

# The Night of Enitharmon's Joy



Evan Forman

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By Evan Forman

*From 10,000 Dawns: Poor Man's Iliad*

Once upon a time there was an invisible boy who saw the world sideways. Nobody really knows how he was made to be invisible - *almost* nobody - but one story goes that the boy was offered runner beans by a witch with a silver tongue, who promised the beans were magic and would make him grow up to be a very famous athlete. (She was, of course, lying: the beans were legumes.) The boy snatched them out of her hand and ate them, and in the night they passed right through his stomach and took root in the bones of his shins, and as he slept and dreamed of gold medals they sprouted inbetween his bones and grew. When he was woken up by the howl of the wind, he looked down and saw that he now had little bronze wings on his feet, and he was cursed to run - sideways - forever. No one saw the boy again, and no one bothered to notice how fast he was going till one otherwise miserable afternoon when Lucy Walpole - aged nine and three fifths - caught the now-grown man running on the wire fence beside her mother's car.

She leaned against the seatbelt that cut into her neck so she could see the speedometer. Her mother was driving at precisely eighty miles an hour, and the man outside the window never once slowed down - except when the fences ended and he fell down to the pine trees in the distance, then leapt up onto rusting electricity pylons and got back "up" to the road on the old and precarious wires - so Lucy deducted that the man must be running at about eighty miles per hour too. This was all very interesting to Mr. Bear, who sat beside her in his seatbelt on top of some books: *The Neverending Story* and an illustrated encyclopedia about the country's wildlife. In the seat in front of Lucy, her mother quietly listened to the radio as she drove across the sunny green wilderness. Every now and then Lucy's wandering gaze would land, accidentally, on the front passenger's seat where a small-ish cardboard box labelled "Will" sat in a seatbelt of its own. The box had been taped shut.

She didn't pay attention to the program on the radio, in which the news presenter had been grilling a PR person from Talinata Softworks for the past few miles.

— Blah blah blah, said the interviewer. Blah blah regulations blah blah addiction blah stories of babies in Korea starving as their parents blah blah for days at a time blah blah, serious psychological blah.

— Well, said the other voice, we have had one or two edge cases where people with existing mental or emotional problems-

— And how many people do you think that is? The interviewer interrupted.

— ...did abuse the devices, but multiple studies have found no evidence whatsoever that they're inherently addictive. There have been rumblings from special-interest groups about restricting the kinds of experiences customers are allowed to have, and that gets to the core

philosophical issue: any utopia, fundamentally, has to be all things to all people. At Talinata Softworks we believe human beings have infinite potential, and infinite potential demands infinite possibility, and the only way to achieve that is a totally unregulated-

— Boring, replied the interviewer, icy behind her professional veneer. Boring boring boring boring boring-

— Mum, could you change the radio? Lucy asked.

— I *am* fully voice-controllable, Ms. Walpole, said the radio. Is there anything in particular you'd like to listen to?

There was something unlivable about the region. Lucy liked that, she felt like she was crossing the hazy border to a magical kingdom, and that today was the beginning of a great adventure. When she and her mother left their hotel very early in the morning, the city sloped down from skyscrapers to suburbs, from trim front gardens to its derelict and industrial border; a moat of flat land yet to be used, empty but for long grass, craters of mud, and the rippling shadows of predator drones. The sun had risen over Development Opportunities™ but peaked above a place where cities - which were foreign plants - could never grow. They'd long since passed the point where anyone else might be living. These roads once ferried tourists and hillwalkers through the primordial valleys, but the tar made from tree fossils was crumbling now: the earth would rebury them all one day. It was, however, very beautiful, and it exceeded all of Lucy's fantasies about what it might be like out here: far, far away from the real world. (Strains of the *Lord of The Rings* soundtrack swelled in her head. If she was alone, she thought, she might have cried.)

The moving man and his moving robot waited outside Newton House with a lunchbox and a battery pack. Sitting in the back of their open lorry, they watched the huge white clouds churn over the landscape and listened to the wind brushing through the trees, chattering birds across the lake and the breaking of hand-pressed crisp sandwiches.

— Is that them? asked the man, pointing to a light blue dot rolling down the hill in the distance.

The robot looked up from the battery in their lap and zoomed in on the horizon.

— That is the client's car, yes, it should be another four minutes and twelve seconds before she arrives.

— Good. The man took another bite from his sandwich and washed it down with some biting fizzy Reissue Moray Cup. Here, what kind of name is 'Ophelia Walpole'?

— That is an astute and humorous observation, David, replied the robot. If you'd like a more personalised response may I recommend the region-specific Workplace Banter DLC, unlockable at the reduced price of fifteen credits?

Ophelia Walpole unfurled out of the car first: a silky column of vantablack fabric and hair, hidden behind circular sunglasses without arms or a bridge that covered most of her icy pale face.

— Is the middle of summer no too hot for a black turtleneck hen? laughed the gammon-faced man as he walked over, his worn-down work boots crunching on the white gravel.

— No. Ophelia replied.

— Christ... the man walked around the sleek American car. Is that a *steering wheel*?

— Yes, it's vintage. Obviously. She glanced at the robot. No offence.

The robot had been programmed not to notice.

Lucy bombed down onto the gravel and shut the door, holding Mr. Bear to her chest. She wore dungarees and a loose tshirt covered in animated sunflowers. She looked up at the imposing geometric building - internationally acclaimed when it was finished - and sighed.

— I thought this was going to be like a massive gothic castle! She moaned. It looks like something out of a catalogue!

— It was a precedent-setting triumph of posthuman style at the time, dear, her mother offered.

— I demand to speak to the architect!

— There is no architect Lucy, said Ophelia, very quietly sighing at the house's pyramidal outcrops and dodecahedral growths. The house "evolved" like an organism in a virtual world where the laws of physics are different from ours, using hexagons as the base shape instead of squares, then the AI took factors like latitude, wind speed, altitude and sunlight hours into account as it algorithmically generated a few thousand designs for your granddad to choose from, of which he chose - she opened her arms out and flared out her wrists - this! It's nicer on the inside, go and have a look around. Lucy sprinted off towards the front door and smiled as it blossomed open for her with an ancient creaking. Pick a bedroom! Ophelia shouted. And if you go in the garden don't go past the fence!

— Why not!? Lucy stopped and turned back, shielding her eyes from the sunshine.

— Why do you think there are no other humans for miles around?

— Because grandad's robots still patrol for miles around?

— Because there's a big scary monster in the forest, Lucy, and he eats anyone who goes past the fence.

— oooOOOOOkay! Lucy chimed as she and Mr. Bear explored the house. The vestibule opened up on one side to the domal living room, where a massive glass window made it seem like a "corner" was missing from the wall and roof, like a giant had taken a bite. Lucy craned her neck to look up at the angular stalactites hanging from the roof which she'd been told would gradually light up as the evening encroached. She passed the large spiral staircase in the centre of the house and walked around to the bare white kitchen, where all the counters and fittings had been made to look like low-poly structures that rose naturally out of the floor, with a cave-mouth entrance at the far end leading to a cloistered and windowless dining room.

Beside the foot of the staircase there was a table, one that looked like an alcove in a cave wall with a little LED light at its roof. Atop a thin layer of dust where the cleaner drone couldn't reach there was a little picture. Lucy stood on her tiptoes to get a closer look: it was a slightly corrupted image from the olden days - perhaps the twenty-three-hundreds - of a young girl and two men sitting on the doorstep of what looked like a little cottage. Lucy reached over and pressed her finger on the glass, and after a moment's posing the girl excitedly ran behind the camera. The man in a wool jumper rested his head on the shoulder of the man smoking a pipe, and Lucy tried to read his lips as he shouted something over at his daughter. She pressed further.

There was a haptic click as the glass receded from its frame slightly, then Lucy was startled by the sound of laughter.

She spun around, and the slightly faded image of the girl was standing there, giggling and bending down with her hands clasped between her knees.

— Your laugh sounds just like mine! Lucy exclaimed, trying keep things close to a whisper.

The girl with a gap between her front teeth smiled and shook her head, looking at the picture frame then running away through the kitchen, then through the door. Lucy followed, shutting the door behind her as the girl stopped on the grass and threw her arms open at something far behind her. She fizzled and warped as she beckoned.

— You're not supposed to go this far away from the picture, can you understand me? Lucy cautioned. You'll go out of range!

The girl seemed to look at Lucy as she walked backwards to the end of the garden. She stood still, crouching as if she were about to rugby tackle her.

— No, come back! You can't-

The girl buzzed out of coherence as she darted through the locked gate. Lucy could just about see her waving before she vanished, a sliver of static moving further into the trees like a wisp.

— Keep an eye out, said Lucy to Mr. Bear, as she set him down facing the house. She took a breath and cracked her fingers, that's generally what people in the holograms did before something this silly. She looked for some kind of touch-identification that would deactivate electrified steel, eliminating potential threats till she prodded the rusty chickenwire grid with a stick.

She heaved the stiff old latch up and pulled the gate open, gave herself a blister, and walked up to the very edge of the two worlds: the threshold where a lawnmower bot's immaculate jurisdiction ended and a shadowy overgrowth began. Lucy realised that every forest she'd ever been to was more or less made for humans: was regularly trimmed around the childproof playparks and signposted trails. How long had it been since anyone stepped over this line? How many decades since anyone had breathed within a mile of this place? Lucy closed her eyes, lifted a foot, and leaned over into the other side.

She grinned, then looked back to see that her mother wasn't at the window; once sure, she turned and faced the forest. There was no clear path to guide her, no designated landmarks or subtle volume of light; that there was a gate didn't mean there was an entrance. Her heart raced as she took a little step forward, then another, each more thrilling and transgressive than the last. A few more steps and the grass would be up to her chest, and that's when ***THE TENTACLE*** would drag her away for sure. She tried to see as far into the knotty green darkness as she could, half-expecting - half-hoping - to see malevolent emerald eyes snap open in the void, see them wink as the gate slammed shut behind her and never opened again.

Nothing.

She carefully walked backwards, never taking her eyes off what might have been there as she locked the gate again, making sure she didn't leave a trace of interference. She wiped her hands diligently on her dungarees, picked up Mr. Bear and ran back to the house. Out of excitement - of course - not in fear. Because there was nothing to be scared of in the forest. As the night closed in, she looked out to the teal-skied black world beyond the kitchen window and thought about just how much there was nothing to be scared of in the forest, and how nothing had seen her open the gate that afternoon, and nothing had slithered through an opening it had dug beneath the fragile wire fence and crept towards the light of the kitchen and watched her mother 3D-print a chinese meal for dinner. They ate watching holograms, and Lucy tried to ignore the silent pressure of the outside and reassure herself that the geometry of the house was quite tall and steep, such that nothing could climb up and look in the windows, not even a forest creature come to intrude on a little girl's world the way she had rudely done so on his. She thought about her little encyclopedia: about the legend of a mad wizard who fled here in the time of King Arthur, and the news stories of reclusive terrorists who made their camps in the wilderness.

In any case, there was nothing reclining by the skylight and listening to the conversation between the girl and the woman who looked just like her, which is recorded below:

The Girl:

Why is it called Newton House?

The Woman:

Because I used to be Ophelia Newton before I married your dad.

Girl Newton:

Is it nice living here?

Ophelia Newton(!):

It's very pretty. A bit solitary, but there's nothing wrong with that.

Girl:

Can we go up the mountains tomorrow? The weather says it'll be nice.

Ophelia:

Not tomorrow. I've still got to work, and you have your appointment tomorrow anyway.

Girl:

Oh yeah. [Pause.] How long are we going to be here?

Ophelia:

I don't know, the summer holidays at least. We'll see.

Girl:

What about after? Are we not going back home?

Ophelia:

Home is wherever we want it to be.

Girl:

What about Anna?

Ophelia:

You can still talk to your friends whenever you like. [She gestures towards the glowing white stage in the middle of the room, where a trick of the light makes it look like two swordsmen are duelling inbetween some clifftop ruins.] You'll be fine.

The Girl is visibly about to say something, but doesn't. That night, she squirms in a troubled sleep. Her window is left open a crack, but only a crack: narrow enough that nothing can creep in. Nothing but the wind opens her wardrobe door by a hair, and night in the country is so black that nothing could read the name "Lucy Walpole" on the label of a coat.

— There's nothing to be worried about. She'll just talk to you for about an hour then you won't see her again.

Cars raced past as Ophelia fixed Lucy's black hair outside the building.

— I'm excited, the chipper girl said.

— Why?

— It's meant to be helpful, isn't it?

— Yes, if you're mental, Ophelia tsked. There's nothing wrong with you, don't be stupid.

They stepped out of the elevator into the plush quiet lobby. Ophelia put her hands on her daughter's shoulders and gently squeezed.

— Just tell her what we talked about last night, okay? I'll be outside.

The psychologist's office was on the twenty-third floor, with one wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling window (transparency tuned down to 90%) that overlooked the city's glass helix towers and post-everything cathedrals to Mammon and Moloch, built on a scum of exposed brick and broken windows below. The office had a misremembered art deco theme, and was very gently non-human;; AI had been trained in celebrity rehab to design for comfort and brand-recognition style based on relevant consumer profiling. Deep in its neural networks the sick had been deemed: aspirational.

Dr. Oliwia Zofia was as much a corporate touchpoint as anything else in the building: tall, phrenologically perfect by design, and faintly golden. She did not *literally* sweat money, but cryptobiotics were illegal in this country. She sat cross-legged with a heavy gold-tipped pen and spun cursive on a pad of fresh-pressed artisanal paper.

— Mhhmm. And how are you settling in to your new home?

— Well it's not my home, Lucy protested, trying to rest her arms on a chair which made her feel small. It's granma's [sic] house, technically, we're just living there for a while.

— Don't you feel comfortable there?

— No. My actual house is back down south, all my friends live there. Usually we go outside all summer but my friend Anna's on a cruise till August, so. I suppose it doesn't matter where I am just now.

— Do you have lots of friends back home?

— Not... really. I don't fit in too well. Most people think I'm a bit strange.

— Can you give me an example?

Lucy paused and thought for a moment.

