey of the soul. I looked over at Robert, his eyes brimming with tears.

“I just can't help myself,” he said, smiling. He looked like he was at church.

I came out of my thoughts as the mansion came into view.

I stepped out of the car and drew myself up to full height, the way I'd been taught to. As a businessman, your physical appearance is what says it all. While I stood outside the Cadillac, I clicked my eyes over the house that stood before me. It was a Victorian-style manor gone to pot.

The front yard was a lay of dead grass and weeds, still damp from the rain that had now stopped. The wood paneling of the house was covered in wilting strips of gray paint. On the left side of the house was a tower-like structure with a narrow rectangular window that appeared to be winking at me in contrast to the square windows on the rest of the house. The gate at the front was wrought-iron but so dilapidated that the door hung off only one hinge, open and collapsing to the forces of the world it had stood against for so many years.

I thought of my grandmother's home in Country Walk. Always warm and comfortable like a Tempur-Pedic mattress. Complete with its own musty scent of cloves, pepper, and garlic in the kitchen and couches that smelled like old people alongside an ancient television and warm lighting. She'd moved from Maryland to be closer to my mother and to be around for her only grandson. As a young boy, my mother dropped me off after school so she could pursue her work as a realtor. The house reminded me of the day I was watching afternoon cartoons and I wanted more of the cookies she made me. I called her name a few times, but she never answered. I noticed that it was more quiet than usual in that home. I remember getting up and walking over to my grandmother's room, where I found her lying on her bed sleeping perfectly, a photograph of my young grandpa in her wiry hand. But her stomach wasn't moving.

I remember standing there, looking. The sound of cartoons muffled from the living room. I remember how comfortable she looked. When my mother came to pick me up later that night, she found me telling my grandmother about where people go when they die and asking her if she could tell me what it was like.

A house has no soul, no depth or nooks or crannies. A house is a dead hermit crab's empty shell. Houses are immaculately neat and have function. I learned about houses with my mother

on the day she decided to take me with her on her job. It was then that I learned how values of houses were determined and how important location was in price. She taught me how to say hello to her clients, to be cute and shake their hands. She said that being cute always helped close a deal (Later in my life, being polite proved equally helpful). She sold houses. Not homes. She sold buildings built for the storage of human bodies and unwanted material objects passed down through the generations purchased at Sears and Wal-Mart. She manipulated people. This is the way of business.

They were empty doll houses with perfect grinning windows and polished wood front doors, white crown moldings, disinfected porcelain toilets, sinks, tubs. The smell of Pine-Sol and bleach overwhelming. They had full kitchens and for a limited time only, pre-installed satellite TV. Some were worn, painted skulls with wide, gaping eye socket windows and weary, creaking doors and stairs. Cobwebs and the smell of death lingered; covered up with cheap air sanitizer and water-stained wallpaper peeling in the upper corners of the vacant bedrooms. A mausoleum to the life that had transpired. I promised myself I'd never be a realtor. The mansion we pulled up to was just another house.

The driver never showed himself, and the cold steel creature pulled away. Curious to find out why the woman gave me a card and how she knew my name, I reached out my hand to take hold of the knocker, but the door was already being opened for me. There stood the woman with the black dress.

“Hey. Glad to see you made it okay. I'm Aurora.” I recognized her even, silken voice from the phone. It dragged through the air as if she was tired and didn't have much energy to expend on human interaction. She still smiled, however.

I nodded. “Nice to meet you, Aurora,” I said, looking back for the car that wasn't there. “I'm not exactly sure why I'm here, to be honest. I lost my job today.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, frowning. “Maybe the Teacher can help you.”

“Who's 'The Teacher'?” I asked.

Aurora opened the door wider and stepped back. “Come inside and you'll meet her.”

I wanted, more than anything, to believe that there was another explanation for losing my job. I was unwilling to lose my quarter-million dollar penthouse and new Mercedes. The exclusive club memberships. The champagne. The parties. The drugs. The women. I thanked Aurora and stepped inside.

“Follow me.”

She seemed out there. Numb. Silent. Yet confident. Solid. There was a gravitational pull that she had on me, it felt like there was no other way to go or other way to be. I couldn't understand that one thing. I'd never met a human quite like her before. She led me through what I supposed was the parlor, and we marched through bare hallways which seemed endless and far too long for such a stout house. Left. Right. Left. Straight. Right. Right. Left. As we walked, I could hear voices, ringing telephones, and what sounded like lawn mowers or weed eaters spinning away behind the doors, buzzing and buzzing like the sputtering of a biplane.

After what seemed a maze of turns, doors, and locks, we came to a door which stood at the end of a hallway, slightly open, revealing a dim, musty light within. From where I stood, I had to squint my eyes to get a better look. Aurora motioned for me to go in and stayed behind as I entered.

A skylight high up on the ceiling lit the cylindrical room. Behind an old desk cluttered with papers sat the most decayed, ancient woman I'd ever seen. She sat in an upright armchair, padded leather holding her arms. Her head wobbled and bobbed slightly, the result of Parkinson's, a gift of old age. Wispy hair floated on her head like lint. Her tongue sat dead in her mouth, which opened and closed ceaselessly as if trying to move moisture back around her sandpaper gums. As I looked around the room, I saw a young man standing at attention in the shadow of the room, as if guarding an important general. It made me want to laugh. She reached down slowly onto the table, and picked up a worn dollar bill feebly with her shaking hand. Her attendant stepped forward mechanically.

“Would you like the small size or the big size, ma'am?”

“The small size would be just fine, thank you.” Her voice was thin and shaking, like a novice violinist playing harmonics. I could visualize her shuffling down the hall with a walker, with a quick pace at first, then stopping, like a child's pull-back toy car, stuttering at cracks in the tiled floor. Her attendant left to get the supposed thing she had asked for, the “small size,” and as soon as he left, she allowed her head to sink slowly, shakily, onto her upturned palm. A light, rattling sigh escaped her lips like the rustling of leaves, and she spoke again, in a lower, more serious tone. “Please close the door, Mr. Simmons.” When I closed it, she continued. “I see that you have met my Aurora. As for why you are here, you will know in due time. I trust that you'll find what I'm about to do very interesting, Mr. Simmons. In fact, you may want to sit down. It's quite shocking to most the first time they see it.”

She motioned wearily to another chair which rested just behind me, a silken wisp of a cobweb hanging in between the backrest and the seat. And then, with her forehead still resting on her hand, she proceeded to grab at her skin and slowly peel it away.

Most of the emotional and physical reactions people develop are derived through societal conditioning. Beginning in the early stages of development, children learn what is popularly considered to be distasteful, grotesque, or vulgar and concurrently learn the emotional and physical reactions that go along with these presentations of social deviation. The classic recoil, lips contorted in a grimace accompanied by a deep exhale of air, usually vocalized using the syllable “ugh.” I felt all of these processes taking place at that moment, awash with reactionary instincts. It was one of those moments where you’re too busy telling yourself that what is happening isn’t really happening. But it was.

