



THE HISTORY OF
NICOLAS &
THE ORACLE OF
KNOWLEDGE

*Nicolas Theodoro D'Orleans
De Braganca*

Translation by Jesse Dustin

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Dedicated to the illustrious fair-maiden Genevieve.

Prologue

While this story has been restored to the best of our scholars abilities, the History it emerged from has for the most part been entirely lost to us. We know not who this Nicolas was, and have only the faintest historical grasp on the persons, places, and events he so eloquently described within this archaic work.

As you, the reader, will no doubt be aware, we have lost nearly all records of and information on that bygone period which some historiographers are calling “the final Dark-Age.” Though, unlike any of its predecessors, the inhabitants of this penultimate Dark Age supposedly had vast storehouses of knowledge to pull from, novel communication methods and technology unheard of today. The following translation comes from an old-language manuscript which was found, as the story goes, buried in a crag beneath an old oak tree, and has been re-translated for you, the humble reader. We have no way to gauge the veracity of this story, other than to say that the educated amongst us today very much believe this account to be true and you should decide for yourself as to the integrity of

these chronicles.

Part I

The Beginnings

I.

Once upon a glorious time, there was a boy named Nicolas, who grew up in the forest amongst the tall pines and ancient oak trees. He was a thoughtful, earnest and curious young boy, questioning everything around him and always seeking to understand how things came to be. As a small child he would often sit in his father's wood-shop, fetching various tools and asking about all the creations his papa had carved and whittled away at for all of the local townsfolk. When Nicolas was not helping his father, he would spend many a glorious day bathing freely in the crisp, cold waters of the Swift River, or frolicking with his siblings through the lush green field-brush and pastures of their idyllic homeland. It was a special time for young men like Nicolas in those days. His world was much smaller and simpler. His path to fulfillment and thus true success in life – like his father's success in fashioning grand creations out of wood – was much closer at hand and appeared far easier to grasp.

Some would describe Nicolas as the spitting image of his

father, whose trade was that of a draftsman and a carpenter. He was a tall man who had a chiseled, strong face with captivating blue eyes, which would stare intently and thoughtfully at his works. Nicolas would watch his father as he toiled over his wooden creations, like a father would toil over his own children, working his immaculate pieces and handicrafts to completion. Nicolas excelled and seemed at ease during these early years, as it seemed he was at peace in the small hamlet he was born into. He would bask in the sweet serenity of growing up within the simplest foundations of nature and humanity.

In Elementary school Nicolas was an exceedingly accomplished pupil, and was popular with the other schoolchildren as well. These young tikes studied the foundations of counting, reading and writing, and as they reached each new pinnacle of learning they began to understand the basics of arithmetic and classic literature, such as their past generations, and even Nicolas' own father had once learned. As he grew more educated and aptly prepared for greater things in life, it was determined by his teachers

and parents that he was indeed a bright and capable young lad.

And so, when he was thirteen years old, he was sent away to live at a boarding school for gifted students, called the Academy.

At first, Nicolas struggled to fit into this foreign world, as he came from much humbler beginnings. He would often be found sitting alone on the Quad, under one of the tall oak trees, on the thick patchwork of green grass, caught up in reading his favorite books. For the first time in his young adulthood, he seemed to show a solitude and melancholy nature; a sadness borne of being separated from the idyllic places from which he had been raised.

At the Academy he lived amongst the young, gifted scholars of the time, who travelled from all across the world to be educated there. There were the children of Princes, Business Tycoons and Foreign dignitaries, Asians & Jews and all sorts of gifted children. Over time in the dormitories where the children slept and studied at night, Nicolas would make a few long-lasting friendships and he seemed to be partially content in his newfound place in the world. He and his friends would often stay up late into the evening,

dreaming of what adventures and successes lay in wait for them on their journey to becoming adults. Each one promised the other that they would stay in touch during those later triumphant years.

2.

At the time a great upheaval was taking place all around them. A new innovation was appearing in the classrooms across the country, and it would soon come to change the nature of mankind forever. It was called the “Oracle of Knowledge” and it was an amazing creation, for it contained all the worldly knowledge one could want. This new Oracle was a modern encyclopedia, map and thesaurus all-in-one, and it featured a way to gather expertise from a whole range of topics in just mere moments. The teachers greatly encouraged Nicolas and the rest of his classmates to learn more about it, and young Nicolas quickly tapped into its wisdom, showing a great aptitude for this newfangled device. It truly was an amazing achievement which modern man had invented, or so it was thought at the time. It was heralded by many as a modern version of the great ancient Oracle at Delphi.