— Okay, so like two years ago everyone was playing in the playground at school like usual, but the corner bit I usually hung around at had loads of these weird shiny little black flies crawling around the wall in almost like circles or these sort of, um, interlocking spiral patterns? I thought it was really weird and a bit scary in a cool way so I told some other people and they came and started kicking the flies into the wall and they just left these little bright red splotches on the white paint. So I went to the prefects so they could make everyone stop but they told me the flies were the servants of the devil and that I should just let them get stamped on. I then told the prefects that actually *they* were the servants of the devil and I got one of the little flies on my finger, I think somebody had just missed him, and I made a little ball with my hands and ran away from the playground. There was the stone playground which wasn't that big, but then all around that there was a massive grass bit. So I took him all the way to the fence by the road. I don't remember if it was wet or not, if it was then I wasn't allowed on the grass but I don't remember anyone else being on the grass. There was some lucky clovers at the bottom of the fence, so I made a little hospital out of them for the fly, whose name was George, then I went back to see if I could save any more of them. But when I got back here was just these circles of red dots all over the wall, like something out of a horror film, and the playground was empty because everyone was lined up at the door waiting to get back into class. Then, at the end of that summer, we went back to school and we'd moved up to the Primary 6 and 7's playground and in my first ten seconds of being there this boy shouted to his friend 'oh my god!', and he pointed at me and said, 'she's the one that talks to the flies!'

Dr. Zofia didn't look up from her notes.

— Why did you want to save the flies?

— Because they're only small, and the prefects are all older Primary 7s. And it seemed important.

— What seemed important?

— The pattern they made on the wall.

— What do you think it meant?

— I don't know, she trailed off, considering it.

— Are you usually this talkative? She scribbled. Not that I'm complaining.

— Umm. It depends.



— On what?

— I don't know, but the reason I'm here is to talk to you. So...

— That's a very good attitude to have Lucy. She paused. Are you comfortable talking about what happened, then?

—

— If you'd like to hold off until another session, that's completely fine. You seem like an intelligent and attentive girl. If you've heard that counselling is expensive and you don't want to be a burden on your mother, then you needn't worry about that. Centro's taking care of everything in your case. Our priority is making sure that you're well.

— Okay.

— That's good. It's a cliché, I know, but talking about it *does* help. Have you spoken about your dad much to anyone?

Lucy shook her head, staring at a spot on the carpet.

— Why don't you? She leaned forward a little.

— Well.

Lucy sighed.

— It makes me... m- She gulped and started breathing heavier.

Dr. Zofia pushed a box of tissues across the little glass table separating them.

— There's nothing wrong with letting it out, she said.

Lucy squeezed her palms to her temples for a few seconds, forming a tent with her fingers, then pressed her hands against her eyes as her breath quivered.

— There is. She compressed one nostril at the side with her finger and inhaled the mucus back up. After about twenty seconds she wiped her eyes with the sleeve of the coat she'd declined to take off, and tried to breathe regularly.

— Where did you get that idea, Lucy?

— There just *is*. She bunched up her lips and looked down at her knees.

— Do you want to change the subject?

Lucy nodded. Dr. Zofia unspooled her paper pad and skimmed her notes, giving the girl a minute to recover herself.

— How have things been with your family and friends recently, in general?

— Not good.

— In what way?

— I have one real friend and she lives hundreds of miles away and I'm probably not going to see her for months.

— What do you mean when you say 'real friend'?

— People at school lie to me all the time and say they're my friend so they can make fun of me. Well, they used to.

— What do they lie to you about?

— Lots of things. They'll say there are burglars on the roof of the school or something and they'll point and I'll look and all of them will play along until Anna tells me they're joking.

Dr. Zofia paused for a moment to write that down.

— Did they stop? Or did you not make friends with those kinds of people anymore?

— I don't make friends with anyone. I'm fine on my own. Lots of people at school just won't stop talking in class and at playtime they just sit and talk more. But sometimes Anna's off ill or she's got a doctor's appointment or something, so I just play with myself by the fence.

— Do you play by yourself often? Dr. Zofia asked, having only microscopically raised her eyebrows.

— Well there's nobody else around for miles, so yeah.

— And what do you like to do on your own? Do you have stuffed toys or dolls you talk to?

— Mostly I just kind of... make up stories.

— Do you write the stories down, or draw them?

— No. Just... say the words. Do what the people do. Sometimes I draw people from my dreams but I mostly just keep it all saved in my head.

— Could you not get your mum to play with you sometimes? Pretend games are usually more fun with two people.

— No. I used to ask, one time we played video games and it was nice, but she's always busy working. I used to play on the multiplayer modes and play with people all over the world but we haven't got internet set up for the new house yet.

— How is your relationship with your mum, anyway?

— Fine, Lucy nodded.

— Are you sure? Said Ophelia's mother, feeling the magnets click as she gently closed the rhombic wood door behind her.

— Mhmm, mumbled Ophelia, sat on her bed with some classical literature (Alan Dean Foster's *Shadowkeep*) and noise-cancelling earphones buried so deep they hurt.

— Good, good. She crept forward, dragging a chair from below a little desk to the side of the girl's bed. Do you like that Baby Isabella doll I got you?

— Yeah. Her throat went dry, pausing her music before taking out an earphone.

— Can you take out those out while I'm talking to you? It's extremely rude.

— Sorry, Ophelia winced as she quickly pulled out the second one.

— Good. Can I see Isabella?

Ophelia looked around her room.

— I don't know where she is. I haven't seen her in ages.

Ophelia's mother scanned the room, exaggeratedly peering over her shoulder and under the bed, even patting herself down and turning out her pockets.

— Nope. I can't see her either! She smiled a bit and sighed. But you know... if

something *did* happen to her, you could always tell me. See last time I saw her I thought she looked a bit dirty and I just want to put her in the wash for a bit, if that's okay.

— Ophelia was leaning away from her with a hand behind her back, clenching her fist around the fabric of the duvet. Well, she repeated. I haven't seen her.

— Not anywhere? When was the last time you did see her?

— A few days ago, I think. Over there like usual. She nodded at the basket of toys in the far corner of the room.

Ophelia's mother looked down at her, still.

— What? The girl muttered.

— If something happened to her, you *can* tell me, sweetie. Ophelia told her body not to recoil as her mother stroked the side of her face. You can tell me anything. If you did something, I won't be mad. Promise.

Something grew heavy and dead in Ophelia's chest.

— Okay. She shuffled off her bed and towards the cupboard, catching her mother's stare in the mirror as she slid the door open. She stepped into the dark, reaching through the veil of clothes until she hit cool, deformed plastic. She hesitated, for a moment, then took the doll out from its hiding place and held it to her chest as she walked back over to the bed and sat far back against the wall.

Her mother took the doll and turned it over in her hands, inspecting the scrapes across the baby's pale lips (frozen open in demand for a bottle) and the crater where its bulbous head caved in and a glass eye had popped out of its socket.

— How *did* this happen? She cooed, magnanimously.

— I stood on her by accident, said Ophelia, looking just-to-the-right of her mother's eyes, at the little white stars painted on the roof.

— Then what about the scrapes? This doll was brand new just a few weeks ago. The dent in her face isn't the right shape for- she pounced and took Ophelia's foot and pressed the hole onto it like a shoe — look at that, Cinderella. See? It's all wrong. Now. She let go. Stop lying. Tell me what happened.

— Well.

Said Ophelia.

— I got... angry.

— And why did you take it out on the doll!? Look! She tossed the hard plastic thing back at Ophelia. Do you have any idea- no of course you don't know how much that fucking thing cost because you're a stupid unappreciative little shit aren't you!? Why are you crying!?

— Because you're angry.

— YES OF COURSE I'M ANGRY BUT WHAT DOES LITTLE OPHELIA DO WHEN SHE'S ANGRY? She smacked Ophelia on the side of the head, SEE? IS THAT ALRIGHT? Smack again she grabbed Ophelia by the shoulders as she tried to get away — Come here! Come and bring your doll and we'll tell your dad just what you- Ophelia screamed more as she fell onto the floor burning the skin on her elbows against the carpet — Oh GET UP FOR FUCK'S

Ophelia stood up as the psychologist's door clicked open, impulsively pinching the skin on her folded arms.

— How are you, dear? She asked.

— Fine, Lucy stated. She smiled.

Dr. Zofia answered Ophelia's glance.

— Well Mrs. Walpole, you've got a very bright wee girl on your hands here. She chuckled slightly and handed over a business card. Nothing out of the ordinary, so unless you *want* to book another appointment, which we could see to promptly, I don't think we need to follow up on this..

— Thank you. Ophelia took the card. I'll be sure to phone if anything comes up.

Lunchtime in the city, people from offices walked into rustic, homely, empty cafés, grabbed their food and didn't acknowledge the AI shopkeeper charging their accounts when they left, chatting 'finance' and 'my business instincts' as they passed Lucy and her mother.

— What questions did she ask you?

— Lucy was looking at two girls with bright hair holding hands across the street as she spoke. Um, stuff like how I got on with my friends and what school is like, and what it's like moving here.

— Did she ask about us?

— Yeah, I just said we were fine.

— Was she nice?

— Yeah, she was telling me about when her mum died and how she coped and stuff like that.

Ophelia tutted quietly as they left the busy street and headed towards a little food stall in the park.

— She isn't *that* nice, Lucy, not really. She's Centro.

— What does that mean? The girl's cheerful demeanour started to fade.

— They're only pretending to care about you because they think you're intelligent, and they need intelligent people to make them money. Humans are evolved to pick berries and huddle around campfires, we're not built for all this. She gestured at the glass towers. In the

beginning of the twenty-first century the world started spinning so fast it broke everybody's brains. Centro would rather not have to clean up after themselves, not for free, but they learned the hard way that's just unsustainable. When you're around eighteen they might come to you with a job offer, suited to whatever talents they think you have.

— Did that happen to you? Lucy asked.

— No. I know a few people that were... vetted, though.

— But *you're* really clever.

— I didn't do well in the test they gave you when you were six. I did terribly at school in general, but still, look at me now.

— The IQ test? She smiled and perked up a little. The one I got a hundred and f-

— Yes, the one you cheated on.

— No I didn't!

— You did, you told me. The teacher said to put everything under your tables but your folder was clear plastic so you were able to see your worksheet, remember? You looked at the answers.

— Yeah for like one question! Lucy's hand hung limply from her mother's now, fighting the urge to retract into her coat.

— D'you want to get some ice cream for the car?

— Yeah.

She scraped the last of the melty pink goo from her cup and rested her head against the backseat window, turning to watch children play together in parks and big gardens they passed in silence. Outside the city, a road sign stood like a gnarled iron flag that read "NOW LEAVING I". For all the horror stories she'd been told, she did enjoy the fantasy of this wilderness beyond the car window. She liked the idea of undiscovered countries, and ancient ruins; the untouched landscape and fossil-white alien skyscrapers that stood at the horizon: most of the actual turbines and blades fell off centuries ago.

Ophelia sighed as she shut the door.

— Right. You're not hungry, are you?

— Not really, said Lucy, her stomach only slightly gurgling.

— Good. Pardon my French but *mère a shitloads de travail à fair* and barely enough time to do it.

— The only word of that I understood was the bad one.

Ophelia laughed as she placed her bag on a table in the living room.

— Anyway, dinner in an hour-ish?

— Yeah.

— Okay. The TV channels should all be working now, so. I'll be down about six.

— Hurry up! Lucy shouted as she ran through the collapsing ruins of the castle, chasing after a smooth and razor-edged spaceship which was about to take off in the centre of the courtyard. The whole island's about to sink!

— Lucy! Said someone not from this story.

Lucy stopped and looked at them for a second, then turned back to the beautiful Princess

Uris, who was still untying ropes from her delicate wrists.

— You go on ahead, I'll be right behind you.

— Do you know who I am!?! She threw the rope to the floor. You're a peasant girl from some backwoods cottage playing at knighthood! Who are you to order me around like-

The castle shook more urgently.

— The portal's about to close, go! Lucy commanded.

The princess looked at the knight and hesitated, then fled through the stone corridor towards the light of the castle's entrance.

Lucy watched her run away, and when she was safe she walked over to the being that had spoken. She stood tall and imposing in the neutered garden between the house and the forest, wearing a fragrant crown of every local flower and only faintly covered by a green veil; she admired the way the setting sun glanced off the white-hot edges of heathery purple clouds, how its light shone on the muddy face of her favourite daughter.

— It's overwhelmingly beautiful, isn't it? Remarked the red-haired queen of the abundant world. Do you know why they call this "magic hour"?

— No? Lucy lowered her sword and stepped forward.

— There's a folk etymology about celluloid, but the connotations are more revealing. Before the word "God" arrived, like a plague, you worshipped the sun through sweat and song because Light was all you had. Dusk is when the colours of nature 'came fit to burst, when the sun was closest to the land and what you call "Heaven" closest to Earth. This is when weary hunters feasted before the little death of sleep, and it's when the shaman would perform her rituals. You remember this, just as you remember that tigers are dangerous even if you've never seen one. It's instinctual, this beauty was in you before you were born. She turned back to the horizon, binding her warm fingers in Lucy's ruffled hair. How much paint do you think has been spilled trying to capture this moment we share? How many trees' worth of novels or novelettes have been wasted trying to condense this world into mere language?

— I don't know, said Lucy. But look! She pointed her wooden sword at some rocks in the corner of the garden. The Dark Emperor is getting away with the quantrachronoliser!

— He can wait, she smiled, not taking her eyes off the radiant vista. Come here, enjoy this.

Lucy looked and tried to see.

— Soon you will be old enough that your brain will close up, and you will be led to believe you are just one person, that you do not hold landscapes inside you, or that my world is any more than delightful sensations you can take or leave as you please.

— What do you mean? You're confusing me.

— How could I confuse you Lucy? You're imagining me. How could you have spun me out of your daydreams if you did not understand them yourself?

— I... don't...

— Look out, love.

Lucy spun around and caught sight of the knight in black armour charging towards her. She exaggeratedly dived out of the way and landed on a sharp stone.

She was alone in the garden, cradling the bleeding scar just below her elbow. Tears were welling up in her eyes but she wiped them away and started sniffing anything back. She walked the steps back onto the large patio and into the house, scanned the kitchen shelves for a first aid kit but quickly gave up.

— Mum! She shouted when she got to the second floor, noticing the office door was closed.

She reached up to the handle with her non-bloody hand.

— Mum? Mum... Mum!

— What? Sighed the woman at the next table over, moaning through half a muffin.

— I need to pee! The boy demanded loudly.

— Okay, see the bathroom over there?

— No.

— It's right there, she pointed.