The skin split and cracked and tore, revealing a glowing luminescence softly pulsating underneath. She continued pulling, ripping, and peeling away at the ancient cocoon lampshade, leaving a pile like shredded papyrus at her feet.

What before had been a frail, withered stick of a woman was now an image of glowing perfection. The look on her face was one of triumph, and I saw that it was Aurora. The glow that surrounded her softly illuminated the room like a soft green night-light. A thin smile spread across her face, along with ivory white skin which shimmered incandescently with a rosy hue that spread from the tip of her nose to the cheeks, which were accented by the small dimples in the corners of her smile.

What I'd just witnessed was impossible, and yet it still happened. I wondered if I might be high, if I'd taken something and forgotten. I felt sober, however. I could not help but think that tucked away somewhere in that face was knowledge that I did not yet have. Her eyes saw inside me the way my grandmother's could, much in the way my father tried to do when I came home past curfew. Right through. Disregarding the suit, well-cut hair, the shined shoes, the image that I had worked so hard to procure. Words did not come to me.

“Do you want to learn the truth?” There was a renewed energy in her voice that made her words seem to come effortlessly now.

“Yes,” I said, without fully understanding why. Neither could I fully understand anything that was happening, but I felt like I was experiencing the most important moment of my life.

“The truth about this life you are living is something that you can learn from me with time. But you will have to stay here until we think you're ready to leave. The world is waiting for you, and the systems in place don't want you to know what I am going to tell and show you.”

“Why don't they want me to know?” I asked, unable to imagine what it would be like to understand what I'd just seen.

The glowing Aurora smiled. “Because having that knowledge will make you more difficult for them to influence. Keep in mind, though, that there are rules you have to follow while you're staying at this house. The first is that you will not tell anyone here who you are or where you came from. The second is that you will only speak when given permission and that you will answer any questions put to you with as little additional information as possible. You have no past here. The third rule is that you agree to follow through with anything asked of you, regardless of its meaning to you. Are you willing to do these things?”

Keeping quiet about my identity wouldn't be too difficult. I didn't want people to know who I was anyway. I thought the talking rule and following orders without question was strange and might take some getting used to. They reminded me of Mr. Porter's rules, conditions for existence that required compliance without question. I was never one for strictly following rules, I needed some sort of deviation to feel alive and human. Even so, it seemed like a good deal on the whole. Worst case scenario, I'd probably just get kicked out and have to go back home. Best case scenario, this woman actually knew things I didn't and there was a slight chance she would be able to help me get my job back. I agreed to her terms.

She led me to a hallway lit by dim circular lights stuck to the ceiling, spaced at equal intervals. The hallway was lined with metal doors on either side, locks on the outside.

“This is your room. You’ll find all the basic things you need here. We’ll come for you when it is time.”

She opened the door for me, and as soon as I walked in, the door latched closed. Her echoing footsteps slowly faded away and I was left alone again, in a cold, sterilized room with concrete walls, a small cot, a toilet, and a sink with a toothbrush and a small tube of toothpaste set neatly and evenly spaced on the side. Next to the cot was a small night stand with a drawer and a simple desk lamp on top. At the foot of my cot was a duffel bag. My duffel bag from home. I unzipped it, expecting to find a change of clothes, but instead I found books. All the books I kept around my penthouse for show, the ones I’d never even picked up, save to put on the shelf. Jean-Francois Champollion, Plato, George Eliot, Nietzsche, *The Odyssey*, Peter Wollen, Faulkner, Shakespeare. I guessed that I was supposed to read them. But I knew I never would.

In a modern world, the ivory towers of academia are compost heaps of discarded truths. There isn't any reason to read any of it aside from academic membership. I had no need for it. I laid down on the thin mattress still wearing my tired business suit, took off my tie and shoes, and closed my eyes.

## Chapter 6

I awoke to the sound of a faint, low-pitched hum. The light in my room was dim, but the hum didn't come from the light. It came from inside the walls. It grew louder and more intense, gradually making my head feel as if it were being compressed by a vice, my muscles tight, and jaw grind. It filled my ears entirely until a splitting headache burst inside me, hurling me to the floor, and then it abruptly stopped, leaving me clutching my head and gasping for breath. The buzzing headache remained, keeping me from sleep, so I reluctantly picked up a book from the duffel bag and began to read as the headache subsided.

Growing up, my parents read to me every night. As soon as I was able to read on my own, I began reading in the dark beside my small night-light and made my eyesight go bad earlier than it should have. When I got older, I got a bedside table and lamp in order to read late into the nights. But as time passed and schooling became more time-consuming, I ended up falling asleep without reading the books that nourished my inner thoughts and taught me to think and question.

No one read novels in school. Literature was a subject of posterity, a mausoleum dedicated to a time where people cared enough to sit alone and read stories. In school, my classmates and I were assigned books to pass tests. The emphasis was placed on math and science, the study of emotion was abandoned in the fundamentalist atmosphere. I realized that what was important were the facts necessary for daily competitive life. We had evolved past

fantastic stories of epic journeys and forbidden romance. Those could be found and ingested easily through movies. By the time I left college, a master of academic texts and business terms, books of deeper thinking and questioning had become mere trophies, conversation pieces that no one actually read.

As I moved from one book to the next, I lost track of time. I devoured the texts like a starved child, and I began to understand some of the things I was missing. The ideas contained in the books that were left out of movies, the ideas of the soul that were ignored in school.

## Chapter 7

“Wake up. It’s time.”

The dim, shaded hues pulled into focus. Above me hovered Aurora, who was no longer glowing. I straightened myself, leaning back on my elbows. Aurora held out a small pile of clothes comprised of a pair of brown scrub pants, a plain gray t-shirt, and a pair of sandals that strapped around the ankle. The smell was of clean linen mingled with the smell of a shoe store; new leather and manufactured rubber. She told me that once I put them on, someone would be waiting to take me where I needed to go. When I put it on after she left, I was surprised to find that the fit was perfect. I noted the sterile perfection that permeated every aspect of the place. And just as she said, a young man was waiting outside the door. His face was scrunched up in a strange display of irritation. He wore the same sandals and shirt I had been given, but wore pants that were a shade of blue too light to be navy, but darker than the sky. The color was like ocean water over a sand bar. I started to speak, but he interrupted.

“The second rule states that you will only speak when spoken to, sir. Follow me, please.”

He led me out of the sleeping quarters hallway and into the main hallway where we made a left, then a right, and through a pair of double oak doors that revealed a mess hall. There were four rows of long tables set long ways in the rectangular room lined with people; all wearing the same shirts but different colors of pants and different kinds of shoes. There were browns, reds, greens, blues, and purples all sitting and eating. Some wore sandals and others boots. On the left

and right walls stood buffet-style food bars with guards standing at attention at the beginning and end. The smell of chlorine cleaning products, old soap, and reheated breakfast food hung in the air like my public elementary school cafeteria. On the far wall there was a smaller table perpendicular to the others with only one person sitting at it. Aurora. My escort turned to me and spoke.