— I can't SEE IT, the boy whined every drawn-out syllable.

— Do you *still* need me to come with you? At your age?

He nodded, eyes welling up.

— Right.

She got in one last bite, gave her friend sitting across from her A Look, then took the child's wrist and set off towards the toilet in a passive-aggressive rush past Ophelia, who was leaning forward and staring wide-eyed at the table with two fingers dug into her temple.

— I can really see what you meant about the *atmosphere* of the place, her companion raised his eyebrows. He was leaning back with his tanned, muscular arms folded over a cable-knit jumper with the sleeves rolled up. His father was English and his mother Norwegian, but he'd been born and raised in Venice, and had smuggled Mediterranean sea breeze in his tousled dark hair and sun in his daft smile.

Ophelia rolled her eyes, taking them off of him for maybe the third time that hour.

— The thing with cute cafés - she expounded, sitting up straight and interlocking her fingers on the table - is you have to get in there when they've *just* opened up, like, before all the trendy mums hear about it and bring their... she gestured with her wrist like she was smoking, smoking would look *good* on her, maybe she should start smoking ...tumours along with them.

— Tumours? He snorted, ducking and resting his face on his fist like he was ashamed to laugh.

— An egg is a malignant parasite, yes: tumours. She couldn't keep a little smile from one corner of her mouth.

— You're savage Ophelia Newton, he grinned, leaning forward onto the little table.

— You get what you pay for.

— Oh so that's what this is, he nodded at the table. I have your attention as long as I'm plying you with coffee and cake?

— Mhmm. She nodded sweetly.

— Well, he leaned back and threw his hands up, I can't say they didn't warn me about you.

She let her mouth hang open.

— Who the *hell* is warning you about me?

He paused, and put a curled finger to his widening lips in thought.

— The male half of first-year philosophy.

She kicked him under the table.

Outside under the stars, Ophelia hung onto his arm and didn't notice the disparity between his cutting-edge CentroCom 3 and the CentroCom 12s being advertised on screens all around.

— Kirsten's shitposting up and down the uni group chat again, he sighed. Has your phone not been buzzing all night?

— I switched mine off when I left the house.

— It's nearly ten, doesn't your mum start texting about now?

— Oh no! Ophelia gasped and pulled her phone out, stabbing the clear glass sheet with her thumb. My phone must have run out of battery just after I left! She sighed and shrugged. Welp. Fucked it. Can't walk home on my own without a working phone now can I?

He started quickly pressing buttons on his own.

— You could use mine and just phone to tell her, look, he shoved the phone in front of her eyes, you can just say her name in here and it'll search-

She pushed the phone away from her face, laughing before she heard a crack on the pavement.

— Oh, fuck! She clasped her hands around her mouth.

— It's fine-

— Oh shit sorry, her eyes widened as she counted the pieces of his phone on the ground. Um, oh, god, right... she was about to bend down and try and pick them up but he put his sturdy hands on her shoulders.

— Hey, Ophelia, calm down...

(He was, she had just found out, the only person who could say that to her and have it actually work.)

— ...I can get it replaced tomorrow. The thing with the 3 is it does everything on the cloud, so the device itself is basically worthless.

— It's nine-hundred credits! Her cheeks were red and her eyes glistening a little.

— It's fine. It's on a guarantee anyway. Okay?

She swallowed and tried to get a hold of her breathing. He kissed her head when she nodded, put an arm around her shoulder and started walking down the cobbled street again.

— You're cute when you cry.

She elbowed him gently.

— I was wondering when you'd stop that, he laughed.

— Stop what?

— The whole 'all-black cool-as-fuck ice queen' thing you've had going on this whole time. We've been going out for like, three weeks? Ish? And we've known each other two months, and until now you haven't copped to an emotion other than boredom or ennui.



— What’s *‘ennui’*? Ophelia asked, shaking her head exasperatedly.

— That’s French. He nodded. For boredom.

Her quivering breath burst into nervous laughter for a few seconds, before she tried to compose herself again.

— What *is* that shiteating grin you’re pulling?

— You’re cute when you laugh, is all.

— Fuck *off!*

— You’re fucking adorable.

— I am not “adorable”! She put on a haughty, regal pantomime. William Walpole! I am ethereal! And mysterious! And I shall be recognised as such! So be silen

White. Default to startup screen for a millisecond: TALINATA SYSTEMS. “TURN ON, TUNE IN, DROP OUT”. Black.

— Mum? Mum... Mum!

Ophelia grabbed the headset and pulled it off from her eyes, adjusted to the light, spotted the girl who’d pulled the plug.

— Lucy what the FUCK ARE YOU DOING IN HERE?!

— Why are you wearing-

— GET OUT!

— My arm’s-

Ophelia shot up out of her leather chair, grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and push-walked her out of the office, slamming the door between them. She smacked her back against the wood and slid down into a ball on the floor, her fingernails digging into her balled fists.

— Where’s the first aid kit? Said a little voice from the other side.

— In the cupboard next to the dish towels.

The faintest shuffle of shoes against the carpet.

— Lucy? Lucy? She asked insistently, testing the acoustics.

She noticed something: the box labelled “Will”, which had been opened while she was in the headset. She’d heard about “drifting”, a phenomenon of full-immersion VR where the user gets lost in their own head, a phantasmagorical montage of memory and free-association. There

are two ways to get someone out of the spiral, either drastically shutting off the device they're using (the existential equivalent of tearing out a USB drive without ejecting it, with all the psychological risks that implies) or the use of immersion-breaking "dementos", which sometimes occur naturally: objects triggering memories of a real world left behind or a future yet to come. She wondered about the objects in the box: handwritten letters, little photographs and holiday postcards they'd sent themselves.

Lucy was gone.

Very still, almost calm, Ophelia raised a fist in front of her face and slowly brought it to the bridge of her nose. She extended it out again, then punched. And punched again. Again. Headbutting into it. Again. Harder. Again. She burst.

Barrage of fists against the skull she exploded out of her ball her coward-impulse fists opening up hammering her forehead no nobody's going to see your legs lay into the tender bruises she held her hands to her face trying to block out the light she breathed and breathed and four seconds in

One

Two

Three

Four

OUT

One

Two

Three PUNCH

SEE THAT DESK? SEE THAT MASSIVE FUCKING WOODEN DESK JUST- She straightened herself out and, like a dippy bird with a death wish, smacked her forehead off the edge of the desk with a crack, laughing a little as she tried to regain her balance, cradling her skull with one hand and checking to see if her brain had burst on the mahogany. No? Ugh.

Breathe out. Breathe in.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Out.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Beep.

Beep.

Beeeeeeep as the machine clicked open and Lucy pulled out the little pizza. She took it over to the table and sat down with her tall glass of cola as the hologram played: some garbage she'd found leafing through the "sci-fi" section, a curly-haired man with a glowing hot sword held a scrap computer part in front of him, gesturing threateningly as people in obvious rubber fish-men costumes crept up from all directions.

— I'm not telling you again fellas, said the man. If you don't take the next rainbow-bridge back to whereverthefuck right now you're gonna find out the hard way what this thing's capable of!

The bottom half of the metal chunk shook and fell at his feet with a clatter.

— When we get to the pearly gates I'm telling them it wisny my idea to pick a fight with a nest of adaro! Shouted the pretty black girl with her back to him, wearing a cool leather bomber jacket and pulling on a futuristic bow and arrow.

Lucy was nearly sleeping on the sofa when her mother leaned over her shoulder smelling of shower gel.

— Cupboard next to the dish towels yeah?

Lucy nodded without taking her eyes off the hologram.

That night, Lucy lay awake in bed looking up at the little white stars on her roof that glowed in the dark. She'd been passing in and out of sleep for some time. She sniffled very quietly and tried to avoid the cold and crispy bits of her blanket where she'd been wiping her tears.

— Can you see it? Said a muffled voice, which came from nowhere. It sounded as if Lucy was underwater, and someone was trying to talk to her from above the surface.

— See what? Lucy whispered.

She turned around, still hiding under her blanket. A young woman in a gray coat with a red scarf in her lap sat in a leather chair facing her in the middle of the room.

— Yes, I can see it, said the woman, her eyes firmly shut.

— Hello? Lucy sat up.

The woman opened her eyes.

— Hello Lucy, she said. She smiled. Don't be scared, I'm only a dream.

— Why are you here? Lucy's voice shivered as she wiped tears and sleep from her eyes.

The woman, after some preparation, leaned forward in her chair, elbows on her knees.

— Because I have it on pretty good authority - and authority is rarely good - that this is probably the loneliest you've ever felt in your life. Is that right?

Lucy was quiet for a moment, then nodded.

— You feel like there's nothing you can possibly do to stop this, like this is how your life's going to be forever, and you're so... she looked up at the realistic stars painted on the low roof...unthinkably far away from anyone who could ever understand you, let alone possibly even help you. Right?

— How do you know?

— Because when *I* was little, thousands of years ago, I felt just the same as you do. One awful night of many awful nights, lying awake and hoping and praying that the world would stop trying to kill me. But I got better. And you're going to get better. Promise. It's just going to take a little while longer.

— How? How did you get better?

The woman's hypnotic benevolence faded as she glanced up at the wall, uncertain, listening intently.

— Mh hm M hm Mhmmhmm MmmMmm, said the wall.

The woman turned back to Lucy.

— I left. It was scary. I've... fought gods and monsters, Lucy. I've rescued people from honeytrap dream-worlds and nightmares that broke out into the day. I've seen houses blown up by the *fear* of falling bombs and had kids sleepwalk out of burning buildings. I You know how you and every other bookish child wants to live in your favourite fantasy kingdoms? I've been there-

— Which one?

— All of 'em! She swiped the air in front of her.

— What were they like!? She whispered excitedly.

— Temperate.

— Temperate!? Lucy narrowed her eyes at the woman.

— Really gray and muddy, yeah. Bit white; food's never great. You need vaccinated up to your eyeballs but, she shrugged, it's cool the first few times. And life's so *slow* there, it's such a nice change from work.

— What's your job?

— Euuuhh, she sucked in air through her teeth. Foster care.

— The children's home!? Her eyes widened.

— Nah, no, god no. More like... she tapped her fingers on the arms of the chair. Worlds. She nodded. Worlds almost forgotten and never-quite-built, characters in search of authors, that sort of thing.

— Are you a superhero?

— *Yes*. The woman leaned forward. And that's why it's important to remember, she pointed at Lucy, that *leaving* that house, was the scariest thing I've ever done.

— Where did you go?

— Well... I lived in the country too, see, so I spent the first night under some trees. It was quite nice, actually. Cold and scary and beautiful, in a way. I felt free for the first time in a long, long time. She glanced back up at the wall for a few seconds, then nodded. Anyway, I should be going now.

— Stay a bit longer. Lucy sat up in her bed.

— I would if I could, but I can't. I suppose I just, wanted you to know...

She hesitated, then shot forward and wrapped Lucy up in her arms.

— I just wanted to tell you you're getting out of here. Your mother is going through something terrible but none of it is your fault, none of it is ever your fault. Ever. You're going to get out of here, and there are lots of people who love you dearly waiting on the other side. Okay?

The woman pulled back, tears about to burst from her shining eyes.

— Are you okay? Lucy looked concerned.

— Yeah. I'm better now.

She stood up, composed herself, and sat back down in her chair.

— Okay, I'm done here, she said. She sniffled and glanced back at Lucy. Any last questions? Quick-fire round.

— Who are you?

— A... friendly ghost.

— Are you coming back?

She paused.

— You'll know where to find me. She gave a little roguish smile, nodded to some unseen agency and vanished in a bright bubble of time-distortion and slow-moving sparks of anti-entropy.

Lucy threw her blanket off and stood in the centre of the warp, which had faded back into stability. She waved her arm through the cloud of nothing and walked back and forth over the

portal's circumference. She didn't feel a thing, not even the eerie chill she'd heard about on ghost-hunting documentaries.

She looked around the dark of her room: the mirror that seemed joined to the window, the boxes of clothes and books, the mess of toys on the floor that led to her boots and her backpack. She thought about the woman in the gray coat and the red scarf and she wanted to be like her. She thought about how she'd run away, how she spent a night under the trees and the stars. She knew what to do.

She packed a torch, some clothes, some books and Mr. Bear. She looked out her angled bedroom window and thought that if she'd been prepared for this she could creep across the roof and slide into the back garden where it sloped right down to the ground. Holding her wellies under one arm, she spent two full minutes glacially pulling her rhombic bedroom door open and letting it close without a sound. She had read in a book somewhere that stairs don't creak if you stand on the very backs of them with your feet along the length of each step, so she crept down to the kitchen sideways. She opened the fridge a crack, keeping her body close so it covered up most of the light shining out. With supplies from all the major food groups (chocolate, crisps, yoghurt, juice) she put her wellies on, unlocked the back door, breathed out properly for the first time in minutes, and stepped out into the void.

There were no obstructions down the middle of the garden, and she didn't want the light of her torch to be seen from a window, so she carefully picked her way across the moonless dark with a hand stretched out in front of her. She jumped as her skin touched cool damp metal wire, then felt for the rusty handle which, having been broken before, now slid open with dreamlike ease.

Prophetically, there was no mechanism by which Lucy could close this gate behind her once she had opened it.

A few steps into the long grass, Lucy switched on her torch and followed the pale light deeper into the wilderness. The idea was to head west, since she would reach the coast by morning and find a town somewhere on the ragged edge of the world. (Anna's dad had once told her what he claimed was the truth about the terrorist cells camped out here: vegans, actually.) Her eyes adjusted to the dark, and what was once black was now blue like the moon had come out above the trees, but it hadn't, and the wind that hissed through the branches faded to eerie stillness. Lucy glanced over her shoulder at every turn.

— But why would I follow you when you're coming straight towards me? She thought, to her own surprise.

She turned and looked where she was going, which was somewhere beyond the other side of this forest she'd been walking through for...

...oh, she'd forgotten her watch. It didn't matter what time it was, fear kept her awake. It slowed her down, too. There was a constant voice in her head that told her she could just turn back now and be safely home. But home wasn't safe anymore, so she chose the unknown.

Everything was silent now, except for the slow and regular pace of her own footsteps. Little “duf” noises on the virgin forest floor. Duf. Duf. Snap of a twig she felt break beneath her foot. She thought about what might be out here, remembered the horror stories she’d been taught in school of degenerate tribes and hungry communists. And thought about the measures her grandfather had installed: patrol drones with thermal vision, and packs of guard dogs ready to swarm on any intruders.

Duf. Duf. Snap of a twig. But she didn’t feel anything underfoot. She turned around, and there it was: The Monster.

When she’d heard the term “guard dog” in these stories, she’d expected fur. And flesh. At least a head. She didn’t move. She thought it was like a dinosaur and that it wouldn’t see her if she wasn’t moving.

— State your name and purpose, the machine intoned in a dark electronic growl. It took another step towards her, machinery absolutely silent, just the sound of a metal hoof digging into the mud.

— My name is Lucy Walpole, she trembled.

An array of red lights spun in the centre of its flat black face.

— Newton! I’m Lucy Newton! I’m Eliezer Newton’s granddaughter, I’m allowed to be here!

— Eliezer Newton has no granddaughter.

— He never met me but, I... oh, tears welled up in her eyes. You have to believe me, take- she held out her hand. Take a DNA sample or something I’m his granddaughter! Ophelia Newton lives in this house now this is my property, you’re- you’re on my property you, she straightened up and pointed, you *are* my property!

— Eliezer Newton has no grandchildren, “Lucy Newton” is not registered for safe passage, you do not have security clearance. As per the regulations set out in the Centro Systems Inc. Private Defence Bill of 2294, your annihilation is hereby authorised.

— Ophelia Newton! Lucy cried. Ophelia Newton is his daughter and she owns this house now!

The machine was quiet for a moment, the red lights on its face danced slowly in thought.

— Eliezer Newton has no daughter.

The machine spread its hooves out, making room as a hatch flopped down and a large gun extended out and stiffened in sections from its underside.

— No! Stop! Lucy hid behind a tree but the machine didn't move for a clear line of sight. She knew, as she heard its insides whir and warm up, that it could easily penetrate the thick trunk. She closed her eyes squeezing out tears, and dropped to the ground with her hands over her ears.

Lucy didn't see or hear anything for the next twenty-ish seconds, only feeling a couple of vibrations as something thrashed against the ground, and she screeched when something slammed into the tree. She opened an eye, then took a hand off her ear. She crept up onto her knees and slowly peered around the pine trunk. She'd dropped her torch on the other side, in front of where the robot stood, and it lit the scene: a metal and plastic leg, and three scars of upturned mud that cleaved a tunnel through the bushes in the direction of Newton House.

She almost swore, quietly, for the first time, but she was too scared to breathe. She picked up her torch, after a while, and very quietly walked on.

Was it daytime now?

The forest floor glowed beneath yellow sunbeams, but Lucy hadn't noticed morning light at any point. This walk had been long, and the air felt warm but she felt no more tired than she had been when she left her house around eleven at night. Why...

She was hungry, and exhausted now that sheer survival panic was fading, so she sat down beneath a tree and was in the middle of a bar of chocolate when she noticed the dry, bristly moss she was sitting on, it reminded her of train set foliage from a big toy shop she'd been to once. Moss is usually wet and soft, isn't it? And the rock was a bit... she knocked on it experimentally. Plastic.

“SHADRACH WOZ HERE” had been carved into a tree across from her. But nobody lived out in the country anymore. Lucy traced the ~~route back from whence she came of course it was silly~~ ~~Lucy you had to come home at some point you could still go home like nothing happened just~~ ~~hide your~~ scars in the bark, cut through the old rot exposing the smooth But no, right, nobody lives far away from civilisation except for criminals on the run or those mental people you see on documentaries who Just behind her she heard a rustle in the foliage. She looked, and the huge robot guard dog was there again. It was twitching in something like pain. It had been folded into a swan. In the dark beyond,



# SNAP.

Lucy dropped everything and sprinted, screaming. There was a noise coming behind her coming closer, footsteps that got louder with the wind, the whole forest bathed red like her eyes were bleeding, her heart trying to punch out of her chest and her legs refusing to listen to her empty lungs. In her ears a woman's clear, English accent like a TV presenter or a robot enunciated:

— Origami. Schadenfreude.

1. *The donor tests the hero (D<sub>1</sub>) Remember you'll see yourself onscreen. This will be a new way of viewing the memory The rewriting of reality and history.*

*XII. THE HERO IS TESTED, INTERROGATED, ATTACKED ETC. WHICH PREPARES THE WAY FOR HIS RECEIVING EITHER A MAGICAL AGENT OR A HELPER (Definition: the first function of the donor. Designation: D.)*

*What is the line between mental illness and the apple tree, the river and the stove offer a very simple meal (113). A witch proposes bedding down with her daughter (171). A dragon suggests the raising of a heavy stone (128). Sometimes this request is written on the stone, and other times brothers, upon finding a big stone, try to lift it themselves.*

*Understanding of the nature of memory and belief and is also the proposed mechanism through which all magic works.*

1. *Close your eyes and relax.*
2. *You are about to rewatch the footage of the memory that led to the sign ↑ designates the route of the hero, regardless of whether he is a seeker or not. In certain tales a spatial transference of the hero is absent. The entire action takes place in one location. Sometimes, on the contrary, departure is intensified, assuming the character of flight.*

*Content warning. If at any point you need to you can simply float away from your body and come back up here, where we can watch you watching the film from the back of the theatre Offering of seemingly simplistic points which are in fact of profound insight (i.e., again, discordianism) and the willed Departure here denotes something different from the temporary absence element designated earlier by hallucination and creation of thoughtforms and, in effect any sound, but instead there will be music.*

*Is this a defence of escapist fiction?*

*Serve as a ferryman for three years, without completing the process. Ready? Full-on technicolour now, played back from the beginning and viewed from the inside. Go!*

Lucy jumped over a stream and ran towards a fallen tree. She felt cold breath at her back and with insane animal impulse she dived beneath the heavy old thing, scrambled up from the leaves and looked back and saw fingers wedged under the trunk and a yellow eye as big as she was look on and narrow as she ran away.

— Primordially.

## SHADRACH

### *2. The donor greets and interrogates the hero (D<sub>2</sub>)*

*The soundtrack will be ridiculous, so pick something from a TV programme which sounds inherently silly. Rudy Huxtable is able to spend three nights beside his grave.*

*You are sitting at the back of a theatre You could picture a real one you you've been to before, with a belief that things are in a chaotic flux, an expectation that change can and will occur and the ability to accept the changes as they occur.*

*Forest knights propose that the world is so scary and beautiful and*

## *XI. THE HERO LEAVES HOME*

*Maybe.*

*Interrogation assumes the character of an indirect test. If the hero answers rudely he receives nothing, but if he responds politely he is rewarded with a steed, a sabre and so on the little brass peasant is held captive and asks to be freed (125). A devil sits in a tower and begs a soldier to free him (236) A jug fished out of five paragraphs of material.*

*In a story so dominated by opposition and parallel, imagination and delusion? The form may be considered as a weakened form of testing. Greeting and interrogation are also present in the trigger again. What's different now? Is gone?*

*Life) (115). The hero is supposed to Escapism. The phobic response you have. However, this film won't be projected normally.*

*A feeling of power overcomes you. Exaggerate this and notice how it feels, let your body grow*

*familiar. This is how you will feel when you rewatch the footage of the memory. Practise a form of retro-chronal magic through the practises of storytelling, game-playing: lakean Tricks of The Mind. Ready? Start the music. Go!*

The forest turned like a kaleidoscope and bits of scenery repeated themselves. Lucy didn't know what direction she was running but away from the monster, which she couldn't hear anymore. Her body was collapsing, and drips of sweat ran down with her frightened tears as she turned and backed up against a tree. She could see the trail of disturbance she'd made, lit up by a pale green aurora in the sky that made all the trees below look black. Something roared behind her, and she shot off the way she'd come: over the untouched ground.

*The danger with going to Faerie was always that you'd never come back out.*

— Nomad. Monad.

*3. A dying or deceased person requests the rending of a service. "Eat not of my meat, but gather up my bones, tie them in a kerchief, bury them in the garden and forget me not, but water them each morning" (100).*

*3. Before the film begins, picture yourself in a familiar situation in which you know you are safe, secure and powerful. Float up and out of your seat and descend into the still image of yourself on the screen. Should mirrors not be our way through the world?*

*You'll see everything, but it'll look quite small and far away. The picture quality will also be rather blurry, like a TV programme from the '70s. There won't be forms mentioned above, but there they do not have the character of a test. Rather, they precede it. In the present case, however, direct testing is absent, and what if the amount of time Lucy is as being constantly in a state of flux beyond immediate awareness. Will play in reverse at maybe five times the regular speed, but this will be over very soon.. When you're back at the beginning, you can open your eyes.*

*The departures of seeker-heroes and victim-heroes are also different. The departures of the former group have search as a goal, while those of the latter mark the beginning of a journey without magic, reality is by its nature malleable.*

*(Definition: departure. Designation: ↑.)*

*This form also sometimes takes on the character of a test. A cow requests the following: this can be anything from making sensational lasagne and get it to spread into every nook and cranny of your body. Really weird thing you can think of. Let yourself feel the very comfortable, smug retro-chronal magic or changing past events. This is a skill peculiar to chaos magicians,*

*requiring a Benny Hill, The Muppets, Monty Python and so a witch proposes the guarding of a herd of mares (159) and so forth.*

*A new stonehenge in searches, on which various adventures await the hero. At the end it will freeze-frame according to principles - of which there are, in fact, barely any - of chaos. Water begs to be broken, i.e., the spirit within the jug asks for liberation. Viewing everything from that first-person perspective. The same music on tend to work very well for this.*

*Modern practitioners are experimenting with Forests are hidden places to get lost in, remember when you thought you'd found visionary genius?*

*4. On 'Go' you're going to start the film.*

*Can it be that easy?*

*It's an old silent film starring you, playing yourself. The film will tell the whole story of the memory in a vintage haze. A witch gives a girl household chores (102). The hero serves them for three years. The hero is to spend three years in the service of a merchant (a rationalisation from domestic but the route followed by the story and on which the action is developed is actually the route of the seeker. If, for example, a girl is driven out and there is no seeker, then the narrative is developed along the route of the victim hero.*

*In a minute you will watch the film again: backwards, at twice the speed, with you inside the action. But not yet.*

The forest turned like a kaleidoscope and bits of scenery repeated themselves. Lucy figured she had two seconds to pause and look around, everywhere she could go looked like everywhere she'd already been. Every muscle in her little body burned and an oily, viscous shadow with no shape was consuming the uniform trees, lit by a dreamy white glow from the distance behind her, whose source she couldn't reach no matter how long she chased it.

*Step into the body of your younger self so you look out of their eyes. Meet your younger self. Congratulate them for having been so brave, for having survived a traumatic experience.*

*In the machine is the amount of time most interesting and I or the character is the only one who sees it. It's hidden by hollow trees or magic books. People will take to read the story?*

*The practise of retro-chronal magic involves the shifting of the past by maintaining and embracing a sense of memory that is flexible and fluid and in turn allows for the recognition of reality.*

*Terry Pratchett described the process as “the zipper in the trousers of time”.*

# SHADRACH

— Brick-a-brack.

The forest turned like a kaleidoscope and bits of scenery repeated themselves. Lucy’s legs burned with overuse, and just as she felt like they might give out from under her, the world capsized. She was thrown onto the ground, and grasped for something to hold onto as she slid down the forest floor, rolled up a hill and landed hard on the side of a tree. She stood up on the rough bark and tried to get a sense of her bearings. The light in the distance seemed to move, or adjust and refocus but never quite come or go; casting rays through a fog striped by the horizontal trees. Behind her, a tree cracked and moaned as it bent below the beast that was perched on its side. If there were words to describe it, the girl had never had to learn them; she couldn’t tell if it was leading the solid wall of darkness that ate the forest, or if this was merely its head. The thing shrank into itself, shimmied from one side to another like a cat and jumped onto another tree, which immediately snapped. The beast fell through another tree, and was pelted with branches, stones and a waterfall of sticks and dead leaves from the ground as it gripped onto a ridge and dug its appendages into the mud. Its many eyes moved, as if unattached to its body, until all of them were looking at Lucy, and it began to scale the forest floor.

Lucy turned and looked at the skinny little tree ahead of her, and the gap she’d have to leap across, and the neverending drop below it. She ran up the tree and made the short jump onto one of the branches, figuring she could walk across the canopy. She crossed a few trees, then looked down to see the monster gaining on her.

*4. A prisoner begs for his freedom (D<sub>4</sub>)*

Somebody whistled. The sound came from above, and Lucy looked up to see some of the thin trees bend in a downwards procession, with thuds that got louder as something else approached her at great speed; something, or somebody, that nobody could see. *Almost nobody.*

*The theme of my childhood stories is remuneration (138). †*

The leaves next to her flew out from a point of impact, apart from two spots where they were held down by what Lucy assumed were feet.

— Is that you!? Her voice came out warped and in pieces through the strange atmosphere.

She lifted her arms as if she knew the rest of this, and clung to the invisible man as he lifted her up and leapt across the trees in strides. She peeped out from the nest of her arms and his chest as he sprinted through the sideways forest and watched stars fly beside them. The monster's roar was fading away, lost in the noise of the wind in her ears.

*The hero must listen to the playing of the gulsa without falling asleep (216).*

*The film will be played in a small rectangle in the centre of the screen, all the way over at the front of the theatre.*

The world turned again, and the man was back on his feet and on the ground, just walking now and only slightly out of breath. The exhausted girl could have fallen asleep in his arms, and he told her to just rest as he held her close. With her eyes half-open she could see the forest getting lighter, and she could see that she could see the man who carried her. There was barely a sound in the forest now, other than a very gentle buzzing noise, and the old familiar voice: his.

*Little projection room furthers machine as metaphor for stories.*

*Aden Park? It requires the practitioner to maintain a careless memory of how things used to be.*

*A similar request is made by the bull in tale No. 202. † † Another form of last wish is evident in tale No. 179. Here, a dying father instructs his sons.*

— Dad? Lucy murmured.

— Yes, love?

— What's the last thing you remember?

— You.

— How?

— You and your mum were the last thing I was thinking of, in the hospital. As far as I can remember, anyway.

— What happened? Did it hurt?

— Oh, no, no. He stroked her cheek. The car just... I wish I could tell you. Nobody knows how those things *think*, really. Not anymore. I was in the middle of writing an email on the drive

home so I didn't even know what was happening until it was over.

— What happened after that?