“This is where you'll eat. There are three meals a day, and your place at the table is already assigned in accordance with your number,” he said, and turned to walk away.

“Hold on.” I hesitated as he turned back towards me, remembering I wasn't supposed to speak. “I don't have a number.”

He grabbed my left arm and rolled up the sleeve of my shirt to show, printed neatly on the underside of my arm just outside my armpit, a small tattoo of the number 11. A look of surprise crossed his face, but it was quickly buried and replaced with his stoic, military façade. His voice didn't adapt so quickly. “11. I don't know why, but the Teacher has her reasons. Your seat is at the head table.” As he walked away, I could hear him grumble indignantly under his breath, “...a brown sandal private...head table?”

Alone, I made my way toward the buffet on the right wall, opposite of where Bluepants was headed. I could see him across the crowded room, whispering to another man wearing a pair of forest green pants and sandals. I served myself a plate of scrambled eggs, a waffle, and a small Styrofoam cup of orange juice. Then I stood with my tray of food in hand and looked at Aurora, who was eating complacently. The front table. By now, word had spread and there were eyes following every step. The front table. I made my way over, each step weighing more. The buzz of the people talking got louder in my ears, I could feel blood pounding in my head, the choking

smell of chlorine and old food flooding my nose, the confusion slowing me to a halt, teetering. Eyes flicking towards me like flashes of light from cameras at the red carpet. Those were the moments I was glad my body could shut itself down when it wanted to.

## Chapter 8

I woke up to the sound of my alarm blaring out a pulsating, urgent screech. It was 8:00 A.M. on Monday. Work started at 9. I slapped the sleep button and got out of bed, took a shower, shaved, and got dressed before I tore out of my penthouse and dashed into the slowly closing elevator by 8:30, all without a second thought. A rushed moment in an elevator is enough to kill. I'm going to be late.

One of the things I knew about Mr. Porter was that he loved punctuality. What was funny about the whole situation was that I felt as if I was reliving the dream I'd just had, about getting fired and having to live instead in some old house that was being used as a headquarters for an underground organization.

I arrived at the office building at 9:15 exactly. Still late, in anyone's book. Too late for Robert to make any changes to the time stamp, either. After checking in with the security guards, I ran into Mr. Porter as I exited the elevator, who feigned surprise.

"James!" His voice turned more serious. "You know that promptness and proper attire are expected in this business and especially in this company. Am I correct?"

"Yes, sir. I am." Déjà vu.

Mr. Porter cleared his throat. He looked at me with amusement, a perfect sneer curled across his pig face for a moment before continuing his look of feigned concern, a furrowed brow and narrowed eyes. I looked directly into his eyes, which seemed to say "You're just another

waste of my time, little nipple-sucker." I read it like the morning paper. His Coca-Cola billboard. His Marlboro Smoker Propaganda. Triumph.

Then Mr. Porter said, "You realize that there are penalties for disobeying the rules of this company?"

"Yes, sir. I realize that I was late, but—"

"The penalty, Mr. Simmons, for such, will be a deduction in your salary. Twenty-five percent until the end of the week. Make sure you get here on time from now on." He turned away from me and began shuffling some documents on his desk.

I stood amazed. In awe. Never, in the history of the company, had a person been given a 25% reduction. I apologized once again to Mr. Porter and left his office, my mind buzzing. Questions popped up. I felt like I had woken up into my own dream from the night before, only this one was more forgiving. It was impossible to conceptualize my luck.

When I returned to my desk, Robert looked at me, eager for news. "You got here fifteen minutes late. What happened?"

"I have no clue, somehow I just got a 25% reduction until the end of the week. It's really strange," I said, still amazed.

"You lucky son of a bitch," he said, shaking his head.

The deals I made and stocks I traded that day happened smoothly, easily, as if the world wanted me to have more. As if the world knew something I didn't.

People were too nice. Was it me? Was I just seeing things differently? The questions persisted throughout the day, but they weren't brought about by tangible events or appearances. It was a feeling that put me on edge. The same feeling you have when you walk into a room and

there is a slight tension in the air, information being passed from one object to another, from one person to another like the time I walked into my parent's home after school on a Thursday afternoon.

I opened the front door and immediately felt it. The air buzzed with an ephemeral energy that seemed to bounce from one particle to another. I walked carefully through the sunlit house, not noticing anything out of the ordinary until I reached my parents' bedroom. There I found the drawers pulled out, my mother's jewelry gone, sheets tossed off the bed, clothes everywhere. The rays of sunlight penetrated the dark room, dust particles floating through like fireflies. That was the last thing I remembered before I woke up, my parents huddled over me asking if I was alright. Turns out the burglar crept up behind me and knocked the back of my head with the butt of his pistol.

At work, I kept thinking I was going to be caught unawares and hit over the head with something. That I was going to wake up and find out that it was all just a strange dream or it was a trick that was being played on me. The constant uncertainty, coupled with the day's work, made each hour pass by incredibly slow.

When I got back to my penthouse that night from work, I was exhausted and needed to unwind. I called Robert, and he agreed to come over. By the time he arrived, I'd already blown two lines of coke. Without it, I wouldn't have been able to talk about what I needed to with him. I told him about my dream, explaining how I got fired, called the number on the card, went to a house in the middle of nowhere, saw an old woman shed her skin and turn into a glowing young woman, and how I fell asleep in a locked cell. "I'm worried that I'm going crazy or something," I said as I casually slid another line in front of me.

Robert answered quickly, hoping, I assumed, to gloss over the whole thing so that he might get offered a line. “Look, it was a dream, right? And even if it wasn't, I don't think you're crazy. Sometimes I think something isn't right around here too. Anything is possible. But I mean, it could just be the drugs...” His voice trailed off as he eyed the cocaine in front of me.

I ignored the fact that Robert wanted to do some and blew the line I'd cut. Sniffled. “I honestly don't feel any different about the world than I did before I started doing this shit,” I said with resentment, noticing his attempt to provide a quick solution to my obviously complex problem. The only thing drugs ever did was increase my awareness of the paranoid feeling that something was not right. “That's why I haven't really developed a habit with anything. Did you notice how everyone at the office was really nice to me today?”

“In what way?” Robert was paying attention now. Practically drooling.

“Well, for example, S—”

“Samantha? The secretary?” He asked, cutting me off.

“Not Samantha,” I said as if I was talking to a child. “in the way Mr. Porter only gave me a salary reduction. Or people smiling at me too much. Did you notice anything about that?”

“I mean, maybe a bit more than usual,” said Robert, shrugging his shoulders, “but maybe people were just having a good day. Wait! Today was payday!” He said, as if he'd just figured out the answer to the riddle.

“Yeah, but that doesn't make it any different from other paydays.” I was beginning to get irritated by his lack of coherence. He hadn't always been this way.

We became friends at a bar after work one night. I'd had a rough day and Robert suggested we get a drink.