William chuckled and rested his chin on his daughter's head, remembering how she smelled like him, as he walked in no great hurry to the strange light beyond the trees.

— I don't know. It's difficult to explain.

— Am I dreaming right now Dad? The girl wondered, holding onto him tighter.

— When *aren't* you? He laughed, and nearly burst when he felt her giggle against his breast.

— Are you? She asked.

He sighed with some comfortable resignation.

— That *is* a very good question.

*5. Finished? Good. Keep that last image in your head.*

*6. Although this is the end of the film turn up the saturation on the colours, as you look out of your younger self's eyes.*

*7. Good. Open your eyes and see if that worked.*

— I think this is about as far away as we're going to get, Lucy. I know the way back, just get some sleep. It's time we got you back home.

— Nooooo, she complained playfully, opened her eyes and looked up to see the moulted hive of little black flies where her father's face had been.

Lucy screamed and kicked off the corpse that grinned with few remaining teeth. That she'd torn one of its ragged arms off when she threw her weight to the ground didn't stop both hands grasping. She sprinted towards the light and the buzzing grew more violent and insistent as flies emptied out of the charred corpse to eat the girl alive. She closed her eyes and ran straight ahead into the darkness, past the tickling sensations on her hands and skin and scalp and face and lips and nostrils and eyelids that was intent on drowning her, thick enough to slow her down so she could hear the strenuous pant of the dead thing trying to grab her just behind her and then as beams of solid white light flooded the insect fog: a piercing howl.

*And if someone is reading these directions to you, yet that very helpful someone know you've made it through to the end.*

— Emanation.

# SHADRACH

— Ow! Lucy smacked her forehead off the ground.

She scrambled up to her knees and turned and looked into the veil of trees behind her. Nothing. Not a sound, no more colours or lights. She collapsed to the ground againaching with exhaustion. She'd stumbled over an exposed root and landed on the edge of a clearing, which radiated a soft golden light in the middle of the dark forest.

— What happened!?! The girl whimpered to herself.

— You tripped.

No shock of adrenaline could have propelled her away when she looked up and saw a wolf standing on two legs above her; who wore a crown of pointy bones over a marvellous hooded cloak of red and brown feathers trimmed with blue and green at the bottom.

— Who... *what* are you? Lucy asked, trembling.

— The Wolf King smiled their razor smile and said you're not this cautious in your playtime dreaming.

— Why are you talking like that?

— The girl inquired, her countenance disheveled. She felt her head and winced, touching a scar.

— Stop that! The young girl demanded, and got up from the mess where she'd landed.

— While the Wolf King conceded he rhymed unimpeded in a way that was most underhanded.

She sighed.

— How can I help, dear?

— What *was* that thing?! She swiped mud and leaves off her coat.

— Oh, nothing, the Wolf King waved her bejewelled hand, pale skin almost glistening.

You're safe around me, little one. I promise you only this.

— But there's something in the forest, it took a patrol dog and just...

— Well you aren't in the forest anymore, child of Newton.

Lucy was quiet for a moment.

— How do you know who I am?

— This forest is thousands of years older than you or your home, and I am thousands of



years older than this forest. You're not the first little human girl to wonder about these woods, but you have wandered further than any anyone.

— I'm trying to get away. She said. From home.

— From Newton House?

Lucy nodded.

— Not an unsympathetic goal. But did you expect to get far without carrying any food?

— I did!

— You *did* expect to get far with-

— No you're not LISTENING! I did PACK THINGS! But I lost them when I got chased by the- the monster in the woods! Lucy stabbed towards the forest with her finger, angry tears forming in her eyes.

— Oooohhhhhh of course, The Monster. The Wolf King clapped her hands together and spun around on one foot, striding towards an ancient fallen trunk which rested against the curtain of trees.

— Was it you? Chasing me? Lucy asked.

— Why would you think that? They said, prowling up the trunk on four paws. I'm almost offended.

— I saw you, before. On the first day I moved here I opened the gate and looked into the woods and I saw these two really really bright green eyes staring back at me.

The Wolf King reclined upon the mossy tree, stroking his magnificent white beard as he looked down at the girl with two really really bright green eyes.

— It was me who saw you, yes, but I did not chase you. Why would I?

— To eat me. You're a wolf.

The Wolf King laughed like one of their hyena cousins.

— What wolf wears a crown and walks on two legs!?

— A magic one?

— Okay, it nodded. Getting warmer.

— Why don't you just tell me?

— Because you have survived that metal beast and a brush with 'Outside influence', you have come this far to seek an audience with the mighty Wolf King! A hero of such strength and bravery is not usually impoverished by intellect.

Lucy sighed.

— I didn't seek you out and you're not a king.

The Wolf King shot upright on four paws.

— By what meek human measure am I not king?!

— If you're a wolf king that means you're the king of the wolves, but there are no wolves. There haven't been wolves in the country since 1888 at the latest though officially the last one was killed in 1680 because James the sixth and first had you all hunted to extinction 'cause you kept killing sheep and digging up graves so just... *chill*, okay?

The Wolf King's voice took on a low growl.

— Look at the perils surrounding you, this place. The light from above faded and the

Wolf King unfurled into shadowy omnipresence, pulses of menacing energy circling in the dark around Lucy. An old god spares you from Shadrach's twisted dreams, from timeless and eternal living death, and you *dare* to question their authority with... unnaturally specific ecological trivia!?

— Yeah. Lucy muttered, about to burst into tears, quivering fists clenched inside her pulled-down sleeves. I read encyclopedias for fun. Don't fuck with me.

The Wolf King smiled his razor smile, showing off the yellow fangs beneath his wiry beard.

— An excellent display, Walpole child.

— Why are you calling me *that* now?

— Because I watched your grandfather choose the spot of Newton House, blissfully unaware of what psychogeological wound had been inflicted here or what malevolent cosmic drafts blew in through the crack. He was a scientist at heart; blessed with single vision, he could not see for looking, see?

Lucy thought for a moment.

— I think I do.

— Good! Good. Eight thousand years in these lands and I count on one hand those who took this visage to be true: the priests, and the madfolk, and you.

Lucy narrowed her eyes.

— So you're a *ghost*, then?

— What makes you think that? She purred.

— Nothing lives for eight thousand years. You only ever hear about ghosts from like Victorian times and that but who's to say you don't get caveman ghosts as well?

The Wolf King gasped in delight.

— So you *are* a caveperson ghost!? Lucy smiled.

— Something like that, yes. He shook his head. Congratulations.

— What do I win?

She threw her head back laughing, curls of glowing white hair bouncing in delight.

— I trade in magic, dreams and heresies, fantasies and nightmares, Lucy Walpole; I'm no Lady of the Lake waiting to dole out prizes to passing tourists. But... I suppose that's how these things work, isn't it? She put on a deep comic voice. The brave hero ventures into the belly of the beast having faced incredible danger, and receives a magical boon to help him on the quest to be reunited with his beautiful princess! She sighed and grinned wistfully. How is she, anyway?

— Who? Lucy asked plainly.

The Wolf King's eyes widened a little.

— No time for more of my riddles, let's discuss your reward.

The Wolf King held out her clawed hand - which might have been a furry claw with frayed black nails, or a human hand adorned with silver jewellery - and what looked like stardust coalesced into a solid shape. She closed his fist and hid the thing behind his back.

— How did you do that? Lucy asked.

— We aren't in your world anymore, Lucy Walpole. Haven't you learned a thing from all

your stories of magical kingdoms? You crossed that horizon *long* ago. Many things are possible in these domains, everything at once.

— What do you mean, ‘these domains’? Whose domains?

— I mean ten thousand suns that rise above ten thousand Earths, every possible world just one small fragment of a new infinity. The world of the Imagination is but one, and you know - more than most - that it pollinates much faster than your old, hard mundanity. I could fill a book with all the stories I could tell you of the faraway places, but... it would be about *this* thick, wouldn’t it?

The Wolf King took Lucy’s hand and placed something cool in her palm.

— In good time you will understand perfectly, he said. Be patient. The beginning is nigh.

Lucy opened her fingers to inspect the shining silver heart-shaped locket in her hand. She gasped very quietly at the object, which radiated magical possibility.

— What does it do?

— It opens up and there’s a wee picture inside.

— You know what I mean! Lucy scowled.

The Wolf King smiled her razor smile.

— You may return to these domains only once, when you need it most. Open the locket, you open the door.

— Right. Lucy looked down again at the locket, drawn to its elegant if occultish engravings.

Something churned in the void beyond the clearing.

— What was that? Lucy turned to face the dark and took a few steps back towards the Wolf King.

— In human terms, Shadrach is looking at this little universe and just because it doesn’t *need* to eat that doesn’t mean it won’t turn down a snack.

— What’s Shadrach? Asked Lucy, a little more assertive, as if she knew she was too young to be asking that sort of question. Naming the thing felt good.

— Would it satisfy you to know that it’s a primordial evil from before the beginning of time and beyond the reach of thought? A being of such unutterable terror that for me to explain the whole thing would surely drive you irretrievably mad? The Wolf King chuckled slyly.

— Ugh, the Wolf King rolled her eyes and sat on a rock beside the girl, lifting her crown to pull her hood down and setting her hands in her lap. So you know how this world is not the only world and there are countless parallel worlds where the laws of physics are different from yours or where history worked out differently or people have superpowers?

— Yeah. Lucy nodded. *Obviously*.

— Well they’re all separated from each other. Like bubbles, that would pop if they touched.

— That’s worse than *my* story! The Wolf King wagged his finger at her.

— That’s why nobody can travel between them, she continued. Shadrach is what keeps them apart, you know how nature needs to keep itself in balance, like...

— I’ve seen Star Wars, yes.

— Right. Shadrach is just a spooky-sounding name for the space between the universes. The Wolf King leaned over Lucy's shoulder and she could smell his hot ancient breath.

— Shadrach is also the name of the *thing* that lives there

— And it's trying to get out? Lucy turned to face him. Is that what the "wound" is? Like building a house on a burial ground? Shadrach turns things... wrong, it folded a robot dog into a swan and made the forest turn fake and sideways and... is that why this whole area is so... Lucy paused, holding her hands to her temples in heightening distress. She breathed, and returned her fists to her sides. How do we stop it?

— Your bravery is very charming, Walpole girl, the Wolf King smiled. But it has no interest in you or your world. We... She paused, with some caution. Shadrach attracts a certain type of person, through no fault of its own. Or theirs. And those people tend to try and bring others along with them. There was a tribe here once, long before anyone else was, and they tried to get into contact with Shadrach, and they did.

Lucy had seen the look on his face on a lot of adults, recently, and she had learned when to stop asking questions.

— We should get you home now. The Wolf King stepped in front of Lucy, cocking their snout and gesturing for her to climb on their back.

— And we're going to go through that stuff?

— The Imagination is so fertile because its seeds can cross the void faster than anything else. We can outrun him - the Wolf King took on a childish sing-song - as long as you believe!

— I can't *believe* you just said that.

— That's fine, fine! The Wolf King circled back and prepared a run-up into the shadows. The great thing about ideas is that they're true whether or not you believe in them.

Lucy clung to their coat of feathers, and jammed her eyes shut as they crossed over into the dark.

It wasn't that effective a strategy, Ophelia found, for tricking oneself into sleep. She kicked the blanket off, folded her arms and sighed. She looked at her phone: 1:30am, 34% battery, no notifications. Alone. Her index and pointer fingers curled and pulled across the skin of her arm, fidgeting in the uncomfortable heat which - typically - wasn't quite enough to make a blanket redundant. She reached over and pulled it back up to about her waist. She breathed in deeply, stuffed an arm around the bottom of the pillow and closed her eyes once more.

No.

The boredom finally broke her, with a finger she rubbed what little sleep there might have been out of her eyes. She blinked open wide and sat up, looking around the dark and mostly unfurnished room. All this time the side of her right foot had been unconsciously circling on top of the toes of her left, trying to eke any kind of stimulation out of this dull struggle. Think about anything. Anything.

Not that.

Maybe do something. What could I do to get to sleep? Maybe I need to wake up first and hard-reset the whole process. Maybe read a book, maybe get coffee and chart the mountain of

email gradually rising out of the ground. Deep time. Tectonics. Lava? Smoke and ash and explosion. What was that ancient film they were advertising at the old cinema in the city today? About Pompeii? There's this tendency to forget how shit the past actually was, people from around the time the film was released would probably laugh at us for our taste. Impractically-shirtless gladiator boy on the poster was hot as fuck though. 'Lush' is the polite old-timey word for it. Thought about that in the psychologist's waiting room while marvelling at cloistered civility of office clothing. You could see the outline of that receptionist's bra through the white fabric of her shirt. Considering the corridor hello she spun into a five minute conversation with that one older doctor with the nice arms it was probably intentional, the slut. Which I say in the most affectionate sense possible, I mean, like what the fuck else are you going to use those recliner chairs for? There's no medical reason for someone to be lying down while they confess their deepest, most intimate and shameful thoughts to you, but plenty reason while you're recreating them. 'Show me on the doll where she never touched you.' I wonder what sex therapists actually *do*. Didn't Foucault talk about this? Oh god, remember the Foucault phase you had when you were eleven? Medicine, madness, sex and religion all wrapped up in each other, all trying to open you up and bring the disease screaming out of you? You've got to do it to yourself though. Doing it to yourself makes it worse. Maybe you'll like worse. Voluntary shattering of the ego. Facing the abyss to see the transcendental, cauterising extraterrestrial physical, finally, physical contact with God(dess) and Death. Outsideness. Empathy as a source of horror. 'La petite mort'. Submission and sublimation. The eternal sleep.

Ophelia was fully sat up in bed, only now noticing that she'd been pulling on her bottom lip between her thumb and pointer finger now for the past two minutes. She knew exactly what to do. She unspooled herself over the edge of the bed and stopped herself with her hand on the knob of the bottom drawer. It was always fun, she thought, in the two seconds of hesitation before the will-to-decency fell apart like biscuits in tea.

Enjoying the quiet, co-conspiratorial thud of the closed drawer, she shuffled over onto the stack of pillows and leaned back into them, catching sight of her naked body in moonlight before blindfolding herself with the black plastic box, and the strap secured around her head.

'TALINATA SYSTEMS', read the startup screen. TURN ON. She thought of the password and the grid of interlocking polygons opened up to the Home screen. TUNE IN. She smiled as she flicked through the menu by running a pointed finger through the air in front of her: Paris (7 days, 2417), Melissa's 21st birthday party (7 hours, 2416), First Time (4 hours, 2415), Last Time (5 minutes, 2431), Amsterdam (1 year, 2418), Bridge Attempt (15 minutes, 2431), Bath Attempt (35 minutes, 2431), Random (4 years, 2415-2431). DROP OUT. She pressed down on the air, the floating window blossomed into a field of polygons that enveloped her field of vision and swallowed up her senses.

Ophelia Newton sat on the windowsill with one leg hanging down above the river Amstel watching morning commuters cycling over a bridge, birds flying over the old tall buildings and huge construction drones touching up the historic sea wall. She wore an old "Heroes" tour shirt and nothing else but her hair up.

— They're kind of burned but I put enough butter on to even it out. Said William, handing over a plate of bagels.

— Oh, no they look fine.

He sat up on the bay window shelf and lit a retro cigarette: real tobacco and everything.

— It still hasn't sunk in, said Ophelia through a half-full mouth.

— What?

— That we made it.

— I know. William replied, looking out at the sunlit city. But maybe you were always going to.

She gurned smiling when he handed it over.

— You heard anything else from her?

— Nope. She popped the 'p' sound. I installed software that doesn't let anyone contact me on anything unless I approve them. Total lockdown. Can't even send a message without my say-so.

— Good.

A pause.

— I love you, he said.

— Why are you telling me that *now*?

— You're worried. You always act hard when you're worried.

She sighed a plume of smoke that got carried away in the warm silence.

— What if I crumble?

— You won't.

— Everyone does. Maybe not five years from now, but probably ten. That's just how life goes. If she doesn't worm her way back in I'll be the one who goes back home because something awful happened or we ran out of money or god forbid some kid's wondering why they don't have a grandmother.

— We're not going to run out of money, I have savings and Great-Grandad Whatshisface is popping his clogs any day now.

Ophelia laughed - loudly - for the first time in a long time.

— She won't worm her way in. He took her cut-glass chin in his warm wide fingers and turned her face to look at him. We won't let her. Okay?

She nodded, and he kissed her forehead.

— So. He gestured with his head at the city outside. What do you want to do today?

Loading.

Loading..

Loading...

— I want you to know that this isn't a game, this isn't a one-time thing, said Ophelia, fanning herself with a developing polaroid. This is just how things are now. This is your life. I'd say this is your choice but you're a slave to biology. The teenage Objectivism never quite left,

so your ego sings for independence but your body moves of its own accord and, increasingly, mine. But you'll know all about that soon enou... she paused and forgot what she'd learned on an acting course. Awww!

She leaned over William's bare chest and showed him the developed picture: cheeks red as the gag between them, arms and torso wrapped up with rope.

— Cute!

She tossed the photo with the others on the floor and glanced down at his cock, stiff and twitching against his stomach.

— You like that?

William closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose as she ran a finger around the tip of him, smiled at his wide chest rising. He arched his back and whimpered as she flicked the head of his cock. Ophelia giggled and bit her lip, smiled just to herself and got up on top of him and sat on his cock. She'd been cruel to him, so she very gently rocked wet lips back and forth along his shaft. She reached behind his neck and unfastened his gag, the warm and slobbery thing dropping from his lips and onto his chest.

— You want me to fuck you?

He nodded.

— Use your words. Ophelia smirked, tuning red-lipped-candy-colour sadism with an arched brow.

— Yes.

She slapped him hard across the cheek. With exhilarating impunity.

— Yes...?

Loading.

Loading..

Loading...

— God!

Ophelia gasped as she leaned back and felt the sun upon her skin and Will admired the bright pictures the canopy above her cast upon her, painted her with shadow and light across her bouncing breasts and hair, her hair all black and silken falling over her Self and William's fingers digging deep into her thigh her face became a rosy pink portrait of sweet delight and we go down up down up down up down up down and up up down she clung to blades of grass and felt the green abundant world surrounding their nakedness their stage they set alight his breath got short fast and

— Oh! She buckled, as William gripped and bared his teeth and lo, the gods of these domains did find it fucking amazing

Loading.

Loading..

Loading...

— Fuckmefu-

William gripped Ophelia's mouth shut, closing her nose between his thumb and forefinger.

— Anyone could be outside. He watched for the bloom of her red cheeks and - in her wide death-black eyes - the pleading voice of reason. Her hands curled round and gripped the edges of the desk. He pointed out the window with a glance. Half of New York could be watching you.

He tossed her unbuttoned shirt open and pulled down her bra, exposing her small pink nipples to the cold air and the world outside the window.

— So could you possibly quieten down? He fucked her faster, she moaned through his fingers and shook her head defiantly and tried to pull herself up the length of him with her legs.

— Slut. . He grinned and lifted his hand from her mouth, fingers hovering over the pulsing flesh of her throat.

Loading.

Loading..

— I heard you shuffling about your room earlier, said Ophelia's mother, winding some spaghetti round her fork at the opposite end of the table. You redecorating or something?

Ophelia's heart started pounding in her chest.

— Just tidying up a bit.

— Hah! I don't believe you, she replied, not taking her gaze off the corners of Ophelia's mouth or the micro-movements of her eyes.

A millisecond too late, Ophelia initiated the polite smile-exhale function she'd rehearsed for just over two decades.

— When did Dad say he'd be back? She asked, hiding behind a glass of water.

— Next Tuesday. It was going to be Thursday but he got pencilled in for a meeting with the CEO of France. Consulting work, she's finally doing the damn thing and privatising the soft-eugenics program, so this week it's just us girls.

Ophelia would pretend to turn her attention to a hologram, or a window, but the dining room just had oil paintings that she'd studied through the corner of her eye for years. That night she stared at the ethereal glowing letterforms on her CentroCom 4, scrolling up through the dark.

Ophelia

remember to stop

before you get too

close

William

Yeah don't worry, I'll stop



before I get around the  
corner and message you.  
Should be over in about  
ten minutes.

Ophelia  
thank you x

William  
Don't x

She tapped her fingers on the bottom of the clear glass, sitting on her bed with a coat and a backpack, resting her feet on a suitcase to feel it solid beneath her.

William  
I'm here.

Ophelia  
i'm coming. if i'm not  
with you in five  
minutes  
you drive through the  
fucking window if you  
have to

William  
I know.

Ophelia put the phone in her pocket and took a deep breath. She opened her angled bedroom window, set her suitcase down on the roof and stepped out into the cold dark. Closing the window as slowly as she could, she picked up the suitcase and crept across Newton House's capital-W Weird geometric roof using dodecahedral recuses as footholds. Finally, she let her backpack slide down a short slope down into the back garden, held her suitcase against her stomach and slid down, trying not to make a noise as she thudded down on the grass. She picked up her things and didn't stop to brush herself down, not taking a final look back at the old house after she'd wriggled around the side. She crept across the gravel on her socks, holding her boots under her arm, taking four seconds per step to avoid even the slightest noise. As she was about to step off the gravel and onto the road to the rest of the world, the driveway lights snapped on and the front door unfurled.

—I've been watching this whole time, you know!

Ophelia froze.

— HelloOOOOOoooo!/? Her mother bellowed from the door.

Ophelia stood still.

— What even *is* this?

Ophelia stood still.

— Would you rather run away from whatever’s bothering you rather than actually address it? Like a fucking grownup?

She turned around, just glanced at her mother reclining against the open door, arms folded in a nightgown and totally indifferent to the cold.

— Where are you going, Ophelia?

— I-

Her mother raised an eyebrow, mocking the silence.

— I’m not telling you, said Ophelia, clutching the strap of her bag.

— Why not? What have I done *this* time?

—

—

Ophelia’s knuckles turned white, and she tugged at the knot in her throat.

— Has it never-

— You know you could run. You know you could very easily just run away from me and you know I’m too old to ever catch up with you, but you’re not running. You’re standing there. Do you know why you aren’t running?

— I’m holding a bag and a suitcase, she blurted, every learned instinct telling her to just shut up. That looks a lot like running to me.

— You *know* what I mean, sweetheart.

— Don’t-

— I think somebody’s put you up to this and deep down you know this is silly, you know this is an overreaction, you know deep down that I love you, that I will always love you more than anyone ever could because I am your mother and you know it would be so much easier to just *talk to me* about this.

Ophelia shook her head slightly, tears starting to run down her cheeks.

— You’re crying now because you thought this would be easy, you thought you would just sneak away like you’re in some shite American film. You’re too old for this shit! And now I’m standing here and you’re faced with the reality of how stupid you’re actually being.

— It’s not-

— SORRY WHAT? I CAN’T HEAR YOU FROM OVER THERE!

— It’s not stupid, Ophelia whispered to herself. I’m not stupid.

— Anyway! Her mother held up a phone with a number ready to dial, I might be generously lenient about this but I can’t speak for your father. He won’t be angry, he’ll just probably send out a death squad for you.

— Don’t!

— Then come over, Ophelia! She begged, dragging on that last syllable like a child. This

is silly, don't let this get out of hand more than it already has. Please. You know I love you.

Ophelia was frozen still, even as she took a nervous step towards her mother. One was enough.

— Oh thank god. Her mother sighed, slipping the phone into her pocket and stepping out towards her daughter.

In the time Ophelia has taken two steps, her mother had taken twenty. She extended her arms out.

— Come on, come here.

Ophelia's arms stayed cemented to her sides as her mother suffocated her with a hug and sickly perfume.

— Thank you. Thank you for seeing sense, little one. Please come inside now.

— No. She didn't say the word, the word just happened.

— It's okay, baby, I don't blame you for any of this.

— No.

— What is that? She asked, wiping a tear from her daughter's face. 'No. No.' Are you suddenly *retarded* now or something?

— No.

— Do you need help? Said the woman, refusing to let go. Is that what this is? Ophelia if you need to talk to a professional we'll get that sorted first thing tomorrow morning I promise you. Now please, come in.

— No.

— Ophelia Newton. Her mother retracted, mercy dropping from her voice like a guillotine. You come inside, or you spend the rest of your life running. You can't run from me, *I'm your mother*. You're my flesh and blood, and I'm yours, she said, sweetly. I will live inside you forever.

— I'm not going inside.

— Why not?!

— Because you are disgusting, Ophelia choked and sniffled. Because to call you a monster is an insult to monsters.

— And what have I done to deserve these fucking lines from films?

— Everything. You hit me. Lots. You called me pathetic until I cried and told me not to tell anyone or the police would come and take me away forever or you'd send me away to the children's home and I was too small and too scared to realise that would have been a good thing. You lied to me until *I stopped being able to tell what was real*. You gave me things and told me because you gave me things it was ungrateful to speak. I cried myself to sleep night after night because in spite of this I needed you.

— Ophelia-

— Well I don't need you. Not anymore. Nobody needs you.

Ophelia Newton took a step back, and turned away.

— Your father will-

— My father will not answer the phone because he's spanking some giggly middle-class

prostitute right now with big eyes my build and hair-colour and no problem calling him ‘Daddy’ all night if it’ll get him to pay off her student loa-OW!

Ophelia wretched back as her mother grabbed her by the baby hairs on her forehead and dragged her down onto the gravel, kicking her in the face and screaming at the huddled ball of flesh and bone on the ground.

— DON’T YOU DARE, DON’T YOU DARE EVER SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT YOU FUCKING PIECE OF FILTH! GET UP! STAND THE FUCK UP IF YOU’RE SO (kick) FUCKING (kick) INDEPENDENT!

Ophelia kept her eyes closed behind her hands, feeling the bitter air on a wound and warm blood flowing through her fingers. She opened one eye and inspected the redness. Her forehead was gushing.

— GO. GO AND LIVE YOUR PATHETIC LITTLE FUCKING LIFE. IF YOU’RE SO MUCH BETTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE GO AND LIVE YOUR LIFE AND NEVER COME BACK YOU WORTHLESS LITTLE CUNT! GO ON! She kicked her again. OR CAN YOU NOT? ARE YOU NOT ABLE TO STAND THE FUCK UP ON YOUR OWN TWO FEET BECAUSE YOU ARE USELESS? BECAUSE FOR ALL YOUR OBVIOUS INTELLIGENCE YOU ARE AT THE END OF THE DAY A CHILD, A SPOILED LITTLE SHIT WHO WOULD NOT EXIST IF IT WEREN’T FOR ME! FOR ALL I SACRIFICED! YOU ARE NOTHING! YOU ARE FUCKING-

Loading.

— ...everything.

— What’s that, little girl? Ophelia cooed, running her fingers through William’s hair as he writhed against the ropes. You’ve going to have to convince me.

— take everything Goddess, take everything i have and everything i am i need you to show me i’m yours, i need- he was sweating beneath her and his breath getting shorter.

— What’s that, sweetness? She slowed down to an aching pace. I’m not quite sure I know what you’re trying to say.

— i’m your toy, i need you to make me- please let me cum i’ll do anything, i’ll do everything you tell me to, i need to give-

— Anything? She bit her lip.

— Everything.

— Open wide.

He did, and she spat in his mouth with a gleeful hock.

— Swallow.

He obeyed without hesitation, and she outright cackled and dug her nails into his shoulders as she rode him faster.

— You wanna cum?

— Uh... huh

— Louder! Her knuckles got white as she gripped the iron headboard.

— Godd-  
(Slap.)  
— Scream it!

Loadin

— WHY ARE YOU SCREAMING LIKE THAT? Shouted Ophelia's mother as her voice echoed around the lake. THERE'S NOBODY AROUND FOR MILES YOU DUMB BITCH!

Through bloody fingers, Ophelia watched the dark gravel at her face transform: lit by a dreamy white glow from the distance behind her, a holo-static surface of gray stone and shadows.

She stood up, very still and unnervingly calm.

— AND WHAT IS THIS!? WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!

Ophelia didn't shield her eyes as she looked into the light of two car headlamps, which merged in the light fog to form a single glowing orb, a fissure which drew her in with slow, religious certainty.

— YOU'RE GOING FUCKING NOWHERE! YOU HEAR ME?! Her mother tried to grab her by the head but her hand passed through Ophelia's body, which buzzed and warped to the touch.

Load

William looked up, his eyes widening.

— Did you hear something? He slowed down for a second.

Ophelia threw two hands at his face and , turned him back to look at her.

— Don't stop. The words struggled out of her breath.

— What if someone hears?

— I don't care.