Robert leaned in over his beer and said, “You know, sometimes I like coming to washed up bars like this. It makes me thankful that we're not fucking retards like these people.”

I asked him what he meant by that.

“These people, man. They're just doing the same bullshit day-in and day-out. They work all week at their shitty little jobs and then they come here and spend all their money on this lovely alcohol. I mean look at them.” Robert gestured towards a middle-aged couple staggering around in front of the jukebox. They wore jeans and t-shirts; they danced to believe they were still young. They got drunk to believe they still had something left to squander.

I agreed with him, these people were pitiful. They were old, spent, used up. They belonged at a bar, though. The place where everyone goes when they're dried out, unlike us.

“At least I can have a fucking intelligent conversation with you, you know? Most people can't talk about anything that involves more intellect than the discussion of other people's lives on reality TV.” Robert took another deep gulp of his beer.

I wanted to know how he'd developed such a thoughtful worldview.

“You ever learn about European history?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“It's all right there,” he said. “We're living with the same damn problems of the colonial age now in the modern world. At the very bottom of it all, nothing's changed and nothing will change because that's human nature.” He went on to explain that consumerism is the central motivation of our society, and that consumerism has always driven the suffering of others. In order to have a consumerist capitalist society, there needs to be a disconnect between the consumers and the production of the products they buy, that is the purpose of presentation. “Why

do you think the commercials are so perfect these days? I mean, they're irresistible. The other day I saw a commercial for a trip to Tahiti where you learn how to make canoes and I bought a ticket. Returned it the next day, but that's just an example. This society needs a constantly increasing demand for newer, shinier, modified, improved products or experiences. And it's never going to change, man. There's too much money to be made.”

He was right. It was like he was telling me something I'd known all along, but had never been able to put in words for myself. I drank my beer, imagining the hands of poor farmers harvesting the hops and wheat. The game show on the TV over the bar was giving away a theme-park-sponsored trip to Scotland where a family could have their kids paint pictures of Scottish castles.

“What do you believe in?” Robert asked, after a while of silence.

“What do you mean, like politics?”

“No, like what do you believe about your life?”

“I don't know, man. I kind of gave up on that a long time ago. Doesn't seem to be any point in believing in anything. What about you?” I asked, gesturing towards him with my glass.

“I believe that this is a fucked up world. It's fucked up and all we can do is make the best out of it. You know, maybe in a past life it was worth trying to make something of yourself. I want to be a good person but honestly, there's no difference between being good or being bad. People are just here like zombies, living out their dead shit. Just enjoy what you have while you can, James. Cuz one day it's all just gonna go away.” He finished his drink and looked over at me. “You ever do blow?”

The lifestyle he'd introduced me to six months ago was catching up to him and turning him into a junkie. I looked at the rest of the cocaine on the table. It didn't look so appealing anymore. But for some reason, I was craving cheap beer.

“You want a beer?” I asked Robert, who turned and looked at me with wide eyes.

“Sure. That would be really good right now,” he said.

I thought again about what I was doing. Cheap beer? Why? I didn't like cheap beer. But it seemed like it would taste so good. I decided against it. “Actually, nevermind. I don't really want any,” I said, “I think I'm going to try winding down to sleep.”

Robert looked like he was going to cry. “No beer?” He asked.

I could tell he was having the same strange craving I was. “What kind were you thinking?” I asked.

“Just some cold, cheap-ass beer. It'd taste so good right now,” he said.

It struck me as peculiar that we were both craving cheap beer when neither one of us ever drunk it. Or any kind of cheap alcohol, for that matter. The fatigue from the day was catching up to me despite the stimulation from the coke so I decided to turn in for the night. “It's late man,” I said, as I put away the coke and wiped down the residue from the table. “I would stay up later, but I'm a lot more tired than I thought I was.”

“C'mon,” said Robert. “Let me buy you a six-pack. It'll take your mind off things.”

I declined and showed him to the door, assuring him that we'd hang out some other time.

My dream, the people at the office, Robert's and my strange cravings, and Mr. Porter's reaction to my tardiness all seemed connected somehow. I was trying to understand the connections while also wondering how much of my dream was real. Or if my craving for cheap

beer was real. I was coming down from the cocaine and my thoughts were becoming increasingly erratic and worrying. I thought about having sex. Maybe calling one of the girls from last week? Then I thought about hamburgers. How much I'd like one. *Almost better than hanky panky...* I surprised myself. I never used words like that. I decided to ignore all the things in my mind and took a Valium before getting into bed.

## Chapter 9

I found myself back in the clean, concrete cell. Aurora stood over me as she had before, with a look of intrigue. As if wondering about my ability. As if I had some sort of powers. I was still wearing the pajama pants I had worn when going to sleep in my apartment and I was confused as to how I'd gotten back to Aurora's house. The same brown scrub pants, grey shirt, and sandals that I had worn lay neatly folded and stacked at the foot of my cot, and it seemed as if I had always been there. My sleep didn't produce any rest or settling of my mind, it proved to do quite the opposite. The question of what was real and what was a dream was even more important than it had been before. Aurora broke my train of thought.

“When you are dressed, go to the mess hall. I will be there to begin your training.”

With that, she left the room. Leaving me to carry on with what had begun, a mystery. I pulled on the uniform. On my way to the mess hall, no longer needing a guide, I noticed the most peculiar thing about this house. The hallways were always empty whenever I walked through them. The masses of people I saw in the mess hall seemed to be in their own places at any specific time. Upon entering, I noticed that the expansive hall was empty. There was no breakfast being served either. Aurora sat patiently at the small head table.

“Hey.” Her voice echoed.

I walked past the vacant tables which stretched the length of the hall. The sound of my deliberate steps mingled with her voice throughout the room and the familiar lingering smell of

food and chlorine brought back memories of my last visit. I stopped in front of Aurora's regal table. She sat at the table, hands folded in front, similar to the way Mr. Porter sat at his. A video camera on a tripod stood to her right, lens pointing at me. To her left was a TV on a wheeled cart. She looked me over before speaking.

"It's time for me to tell you why I've brought you here." Aurora paused for a moment and took in a deep breath. "There is a part inside of you that has been buried and forgotten. Your past has revealed to us what you truly are, and my goal is to bring you to realize this. I am trying to set you free, James."

I pulled out a chair across from her and sat down, intrigued but skeptical. "Set me free from what?" I asked.

"From the drug that's in control of your mind right now," she said.

I thought about the cocaine. "But I'm sober," I said. "I did some coke last night, but that's it."

"You think you're sober, but you're not."

"I don't get it."

"Allow me to demonstrate," she said as she picked up a magazine by her chair, set it on the table in front of me, and twisted around in her seat to turn on the camera before turning back to me. "Right now, would you say that an advertisement could change your opinion about something easily?"

"No." This was beginning to feel like a waste of time. I just wanted to know how I got there.

"What do you think about apples?" she asked.

I told her that I liked apples, but that they weren't my favorite fruit. Then she opened the magazine and showed me an advertisement for apples. "Apples," it read, "crisp, healthy, mind-expanding." There was a picture of a red delicious apple in stunning detail on the page, beads of water spotted the reflective surface. The fruit looked like it was bursting with flavor. I could feel my mouth water.

"What do you think of apples now?"

"I'd really like one right now," I said, continuing to look at the picture. The flavor I was imagining was richer than any apple juice or cider I'd ever had.

"What about grapes?" Aurora asked, a smile spreading across her face.

Grapes aren't as good for the mind. "No, I just want an apple," I said, mesmerized. I was surprised that I never fully appreciated apples this much before.

Aurora turned the page of the magazine, revealing an advertisement for grapes. This page showed a high quality closeup shot of grapes, each one perfectly round and crisp. "What fruit do you like better, apples or grapes?"

As I looked at the picture, I felt an overwhelming desire for grapes. I could almost taste and feel the sweet crunch and burst of juice in my mouth. "Grapes," I said. "apples are alright, but grapes are so much better."

"Do you notice what just happened?" Aurora asked.

"No," I said, confused. "You showed me a picture of my favorite fruit, grapes."

"Do you remember what you said about apples?"

I didn't remember saying anything about apples. "Is this some kind of joke?"

“No,” Aurora said, as she twisted in her seat again to turn off the video camera. “I’m trying to show you.” She turned on the TV, made sure I could see it from where I was sitting, and started the video.

On the screen, I saw myself sitting and listening to Aurora. “I don’t get why you’re showing me this,” I said, throwing my hands up. “You ask me about grapes and then I tell you I want grapes.”

“Just watch,” Aurora said. “You might notice something different.”

Instead of the picture of grapes that I remembered, when Aurora opened the magazine in the video, there was a picture of an apple instead. Confused, I kept watching. In response to Aurora asking me if I wanted grapes, I heard myself say “No, I just want an apple.” I’d completely forgotten about the apple advertisement. It was like the memory had been replaced by the grape advertisement instead. I looked at Aurora. “What is it?”

“It’s a drug.” She sighed. “It’s called Lucidity. It’s everywhere. In the water, in food, in your drinks.” She told me that it was developed by the government in the hopes of creating a substance that would open people to suggestion easier and would condition the mind to process information peripherally instead of methodically, thus increasing productivity and overall happiness. “It activates while people sleep, when the brain takes on theta wave patterns. The drug creates suggestions in the mind that enable its influence to be felt upon waking. Certain advertising schemes appear more appealing, the world seems brighter, takes on an appearance that is modeled towards the ideal expectation of the user. It’s the easiest way to foster ignorance in a nation, and the more ignorant, the happier people think they are.”

“How do you know about it?” I asked.

“It was an accident, a story that I'll tell you some other time. But I can tell you that we've done chemical analyses of city water and found the drug.”

“Well can you at least tell me who 'we' is?”

“We are a group of people trying to make a clean space in a toxic world. I registered this house under the New Scientologists, so no one suspects that we are free from the drug.”

I burst out laughing. “The New Scientologists? Really?”

“Go ahead, laugh. I'm giving you an opportunity to be what you never thought that you could be, to live a life free of confusion. There's a lot that you don't know yet.”

“This is crazy,” I said, as I stood up and pushed the chair back. “Thanks for your time, but I'm not interested. Show me the door.”

“It's at the end of the hall, but I know that you won't walk through it.”

“Why's that?”

“You'll see.”

I left the mess hall and followed the main hallway to the front door. I looked in the small peep-hole to see what awaited outside. Five police cars were lined up, the hired wielders of power and authority in riot gear with their guns raised, waiting. I withdrew from the small porthole and turned around. Aurora stood at the entrance to the hall, smiling.

“They were asking for you,” she said. “Don't you see, James? There is something real happening here, something you don't want to be missing.”

The last phrase she spoke, ‘something you don't want to be missing’ held in it the lure for my curiosity, a small piece of candy being offered to a child.

“Do I have a choice?”

“You always have a choice.”

She walked back into the hallway and turned a corner, leaving me in the lavish parlor to make my choice. The ideas turned back and forth in my head, the scale teetering from one to another. The two paths before me loomed: the entrance to the hall, or the door.

I was confused as to why the police outside hadn't knocked on the door. I was pretty sure that police had to first request compliance before resorting to force. And what did they want me for? The door led to a life hindered by the promise of arrest, trial, incarceration, maybe the possibility of parole? What then? What would become of the profile I'd constructed and the assets I had obtained? Confiscated by the state to pay for a crime I didn't know, leaving me once again at the bottom of the barrel, this time with a brand on my record, reducing me to a permanent fixture in the shadows of civilization.

Aurora and the hall she'd left through represented a questionable future, ideas I didn't fully believe in, and a requirement of change. There was a promise of stability, however. The hall had no clear answers and no visible end. It was as it seemed: convoluted, mysterious, and bare. Void of movement and sound, yet leading to every room in the house.

Was it my second chance? The one that people say you only get once? I looked through the small peep hole again, glancing down the open, welcoming hallway. Choice was an illusion.

I walked down the hall to the cell assigned to me and sat on my bed. I looked down at my brown pants, following the seams and miniature texture of the fabric, thinking. A new atmosphere had settled down on me from the time I walked away from the front door to my room. It felt as though a new, sweet scent had washed in with an unexpected current of air, the

same way when a window is opened in winter time. Even so, it seemed like a small step in a direction I didn't know.

In the following days, I began my induction and training. I learned about the routine that was maintained for "New People" in training, which began at 8:00 AM for community breakfast, followed by instructional lessons that ranged from social reformation to basic self-improvement. I was taught, along with all the other New People that we would lead a new way, that we would help bring equilibrium and peace to the world and that after our training we would receive our Placement, or position within the organization.

I grew strong in the outdoor gym located in an abandoned greenhouse behind the mansion. There I trained under the command of Number 42, a tall, muscular man assigned especially to me by Aurora who told me he was Colombian. Somehow I was still wearing brown pants and sandals but I sat at the head table, had a private trainer, spent more time with Aurora than anyone else, was given anything I asked for. And no one questioned it.

As I headed back to my cell on my fifth night of training after community dinner, drained from the demand of the day's work, I spotted Aurora from the corner of my eye. She was tucked away in the shadows of the hall, but she watched me as I entered my cell for the night. Lay down. Close your eyes. Clear your head. Clear your head. Clear your head. Let sleep come. Let...It...Come.

## Chapter 10

I woke up to the sound of my alarm blaring out a pulsating, urgent screech. It was 8:00, Monday morning. Work started at 9. I slapped the sleep button and got out of bed, took a shower, shaved, and got dressed before I tore out of my penthouse and dashed into the slowly closing elevator by 8:30. A rushed moment in an elevator is enough to kill. I'm going to be late.