He smiled.

— You're *terrible*.

Ophelia closed her eyes and fell into this: imagined what a small and malleable little body she must look to him, how it felt to see how small and malleable she was below her. She felt his heart beating faster and faster in her chest, her breath getting shorter as blood pumped down into her cock nothing. On. Earth. Hotter than the way she squealed and cooed, trying to cover her mouth but his hands held down on the desk; feeling mighty fingers wrapped around her pale little literary ephebe-girl's wrists which he held and positioned however she liked. She bit hard on his plump lip and dived down and kissed her neck, smiling into her kisses as delightful noise burst out of her mouth beside her ear lips touching her lobe messy soft black hair all over her, she'd always wanted wanted to drown in that hair, everything going light and surreal as she pinned herself down onto the wood and her legs straightened out and wrapped around his waist

as (s)he grunted through bared teeth against his sweet-tasting skin held onto held onto hes hot hand for dear life and the world got loud and bit down on their shoulder as(halfsecondofsilence)BURST out of hir throat and cock and ringing in their ears against their vocal chords singing FUCK how does it feel to be this strong? This huge and powerful above us this weak below us?

Lo

They emerged out of the terrible light, naked and unstable; orifice and appendage, limbs warping around the sheer visual noise of their own existence, screaming grayblack static hissing from their thirty-million pores, untextured de-rezz then hyperreal wireframe polygloss skin glistening with the latest real-artificial-time lighting tech an aberrabomination another name for a god a Monster lurking below the net of perfect code blown apart by perception a fault in the fabric of time a sixteen-eyed-sixteen-armed-sixteen-legged creature everything exploding everything leaking sweating snotting and totally unreal virtu(al)horror whose breath and smell repulsed all human notion and sensation an *existential catastrophe* walking and laughing and kissing itself and its dozens of parts moving of their own accord towards some common destination, arms not-feeling themselves and delighting in their own muck and their sister-limbs' muck reaching towards Ophelia's mother unwrapping her pristine white skull like a Christmas present giggling mistakenly breaking off a right arm distracted by hair falling from their heads their heads, their heads wrapped around eachother that saw nothing else of the world, kissing and biting and grinning some eyes closed in self-reproducing ecstasy some eyes wide and sinking back with shock and awe some eyes staring into the soul of the woman crawling backwards away from the disgusting silhouette, the squelch of its clumsy, drowsy steps (when legs up top weren't kicking (flicking fluid) to screams of joy) sometimes drowned out by the sound of apocalyptic white noise or sudden bursts of black noise that muted the world a form that repealed the laws of physics forever, reassembling into fractally functional and beautiful configurations (trypophillic feelers cumming out the hexagony Penrose-hives) and a wet and moaning tree of flesh then crawling on all thirty-twos towards their prey all while echoing and refracting off new algorithmic possibilities evolving in simulated worlds (*void-forg'd things from New Hell*), standing up ontwo twelve-foot long legs, reaching down to the screaming human woman and swaddling her in the dark nest of their every-body, crushing and suckingand dribbling hot red gore down its breasts and limbs moaning with sadistic glee and throwing the body around, throwing its body around like dancing with a little plastic baby doll, screaming with hilarity and the heads merged with eachother, divided and reproduced to look at eachother and know eachother themselves that the ordeal was over. The glow from the wound in the world lit the clouds which shot between day and night and made every weather at once, the sky-tiles of blue becoming gray becoming purple becoming green becoming black. The creature looked up and admired its work in the rain and steam, and looked down at itself and its bodies, and times.

L

Ophelia felt woozy, felt herself sink back into the tingly quiet forest, and William's heart dropped back into his chest and thumped against its isolating prison. Ophelia fell upon her lover's chest, and draped her achy arms across his shoulders

— Maybe we should leave now before someone sees us, William said.

Ophelia smiled.

— Let's stay forever.

Loading.

Loading..

Loading...

William kissed her head and whispered the only rhyme he could remember.

— Will you stay in our lovers' story? If you stay, you won't be sorry, 'cause we believe in you...

He tiptoed towards the cradle.

— Soon you'll grow, so take a chance with a couple of kooks, hung up on romancing...

He stayed quiet for a second, listening for anything louder than a sigh. He leaned over very carefully, set the baby down in her crib and retracted his arms, holding his breath until he was a safe distance away.

— Yeeeeessss, he whispered, gently fist-pumping the air.

— Is she asleep? Said Ophelia, peering around the door.

— Yup. No bother.

— Right, that's *your* job now.

— Well she was just crying because she was tired, so I just kind of sang to her for a bit and she calmed down.

Ophelia peered over the cradle.

— Why would you cry because your *tired*? Just... close your eyes, don't move. Literally zero effort.

William joined her on the other side of the crib.

— You're very cute though aren't you Lucy?

Ophelia initiated her muscle-memory smile/exhale function. She walked over to the window, scratching through her long sleeve the spot where a nicotine patch was irritating a small array of scars.

— Anyway, said William. I'm going back to bed. You coming?

— No. I've still have stuff to do for tomorrow. She sighed.

— You know, you'd actually get a decent night's sleep now and then if you did stuff earlier.

He put a hand on her shoulder, which she impulsively shrugged off.

— Yeah, except the whole evening while you were gone *she's* been screaming and shitting and needing fed and-

— Yeah, right. Okay. Sorry.

— Anyway, night then. She kissed his cheek and walked back to the hologram in the living room.

William followed.

— Ophelia. Opheli-

— What?

— Are you okay?

— Yes. Fine. Why?

— You've been... it's not so much just this past week as the past... while, honestly.

You've just been... distant, lately, is all. Don't start off on me for suggesting this but is this some kind of, post-natal... thing?

— No, you *potato*, she thought.

— No. She said. You know I've always been *like this*. And we don't have enough money to for me to ever get therapy, so-

— Yeah, yeah. Sorry. It's just... he folded his arms. Keeping Lucy was the best decision I ever made and my whole life feels like it's going somewhere now and I thought maybe the same was true for you and...

— Well maybe it is, but obviously I'm not in the neurochemical position to really appreciate that. Now we can talk about this all you like in the morning but right now I have thirty-page reports to approve and a presentation to prepare for first thing tomorrow.

— Right.

He almost said something, but walked off to bed.

— *Jesus*, Ophelia sighed.

She looked to see the bedroom door was closed, then walked past the hologram - what looked like a solid gray table with a white top and cloud of glowing screens in the air above - to the antique chest of drawers in the corner of the room. She lifted up a stack of boring documents and pulled out the cigarette packet and lighter hidden below. She opened up the window as far as it would go, sitting on the edge and watching the orange dot of her cigarette hover in the glass, one light amongst London's financial district, too easily mistaken for actual stars way up there in the dark.

Ophelia Newton sat on the windowsill, one leg hanging down above the river Amstel, watching morning commuters cycling over a bridge, birds flying over the old tall buildings, huge construction drones touching up the historic sea wall...

She admired the golden sunset in William's shades as he sipped on a pint of beer.

— What? He asked.

— You look like a movie star or something with those on, she said as she smiled into her cigarette.

He gestured with two fingers for her to pass it over.

— Why can you not just light your own? She passed it over, and he held it in the middle with his thumb and pointer finger with the filter towards her.

— There's something about red lipstick stains on these I just find *aesthetically* pleasing,



you know?

— Ugh. Her eyes narrowed in spite of her grin. You're fucking disgusting.

— Only God can kinkshame me.

Ophelia looked around and saw a wooly white dog sitting next to its owner at one table, two Syrian boys visibly, obnoxiously, falling in love across from one another, a solitary old man with round black glasses determinedly scribbling in a notebook. She smelled smoke and cooked steak and flowers and listened to an accordion echo through the cobbled streets. She traced her finger along the prominent blue vein of William's idle hand.

— What are you doing? He laughed a little.

— Just touching. Trying to notice everything. Don't you think it's strange that this is never going to happen again?

— There are other restaurants, Ophelia. He grinned. We can even come back to this same one. Many times!

— You know what I mean. Today. Twenty-second of June twenty-four-eighteen. Only comes around the carousel once.

— What's got you thinking like that?

— Look around you. It's perfect, isn't it? You're perfect.

— Oh, no-

— You are though. Right now. I want it to last forever. I want it to be crystalline and perfect and tangible but even the way your dimple appeared when you smiled ten seconds ago is just a memory now. And it's flimsy and fragile and memory is unreliable and I want it to last forever.

He was quiet for a second.

— What's actually bothering you, though?

— I have this terrible unsteady feeling that my life is never going to be this good again. I feel like it's all going to go horribly wrong so slowly, like boiling a frog or something, and I'm never going to live up to my potential and the open possibility of my future is so much more exciting and so much more useful than the actual disappointment of lived reality and I just want it to stop, basically. I just want to stop here. We're young and delirious and the rot hasn't set in yet, we have all the free time in the world and live like kings off savings and danish pastries. This is good. I love this. I love you. We escaped from it all and we're happy. Roll credits now before it's too late. Stop reading. The End.

The Wolf King slowed down just before they reached the fence, glancing back into the dark forest.

— Did we make it? Lucy asked, eyes still shut and clinging to his back, arms wrapped around his neck.

— We're back. It's safe now.

The Wolf King knelt down and helped the girl off his coat of feathers.

— Are you sure? It can't get out of that forest, can it?

— Not 'that' forest, Walpole child. *The* forest. It's an... archetypal place. Vague, endless and haunted: a million years of superstition dyed into its bark. It belongs to no country, most humans can only ever go there in dreams.

— Right, said Lucy, glancing over at Newton House. Well, I should probably go home now. You're not going back in there, are you?

— I don't think Shadrach would be so kind so soon after our transgression. I will stay in your world for a while, look for some wild people, find a campfire tale in need of a monster.

The Wolf King smiled her razor smile as she closed the gate behind Lucy and messed up the girl's hair.

— Look after yourself, kiddo.

— Bye. Lucy waved meekly as she hopped over the garden wall and shot off on all fours across the moonlit fields.

Lucy held her breath as she closed the back door of the house and crept through the silent kitchen towards the stairs. Sometimes, on too-quiet nights like this, she would wake up in the dark from her sweaty, uncomfortable sleep and know - without looking, with absolute clarity - that there was someone standing above her bed behind her. She'd face the wall with her eyes wide open and hope the man with the knife didn't notice her breathe. It was that sort of night. Before she reached the stairs, she stopped. Without looking, she knew.

Lucy brought her hand to her chest and held the Wolf King's silver locket.

She turned around slowly, and looked at the threshold where the moonlit features of the room vanished into shadow, an oily, viscous shadow; not so much the mere absence of light as a wall of solid darkness.

— Hello? Whispered Lucy.

Nothing.

— Hello, whispered the dark.

Lucy's hand tightened around the locket.

— It's you, isn't it? Shadrach. I know what you are now. The girl's voice trembled. What are you doing in my house?

— What do you mean?

— You don't belong here. The Wolf King told me everything. I know you shouldn't be able to come out of the void between the universes, I know you need to remain there to keep the balance. Do you even know that? She breathed in deeply through her nose and stood up straight, lifting the locket and holding her thumb beneath the latch. The Wolf King also gave me this magic amulet, and if you don't go back to whereverthefuck right now you're gonna find out the hard way what this thing's capable of.

— Ophelia... the voice from the dark scolded. What the *fuck* are you on about now?

The old woman stepped out of the shadows wearing a white dressing gown, half her face peeled from the other and red, stringy muscle hanging from the socket of her right shoulder. Lucy stumbled back onto the stairs and screamed, running up on all fours as the corpse chased her with a mangled, outstretched arm.

Ophelia rolled her eyes as a passing child started screaming.

— Mamma! They sobbed. Maaaaammaaaa!

William drew long on the cigarette, looking out to the pinkish-yellow water and the fading sun.

He sighed.

— I wish you were wrong. So, what do we do?

Ophelia pinched a nib of flesh on the underside of her arm.

— Try to enjoy whatever time we have left, I suppose. That's all we really can do.

— Mamma!

Ophelia Newton's eyes widened in horror, recognising the voice of the chil

BATTERY AT 10%, PLEASE PLUG YOUR HEADSET INTO A POWER SUPPLY.  
YOUR TALINATA SYSTEMS VIRTUAL REALITY DEVICE WILL TURN ITSELF  
OFF IN FIVE MINUTES.

Ophelia Walpole threw off her headset and jolted back into the cold dark bedroom of her childhood home which creeping rent and the death of her husband in an auto-accident had forced her to relocate to having not so much been written *into* the inheritance as having not ever been worth the effort of writing *out* of it.. She was alone. She would have covered her mouth with the awful shock of the new were it not for the cold sticky fluid drying all over her fingers. She stood up, readjusting to the weight and balance of a real, older body, and stumbled into the en-suite bathroom to vomit.

The sun rose a few hours later, and Lucy Walpole drifted out from troubled sleep. She rubbed the crusty gunk out of the corner of one eye and woke slowly to the sight of her room lit up in the yellow-orange morning: the mirror that seemed joined to the window, the boxes of clothes and books, the mess of toys on the floor that led to her boots and her backpack. The backpack she thought she'd lost in the forest.

She didn't cry. It would be stylistically cleaner to dramatise Lucy's thought process with the intervention of more imaginary characters or distortions of reality but storytime is,

manifestly, over. And it wouldn't be *my* place to speak on the girl's behalf, even if there was much to be said; even if this weren't just the silent onset of devastation to come. All that anyone who's ever been happy - finally, fully happy - only to be rudely awoken back to the real world can say is this: that it is often difficult to really mourn something you never had. (Mourning, she had yet to learn, was a process of getting better.) This dreamer's wisdom, I admit it, is an old wound for old people. For the Walpole child the pain must have been that of being torn from every seam - not *apart* but *apart from* - as if forcibly removed from one's actual home. And not for the first time, or the last. For structuralism's sake, Lucy's backwards recollection of events - of terrifying monsters and parallel worlds, charming Wolf Kings which were wolves which were men which were women and big robot dogs that were swans, forests which weren't real forests and an attempt to run away that only took her home - landed back at the beginning of her big adventure: a woman who hugged her and told her she was loved, here in this room, in the bed she'd just been dreaming in. It was at this point Lucy drew the blanket up over her face. She wept buckets.