Then I thought, "Haven't I done this before?" I stopped for a second, the second I know that I've never taken and I think. I've done this before. Just like this, I've done it. The eerie feeling looms above me, like a bird of prey waiting to reveal itself from the clouds. And I have no choice but to move on. I have no choice but to see where it goes this time.

"Late again, Mr. Simmons."

"Sorry, sir. I've been incredibly busy these days."

"Not to worry, sir. I have it all under control."

"Sorry, Mr. Porter, I don't understand." Was I dreaming? I wondered what he was talking about.

"I've got it under control Mr. Simmons. The New People don't have a thing to worry about."

I got up and left feeling bewildered. Throughout the day I noticed every face looking at me, knowing me, and they knew something I didn't. Was my job the dream now? Or was my time at the mansion a suspended fantasy? The world spun around me, faces leering, withholding

the keys to the answers that lay inside of me, everything was hints and clues that weren't adding up. The key dangled just out of reach. I went about my day, paranoid about who was watching. At the end of the day, I went to pick up my check from Mr. Porter, and as he handed me my check, he whispered, "Not to worry, Mr. Simmons, I won't tell a soul. You're doing the right thing."

For the following days, I went to work, did nothing but stare at the computer screen, and picked up my check at the end of the day as if I were a temp. Robert didn't talk to me much. He was busy as ever and I assumed he was still butt-hurt about his last visit. Every night I returned home weary, confused, opening my apartment door to be greeted by an empty, silent darkness. A still room without a stir, save for the hum of the air conditioning and fridge. It was as if the appliances spoke in undertones behind my back, basking in the daylight while I still stood in the dusk.

I began noticing increasingly bizarre things throughout the day, people watching me intently, knowing winks and smiles popping up all over, as if the world knew me at work and in the street. Every morning was a waking dream, every night a hypnogogic hallucination, shaken by spilling buckets, crashing clocks, and falling glass spheres. By Friday, I'd started believing that Mr. Porter was part of the New Scientologists, that my fellow employees were somehow involved with the New Scientologists, and that the whole world was in on something behind my back. That night, I trudged home exhausted by over thinking, plagued by insomnia and cold sweat, confused about what was happening. I swung my apartment door open to greet the darkness and something was missing in the feeling of the room. It wasn't quite as empty and

barren. It felt...full. I flicked on the light and there, in the center of my living room, in my armchair, sat Aurora. Two men stood on either side of her, partially hidden in the shadows.

I stood still, disbelief arresting my movement. How? As always, a smile crept along her face while she observed me. My bewilderment quickly melted away and was replaced with anger as I attempted to take control of the situation.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“I’m here to set you free, James.” Her smile remained, but in her eyes tears slowly grew. She said it so quietly; so simply and subtly that I became concerned. Something was not right.

Before I could react, the two men grabbed me by the arms and, with surprising strength, strapped me into a metal chair with straps and buckles and stuffed a dishcloth into my mouth. Two uniformly spaced knocks sounded on my door, almost mechanically calculated.

Aurora’s face changed from slightly saddened to anxious and concerned. “Hurry!” She whispered frantically. I remember the way her eyes darted towards the door, pupils constricted, the muscles in her jaw taut.

One of the men turned away from me and returned with a large syringe holding a clear liquid. Not understanding what was happening, I pulled at the straps and tried to yell in protest while the other man held me down. The knocks grew louder. The man with the syringe swabbed my arm and stuck the needle into my right bicep.

As the needle slid out, a sickening horror overwhelmed me. I couldn't begin to guess what I'd been injected with. The knocks on the door became insistent, banging almost to the beat of my heart, which was slowing. I looked up into the face of Aurora, who was frantically triumphant. Her emotions seemed split, I could not tell if she was scared or happy. If she was a

friend or stranger. Her expressions were wobbling from one to another, almost comically. I tried to ask what was going on, but the words got lost somewhere in the ball of cloth I forgot was in my mouth. Everything slowed. I felt weaker with each passing second. The man who had been holding me unstrapped the leather restraints as I witnessed my entire field of vision dripping away into a whiteness that blanked out all else. The lethargy took over me, and I escaped the world through a ripping cyclone of dripping colors; clutched tight in the arms of a man whose name I still did not know. Jostled through a blind white world. Eyelids slowly closing. My last glimpse was of Aurora running alongside, face worried.

## Chapter 11

I hear the sound of heart monitors beeping, a soft whisper of breath on my face.

The familiar silken voice straining to be silent. “Wake up.”

My eyes opened, her face coming into focus. I wasn’t waiting for answers.

“What just happened?” Energy flowed back as I took in my surroundings. I was back in the room in Aurora's house with a heart rate monitor taped to my chest, which I ripped off. “Tell me now.”

Aurora, who had stood up in the midst of my rage, looked at me intently, trying to gauge something. “You need to rest,” she said quietly.

“What the fuck just happened? Why were you in my apartment?” I could feel the blood rushing into my head.

She looked at me sadly. “I’m trying to help you, James. I’m trying to save you.” A tear fell down her cheek. “I don't want to lose you.”

I asked her what she was talking about.

“You don't remember me, James?”

“No, I don't. Should I know you from somewhere?”

“Two months ago, James, remember we met at Mansion? You don't remember six hours, fifty-two minutes? House music?”

The truth was that I often went to Mansion, got drunk, did lots of cocaine, took Valium, and there were lots of girls who came home with me. It made sense not to remember one or two of them. Hazel eyes were my favorite, of course. They reminded me of my mother. “There are a lot of different girls who I’ve met there,” I said finally.

“I’m too late,” Aurora said, sitting down in a nearby chair. “Lucidity suggests whatever it wants to suggest. It works itself into everyone it can, and now the country is not run by people. It’s being run by a parasite, a being with its own cognizance, whose only goal is to have more power. It’s clouded your mind and made you forget,” she said.

“Remind me.” I said, interested in knowing what she thought I was forgetting.

“I met your friend, Robert. There was a man getting beat up under a poster, and Robert made a joke about walking alone in Miami. You took me home. After we made love, you told me that you felt like you were on a roller-coaster between here and there. I remember you said ‘there is a machine that multiplies meaning inside my worldly frame.’ That’s how I knew you were resisting it.”

It was as if tightly bound ropes were being undone and slipped away from my memories. I closed my eyes, and remembered. I remembered the truth of my memories, I remembered without the shroud of Lucidity. I relaxed, and I began reliving my memories, bathing in each moment, each experience, each conversation. And I began to remember a distinct strangeness. Something eerily off-center. As I remembered the people I had talked to, done things with, I became aware of a separate entity in their faces. Slowly, this entity became embodied as a blue, ghostlike figure clouding their true form, skewing their image slightly, taking control. It wasn’t

the robber knocking the back of my head. It wasn't my boss firing me. It wasn't my parents raising me; it wasn't my teachers teaching me. It was Lucidity. I opened my eyes.

"Now do you see?" she asked.

I saw, and I didn't want to believe, but it was true. Aurora's stare was different, now there was a soft longing, a beautiful sorrow that overwhelmed me.