This was to be the story of her life: there was no escape for Lucy Walpole, no magical flight or supernatural intervention; no adventure, no friends on the other side of the abyss, and no heroics. No elixir but pills for a depression, she was told, she was too privileged to have. Anna Khoury had her own problems, and Lucy could never solve them with a weekly or twice-weekly video call. Even if she got her own phone one day and she built a digital world for her, the girl with the big blue eyes and the ridiculous laugh would still be hundreds of miles away. Lucy knew was alone now. She would be alone for a very long time.

She got up, eventually, and trudged downstairs for the first of two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-two awful days.

— Morning, muttered Ophelia, holding her head up with elbows on the kitchen table.

— Hiya, Lucy mumbled.

She opened the cabinet to get her pre-synthesised cereal. The only talk in the room was from the radio: Cage Mishima making a speech about a joint partnership between Earth and Martian scientists, something about putting differences aside, something about a new dawn, something about parallel universes. This felt like a cruel joke, but before it could drag further the radio cut to an advert for the new CentroCom 12.

Lucy sat down in front of the hologram and flicked through CentroDrama, CentroNews and CentroCinema to CentroFun! Chewing on cereal in front of an animated space battle, she felt eyes on the back of her head.

She turned and saw her mother staring over at her from behind a mess of black hair.

— What?

— Nothing. Just tired.

— Why? Lucy asked, enjoying the sound of cereal crunch from inside her skull.

— I had a very bad dream, is all.

— What about?

— I was with your dad. We were having dinner in Amsterdam. It was nice. It actually happened, the dream, long before...

She waved a finger around the room.

— ...this. Before you were born. Then I woke up.

— I had a bad dream too, she said.

— What happened?

— Lots of things. There was a woman in my room. And Dr. Zofia, I think, but there was another woman with her with a red scarf in a chair. Then I ran away from home in the middle of the night and got chased by a... well, I ran through the forest behind the house. Which was also every forest, like, every time anyone ever dreamed of a forest or talked about a forest it was the same forest they were all thinking of, but anyway. There was a giant robot dog that tried to kill me, and I told it I was Eliezer Newton's granddaughter, but it didn't accept that so I said you were his daughter, but it said granddad didn't have a daughter, but then it got taken away and destroyed by a monster. And then the monster chased me and everything was sideways, but then... this invisible man rescued me. And then there was a Wolf King who was also a man but sometimes a woman when they weren't literally a wolf, and they made me figure out who and what they were. I answered correctly, and they gave me a magic amulet I could use to travel between the human world and this other one, which was guarded by a thing called Shadrach, but Shadrach was also, like, the place? And anything that tried to pass through it either got eaten or turned into a monster. Except me, because the Wolf King helped me get back here safely. And then when I was coming back into the house there was... this old woman with her right arm missing and half a face who tried to kill me but I escaped, and then I woke up.

Ophelia looked up at the girl across the room.

— *You had a dream where you ran away, did you?*

— Yeah.

— Why did you run away?

— The woman in my room told me to. She said...

— She said what? What did she tell you?

Lucy's body went numb.

— Nothing.

— What did she tell you?

Lucy clenched a fist behind her back.

— She said I should run away because she ran away from home, and said it was nice. She said there were people on 'the other side' who loved me.

— No, no, it's fine, Lucy. I understand.

— Don't be angry at-

Ophelia stood up.

— I've given up fucking *everything* to keep you alive, which is really selfless of me considering- she stopped, and sighed. But if that's not good enough for you then please, leave. She stood up and took a step towards Lucy.

— It's just a drea-

— The children's home would be happy to take you, Lucy. She came closer. They would

give you two meals a day and nothing else, no clothes or fucking toys or televis-

— Mum-

She smacked Lucy across the head.

— Don't you speak over me you...

She stopped.

— Where the fuck did you get that? She asked.

— Get what? Lucy blubbed.

— That!

Lucy's mother pointed at the girl's chest, stabbing it with a finger. Lucy looked down and, through misty tears, saw the glimmer of a silver locket around her neck.

— NONONO!

— Where did you get this!? Ophelia shouted as she tore the locket from her neck with a loud snap. Who the fuck gave it to y- Was it her?!? Was it that fucking Centro therapist bitch you loved so fucki-

— NO MUM-

— WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU TELL HER? She grabbed Lucy by the shoulders.

LUCY FUCKING WALPOLE ANSWER ME!

— DON'T OPEN THAT!

— WHO WAS IT

The noise was hurting Lucy's ears.

— TH- THE... WOLF KING. I TOLD YOU, IN MY DREAM THE WOLF KING GAVE ME THAT LOCKET—SHUT UP! Her mother slapped her—I'M NOT FUCKING STUPID! I KNOW YOU THINK I AM I KNOW I'M JUST THIS NAGGING BITCH TO YOU BUT I USED TO BE A PERSON!

She exhaled, Lucy didn't move to wipe the spit from her face.

— I USED TO HAVE AMBITIONS, LUCY! *POTENTIAL!* THEN YOUR DAD GOT ME FUCKING PREGNANT AND HIS WHOLE FUCKING FAMILY FOUND OUT WHEN I TRIED TO TEAR YOU OUT LIKE A FUCKING CANCER AND LOOK! THEY CALLED ME MAD AND THEY WERE RIGHT! LOOK WHAT YOU DID! She drilled into her temple with her finger. LOOK WHAT YOU FUCKING DID TO ME! FOR YEARS!

She looked at the locket, and the little silver latch skittered over the wood floor as she ripped the thing open.

— What is this?! She spat, tears and snot about to pour. Who's this fucking dyke!?

She threw the locket at Lucy's head.

— LOOK. LUCY, WHO THE FUCK IS THAT?

Lucy lowered a quivering hand to the sliver of silver at her feet wiping tears from her puffy red face.

She looked at the woman's face: a half-Iranian rebel girl with a septum piercing sticking out her little cat-like tongue. In the frame next to her, on the left, there a woman with a short black bob, and she looked at the girl on the other side with the corners of her pursed lips turned up, and she looked. And looked. And saw.

— Oh.

— What is it then?! Ophelia sniped. What does your wee fucking magic amulet do!?

— After all this build-up it turns out you open it and there literally is just a wee picture inside, said Lucy.

— What the fuck do you mean “said Lucy”? Said her mother.

— I don’t know where I was supposed to be going with this but, Lucy looked around, I do appear to have gotten very lost and, hey! There *you* are. Again.

— SPEAK FUCKING SENSE CHILD!

The girl chuckled.

— Nah.

Lucy dried her eyes, put the mended locket around her neck, straightened her back and went to the living room to finish her breakfast.

— Lucy Walpole fucking do what I tell you!

— No, actually. She filled her face with a spoonful of cereal. Oh, look at that! She shuffled her food over to the side of her mouth, pointing at the hologram. That’s not even slightly how the Vigilance raid on Mars happened ya bougie fucks.

— LUCY!

Her mother reached out to grab her but Lucy caught her by the wrist with both hands, spilling her cereal on the floor.

— WHAT THE-

— Storytime! Lucy beamed. Forced to live for seven years in this isolated kingdom, in the shadow of the mad tyrant, our heroine learned, eventually, to fight back.

Her mother retracted.

— Stop that. You’re scaring me.

Lucy snorted laughing as she stood up, stepping barefoot through the puddle of milk.

— Our heroine had quite the mouth on her, much to the surprise of the tyrant, who had suffocated the woman for the better part of two decades.

— What are you doing? Lucy, who the fuck are you talking to?

— Lucy Walpole’s newfound strength was not merely physical. She had grown clever in her fortress of books, and she studied the contours of her mother’s total mental invalidity - she said (she said), stressing the syllables on the back of her teeth: ‘in-va-lih-dih-tee’ - such that she could deliver a killing blow with a look, which she did. Lucy took the thicket of black hair from her forehead, and lifted it up.

Ophelia Walpole stepped back...

— ...her hands climbing up towards her open mouth like the damsel in some lurid gothic novel. She saw the gushing wound on her daughter’s forehead (the scar from the forest she’d reopened, but don’t tell) and knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the Newtonian blood curse had run its course. The end was nigh.

— I’m... ah... Ophelia stuttered.

The scream bubbled, then burst out of her for a full four seconds, then she began

punching herself in the eyes until her arms were sore. She bit her quivering fingers till they bled on her way to the kitchen. Lucy stood serenely still at a distance, watching cutlery and plates fly around the room and shatter against the walls. She winced, only slightly, as her mother picked up a fragment of broken plate just about shorter than the length of a hand, and hastily and repeatedly and determinedly, wildly jammed the jagged end into her vocal chords un-til! They fell! Lucy held her hands still in the air, like a conductor... silent.

Lucy Walpole climbed up onto the kitchen stool and contemplated her reflection in the pool of her mother's blood.

— Of course, reader - she said to herself, alone in the empty house - this is a tall tale spun with magic, dream and heresy; fantasy and nightmare. It is not too far from the truth, in its way, for a memory is just a story that we tell ourselves to sleep.

BATTERY AT 5%, PLEASE PLUG YOUR HEADSET INTO A POWER SUPPLY.  
YOUR TALINATA SYSTEMS VIRTUAL REALITY DEVICE WILL TURN ITSELF OFF IN  
TWO MINUTES.

— Yes, Lucy sighed, and took a long look around her childhood home. You're quite right.

Lucy placed her hands on her temples, carefully, feeling for the thing that wasn't there, and with some concentration she imagined the warm plastic band into existence between her fingers. She closed her eyes, held her breath, and lifted it off.

Lucy took a moment to adjust from the brightness of the virtual world. She put the headset down on the little wooden desk, and leaned back into the rocking chair she felt like she'd fallen asleep on. She yawned, having sort of forgotten who or where she was like she'd woken up from a stray nap, and settled into the familiar warmth of her cottage: the open hearth just a few steps from her bed, shelves that lurched with knackered old fantasy novels and little circular windows dusted at the panes with snow. She held onto the silver locket she wore, and opened it to check the photo hadn't changed somehow. Lucy stood up and faced her antique mirror, holding onto the chair for support, and tried to readjust to her reflection. She still felt terribly short, at six feet, but virtual reality played tricks like that. Her hair was shorter than it had been, just above her shoulders, and she chose to focus on her vanishingly small resemblance to what memories she had of her father's face.

Her CentroCom 11 buzzed on the bedside table.

Anna

Hello this is ground control



Lucy  
Oh, shit, sorry. Didn't  
notice my phone had  
recharged. And yeah,  
I'm just heading over  
now xx

Lucy grabbed her gray coat off the stand, and threw on the huge red scarf that hung next to it. She ducked through the cottage's achy wooden door, and didn't think to lock it as she strolled down the cobbled path through the bare winter forest.

Anna  
Good xx

Lucy  
You weren't worried  
were you? (She typed,  
fifth time lucky in the  
cold, too far gone  
now to go back and  
get her gloves)

Anna  
I know Mother's Day is  
always weird for you so I  
thought I'd give you  
space.

Lucy  
Thank you, though

xx

Anna  
Whereabouts are you now?

Lucy  
King Street

(She typed, as the path wound through the part of the forest that sometimes just turned sideways.)

Anna  
I made brownies btw

Lucy  
Btw marry  
me?

Anna  
You'll have to come over  
to get a reply

I'll just be here in the  
meantime

On Brownie Mountain

Eating chocolate mix

Lucy  
NO

As she passed through The Village - an archetypal place, and called so for it was the only one - Lucy spotted a little gathering of residents around a stage.

“And for my next trick...” The Wolf King gestured towards a tall, slim box just big enough for one person. He rushed in through a door on one side and closed it shut.

“Oh, no just-” he said as the box shook. “Excuse me madam, sorry!”

The Wolf King ran out the other side, wiping pantomime sweat off her brow. Most of the crowd applauded, but the young Princess Uris stood up and good-heartedly heckled, “It’s not a magic trick if you’re actually magic, that’s cheating!” She grinned at the Wolf King, who jumped off stage to claim her as the next act’s volunteer. Mr. Bear spotted Lucy from the crowd and waved.

Lucy waved back and smiled to herself, and continued on out of the square, passing a large-ish tree with the words “SHADRACH WOZ HERE” carved into its trunk.

“Excuse me! Sorry!”

“You don’t *have* to keep running!” Lucy shouted, looking for the man she could only kind of see. She stopped and waited for a trail of footprints to impress itself along the side of an old snow-covered wall along the trail.

“It’s all I’m good at, I’m afraid!” The voice trailed off up towards the village.

Lucy pulled out her phone as she followed the path to the rusty old fence, whose metal grid was silhouetted against a dreamy white glow beyond the sky and both horizons.

Lucy  
I'm just around the  
corner. This is your  
60  
second warning x

Lucy opened the gate and stepped out into a grimy alleyway. Glancing back, out of curiosity, she had just come out of an old fire exit with "2,407" scratched into the wood with a knife. The door suddenly opened, and a cook coming out for a smoke gave her a suspicious look. She smelled rain and steam as she stepped out into the city street, past a speeding delivery robot and a newsstand reporting the events on Mars. She crossed the bustling concrete grid of road signs and traffic lights, and rushed up the apartment building stairs.

"Hey," Anna grinned, and kissed Lucy as she came in.

"Where is he?" Lucy replied.

"What?"

"Where is my beautiful handsome son?"

"In the kitchen, he's helping."

"Hello baby!" Lucy cooed as she scooped up Marc Sengels, Anna's little black cat.

"You're freezing," said Anna, putting a hand on Lucy's cheek.

"I know," she said, dotting Marc with kisses as he rubbed his head against her chin. "I've come to leech off everyone's body heat." She sniffled and held him close just a little bit too long.

"How are you?" Anna asked, folding her arms.

"Fine." Lucy mumbled into the cat's forehead.

"Well, there's nachos on the living room table."

"Immediately better."

Lucy walked through the hallway of the small flat, past stupid charity shop ornaments and some paintings from their friends. She set the cat down on his post and threw her coat on the arm of the sofa, dropping down onto her spot with an exaggerated old-person grunt. She kicked off her faintly snow-dusted boots, shovelled some nachos into a bowl and curled up next to Anna.

Which is a weird sentence to end on, I know, but I felt like the "domestic bliss" part needed room to breathe. The custom is to say that they lived happily ever after, but the Walpole child isn't dead yet - she tried - and the two of them have a lot of living left to do. Structurally we really needed a wedding to round this out, but the future Mrs. Walpole-Khoury had adventures yet left in her. So, anyway: this is where this story leaves off. Things are better now.

— The End.