I noticed that it was not only my memory that was becoming clearer, but so was the room I was in. The blank, Spartan walls dripped away to reveal rosy red walls. The floor transformed from a gray concrete to a stained wood floor, and Aurora's face struck me as one of the most beautiful sights in the world. Everything I'd once believed was now different. It was clear to me that the world had been a lie, that, here, in this moment, I had the gift of sight.

"Yes," I said, looking up at her. "Thank you."

Her face still looked like it was searching for more. For something else from me.

The rose-colored walls now had painted vines crawling and entwining themselves slowly, the last finishing touches on the world. Reality coming full-circle on itself. She was beautiful. I couldn't help but think of angels. But I didn't even know who my angel was.

She walked over to me from the door with a gait that was nothing like a leader, or a revolutionary, or a magical sorceress of a new world order. It was that of an ordinary woman, as she was, simple and humble. She reached the bedside and looked down into my eyes before she bent down and placed her lips on mine, kissing me with hope. In that moment, I didn't feel like I was kissing a stranger. I felt like I was kissing my wife.

All that had been hidden from me and denied all these years was rushing back, all I'd lost lifetimes ago was within my grasp and that was all that mattered. We lay together for some time,

and memories drifted into my mind. She stroked my hair. The void of time between us was not an illusion though. It stood between us, as real as the rose-colored walls.

Though I had memories of Aurora and I being together, only fragments remained. I strained to remember more completely what had happened since we were together, but nothing filled the gaps.

“Tell me about us.” I said.

Her hazel eyes flecked with gold looked into mine, piercing. She took a deep breath and propped herself up with her elbow. “We met around the time you were in college. Your parents had passed away, but no one knew about it because you were always happy, friends with everyone.” Her eyes drifted off to the corner of the room and then returned. “I didn't really care for you, but you picked me. At first, I was doubtful about how genuine you were because I knew about Lucidity, and I knew you didn't. But for a while, I saw that you were mostly unaffected by the drug and you saw things as they were rather than the way most people saw them. Over time, I watched you drift away from the truth and into the shroud of Lucidity. You got accepted to Oxford to study business on full scholarship. We kept in touch. When you got back, you found me still there, waiting for you. Waiting because I knew, I guess, what was really under the shroud. I loved you, and I guess that's what made me wait. When you got your job with Mr. Porter, though, you were too busy with your work. I tried to forget about you, but, when I saw you at Mansion, I couldn't pass up the chance to be with you again.”

It sounded crazy to me, most definitely. But there was a deep sense of honesty in her voice, comfort in her arms, and safety in her home. It felt like I finally arrived home with my clothes torn and my heart heavy, skin calloused and rough. It felt like I only knew what it was to

carry heavy weight with a tight stomach, to continue despite the costs. It felt wonderful to not have to fight any more. It was beautiful to lay in her arms. I could not think of what to say. I felt the pull of guilt, pain, regret, and disillusionment in my chest going in all directions. I didn't know where to begin, so I said the first words that came to mind. "I'm sorry," I said, as I did the second thing I wanted to communicate what words could not. Kiss her. As I did, I remembered the familiar taste of her lips.

Over the next two months, Aurora told me the more intimate workings of the New Scientologists. Her final plan was to start a food distribution company that would distribute doses of her antidote in food. Just as with Lucidity, the antidote had no level of toxicity and once effective in the body, additional amounts of it had no further effect on the person. The food distribution company would utilize a strong marketing scheme that would entice those particularly under the influence of Lucidity.

Though Aurora was able to find members of the New Scientologists to work in the company, she also had to employ those who were still drugged. The employment of those still under the control of Lucidity posed several risks of detection and discovery which were trivial in comparison to alternative plans of action. The company would be called J.A. Food Distribution Incorporated and cost a good portion of the savings of the New Scientologists in order to start. Aurora and I found a series of warehouses a few miles outside the city limits of Lincoln, Nebraska where we could establish the company's headquarters.

The idea was to offer faster, less expensive delivery of food to fast food chains, grocery stores, and restaurants. Our main concern was that if all the companies we targeted began buying

all their food from us, someone would notice. Somewhere, someone would look at bank statements or shipping logs and see JA Food Distribution Inc. all over the page.

If anything went wrong with our plan, we would be regarded as mentally ill people obsessed with a conspiracy theory who were distributing an illegal substance indiscriminately through the means of food. As a precaution for the worst, Aurora and I would carry two things at all times: a small transmitter and a capsule of arsenic. The transmitters we carried were linked to our pulses. If one of our hearts stopped beating, the transmitter would emit a signal to the other, alerting the receiver of the carrier's death. The arsenic was to ensure a quick and painless death if in fact we were discovered.

When the time to implement our plan had come, I was feeling feelings I had long buried, a deeper intimacy, kindness, and generosity towards Aurora. I had moved from my own bedroom into Aurora's. We often talked for hours into the night, till each of us fell asleep in each other's arms, too exhausted to say another word. This act often reminded me of a memory far off in the distant eighth grade, where I'd talk to my girlfriend on the phone late at night, oftentimes falling asleep on the phone with her.

It was a memory I looked upon with a fond smile, a piece of childhood that had been long lost to the desert of the past. The past, to me, has always been like a desert; bare, with few features other than cacti and brush, prickly and dry. No water, hardly any food, no way to sustain myself. There was no way for me to sustain myself on memory until I was given the antidote by Aurora.

I became increasingly concerned that either Aurora or I would not survive through this war of consciousness. I was even more worried that I might lose the one person that mattered most to me again.

When I sat down on my bed at noon during the three days before we left to Nebraska, I could sense the world outside thriving, moving, changing, screaming with life. In the stillness of the day, with the sun pouring through the small rectangular window, I thought about where I'd been and where I was going. I sat and wished I believed in a God as I wondered if and when I would die.

I liked running through the New People's exercise of Remembering. Because as I remembered, as I reflected upon the past, upon my desert, I made sense of the present. Like Number 42 had told me once when I laid on the ground after a workout, exhausted, "There can be no Life without Death. It is in one that we find the other, a never-ending cycle that is self-perpetuating and often forgotten."

In the confusion and convoluted nature of the recent events, I had become so infused in the world of the New Scientologists that I hardly knew myself, or what I was doing. I ran on Autopilot. Beneath the conditioned shell of emotions and ideologies I had been given, I constantly battled uncertainty. And in this state of mind, I was presented with still more worries. What about Me? What was I getting out of giving my life to this cause? Was there something that I never had a chance to consider as an alternative to joining Aurora's mission? I felt like every event, every word another person said, through every hand gesture, every song, every kiss, every moment while making love, every car ride, purchase, and smile were signs leading to something. I could only see it as my death.

I could feel it approaching like Lucidity over my shoulder. I knew I was headed for a suicide mission, and, although I was not fully committed, I didn't fully question or admit it until one morning that I woke up from a nightmare, gasping for breath.

In the dream, I had seen Aurora standing in an open field not far from me. She looked as beautiful as the day she gave me the antidote for Lucidity, practically glowing. Then she blew me a kiss and smiled. Suddenly, the grass wilted and quickly gave way to gray dust. Aurora continued to smile. Confused, I asked her what happened to the field. She told me that it was the work of Lucidity and that the wasteland was freedom. "Only death is free," she said, laughing. Two dogs bounded from the dustclouds and jumped at my throat. "Sleep well, my love."

The days following the dream, I felt suspicious of the house, as if I'd been unaware of a greater truth. I wondered where Aurora might keep secrets if she had any. I'd been to almost every room in the house many times by now, except for the room in which I saw Aurora be reborn. I'd only been there that one time.

When I found the time to go in, it was completely empty. Silence hung over the room like the cobwebs that draped the corners. Once inside, there was a distinct spiritual feeling that began filling my chest, an energy that spread from my lungs into my blood. I was looking for something, but I didn't know what. Clues for information I hadn't been told, a source of concrete honesty that might have helped me understand the things I didn't.

From the doorway, I took in the circular nature of the room, the light filtering down onto the desk, the chair I'd sat in on my last visit, trying to decide where to look first. I decided on the desk first. Under the desk, I only found dust. Two of the drawers were empty. In the other two, I

found three ballpoint pens, an ink calibration page from a printer with the words “Breathe cured” scribbled on the back, and a small hammer.

I thought about the words “Breathe cured.” I didn't understand what they meant, nor did I know if they meant anything, so I kept looking. I decided to check the walls more closely. Starting from the doorway, I ran my fingers along every crevice, feeling for abnormalities in each wall. There were small imperfections, but nothing that stuck out. When I was almost back at the door, I found a small hole covered with very fine mesh. It looked a lot like a sprayer or spraying device of some sort. When I held my fingers over it, I could feel a very slight current of air coming from it. I got the hammer from the desk and began to carefully break away the wall around the hole. The hole was attached to a metal tube, which I began pulling out of the wall until it was haphazardly coiled on the floor by my feet and refused to budge further.

I knew that breaking down more of the wall would result in more noise and increase the likelihood of me being discovered, but I had to know. I began hammering at the wall, digging further to find what the tube was connected to. As I reached into the hole the size of my arm to pull out the small canister, I heard the click of the door handle. I looked up.

Aurora stood at the door. “What the fuck are you doing?”

The metal tubing was sprawled on the ground at my feet and chunks of drywall were scattered five feet in every direction. I could feel my body tensing, heart rising into my throat. I decided to act casual. “I was just trying to figure out what this thing was. Do you know what it is?”

Aurora closed the door and stood a foot away from me. I could almost feel her breath on my face. “Yes, I know what it is. Why do you want to know?”

“Just curious, that's all. The last time I was in this room, something pretty crazy happened. You know that. I just wanted to come in here and feel it again.” I said. Adrenaline spun through my body. I knew I'd done something wrong.

Aurora smiled and tilted her head to the side, the way parents do when they're about to explain something enchantingly simple to a confused child. “Did you ever wonder what the antidote for Lucidity was?”

“It's medicine,” I said, shrugging, “it stops the action of Lucidity in the brain.”

“Right, but did you ever think about *how*?”

“No, but I'd like to know that now,” I said, crossing my arms.

“I've done my own little bit of chemistry work,” Aurora said. “the antidote is my own psychedelic creation. It blocks the receptors in the brain that Lucidity acts on. It's long-acting and pretty versatile. For example, I can fill the air with it. It's what keeps everyone here safe from Lucidity. You've built tolerance to it quickly, as most people do.”

Another psychedelic? Moments with Aurora that seemed so impossibly real like her change from an old woman into a glowing version of herself, sudden credibility, and the transformation of my bare room now had an explanation. It was a fancy bit of magic that Aurora was using to encourage her ideas. I began to wonder if Lucidity was a real drug after all. There were still questions that she'd never answered. I didn't know how she got into my apartment, how I woke up in my apartment some days and in Aurora's house on others. There was too much left unanswered and too many things Aurora told me that I took for granted as the truth. “I think it's strange that you're doing exactly what you say the government is doing. You're drugging people to make them see your version of the truth.”

“No, I'm doing the opposite,” Aurora said, crossing her arms. “I'm freeing people so they can see for themselves, I'm giving them the cure for this epidemic. People deserve to be free from the slavery of this society.”

“Okay, well then answer me this,” I said, “how many of the people that you've freed have left this house?”

Aurora paused. “No one,” she said, looking down at my feet. “Yet,” she added, looking back at me with determination set in her eyes.

“Yet? When did you think they would?”

Her eyes lit up. “When the world is free again. When people are able to see clearly and live in harmony. When Lucidity is gone, people will see past class and consumerism, they'll understand that we're all in this together, we're all equal.”

“I hope that you're right, but you'll have to do it without me,” I said. “I've got to go back home.”

“Why?” she asked. “Don't you see things more clearly now? Doesn't it all make sense?”

“I want to believe that your antidote will solve this world's problems, but right now I don't know what world you're saving. Is it a world that's actually under the influence of a drug called Lucidity, or is it a world that's suffering from the consequences of human imperfection?”

“Lucidity is real, James.” Aurora looked me in the eye. “If you go, I don't think I'll ever see you again,” she said.

I realized that I'd never made my own conscious decision about what I believed. “You said that I always have a choice. I have to know for myself what's true and what isn't.”

“You always have a choice, but every choice you make has consequences. If you really want to leave, don't come back if you change your mind,” she said. “I can't do this again. I'll have my driver take you.”

## Chapter 12

On the way back to downtown Miami, I watched as the sun set into a collage of pastel orange, pink, and red hues that dimmed until they became a shade of deep purple that enveloped the sky and repressed the light of the stars. I didn't know where I would work next, what I would believe, or what I would do, but I knew that it was going to be different. It was going to be my choice.

I walked back to my apartment through the downtown streets at night. Stray newspapers tumbled in the currents whipping between buildings, bums lay in bumpy rows on the sidewalk by closed convenience stores, protected by overhangs and hope. It was drab down here on the streets after business hours, I could see what commercialism and capitalism had done to keep up production. It's always at the cost of someone, Aurora and her drugs had emphasized that. When I entered my apartment it was much the way I remembered, although the air was stale and musty. The city, when viewed from the penthouse window, looked enchanted. Even the dull orange street lights didn't seem to cast as dirty a glow from up there. I had no need for Valium to sleep.

I pulled the blanket of darkness closer, up to my chin so that the only thing between me and my thrumming heart was an idea that couldn't be compared to loneliness. It was the awareness of this small space in universal time, of the events in this space that sent me searching for a version of myself that made sense. There was a mystery that didn't need to be touched or solved, an understanding that even though these events didn't all make sense at that moment, I

would find a home of thought and action. Being lost had been home for so long, and I could feel that I was finally going to find my way.