Each year these Oracles became smaller and more spritely, quicker and more keen at gathering information, and eventually, over time, one could in mere milliseconds recall from any number

of amazing articles of deep human understanding. We can hardly explain just how much this device had changed the role of education in children's lives. We will just mention that over a short period of time, the teachers became much more reliant on them, far more so than the retired textbooks and classics they had quickly relegated to the dustiest of shelves. The students themselves, especially the older ones who could afford their own personal Oracles, became fixated on these cherished creations: caught up entirely in a world of their own amusement. Both educator and student would often be seen staring at these devices, both inside and outside the classroom. It seemed that from then on, the Oracle would become a necessary and permanent fixture of everyday life, and at the time everyone thought it could only have been all for the better. . . .

3.

One early such scholastic instance of Oracle tomfoolery was soon experienced by a young and intelligent thirty-five year old math teacher named Professor Chadwick. He was a gifted mathematics virtuoso, who had just received his doctorate from one of the old ivy-league universities, places which, in those days, still hailed all its wise and great graduates. His first job outside of the University was to take a small position teaching calculus at the Academy.

He taught a diverse class, full of some of the best arithmetic students the boarding school had to offer and the syllabus he had created was a difficult one. They all diligently studied together: derivatives and integrals, the limits of a function, the separation of variables in differential equations and anti-differentiation. This fresh, new, green teacher was elated with his pupils' amazing grasp of the meta-science he so longingly cherished deep in his heart. He could finally feel content that all those tiring years of studying mathematics, and education had finally meant something so dear

and personal to him.

It was the day of the big finale: a gigantic two-hour exam wherein each student's skill and aptitude were on full and pure display. When the test was finished, the children quietly left their seats and gently filed out of the classroom. The proud professor eagerly picked up each student's papers to score their results. It is said that one student struggled to hold back giggles as he walked down the hallway to convene with his classmates. Much to the teacher's astonishment and confusion, he sat down to grade the tests that day and found that the entire class of advanced calculus students had the exact same results and answers. The teacher soon discovered that the students had all banded together and, via their own personal handheld Oracles, shared the formulas, equations, and exact decimal calculations for every question on the test. It is assumed that the administration never found out who the individual ring-leader was, or at least the rest of the classmates must have stayed entirely mum, for the culprit was never caught or expelled over this conspiring digression. In fact, dear reader, as you

may have imagined, the student who had arranged this scholarly coup d'etat over the naive new teacher was indeed our very own Nicolas.

4.

To Nicolas and most everyone else, the Oracle became one big, quick and easy shortcut. It was a shortcut to learning, a shortcut to entertainment, a shortcut to pleasure, and ultimately the short-circuit that ignited a spark which became the firestorm of a New Renaissance, which would soon be seen spreading across all swaths of society. Suddenly, modes of transportation became quicker and more efficient. Entertainment became more visual, even archaic farming practices and principles had become more digital. Food supplies operated more smoothly, and commerce in general ran at speeds never seen before. One could hop on a plane in New Delhi and reappear in New York in mere hours, then the very next day spare yourself the distance and Tele-appear on a smooth glass screen to carry on a conversation with a long-lost compatriot back on the other side of the world. There seemed to be no facet of human life on this Earth that had been untouched by the Oracle. These amazing feats soon gained the respect and trust of anyone who witnessed its delightful achievements and spectacles. Everyone thought that this was finally the future which

past generations had only dreamt of – this was the moment to live in!

People truly saw this invention as a way to remove themselves from the drudgery of how things were done in the past: liberated and unshackled from the old and difficult methods of acquiring knowledge and information. It was also used as a shortcut to reduce the boredom that people often felt within their own lives at the time. It seemed that everyone thought the Oracle was the key to unlocking the inevitable progress of the new age. This new device was lauded universally, and anyone who became skilled in mastering its inner-workings was handsomely rewarded by its vast knowledge, growing wealth and ongoing investment and upkeep. It was the dawn of a new Information and Technological age that rivaled all others before it, and everyone wanted to be a part of it, quickly becoming the foremost advocates, cheerleaders, and champions of the all-powerful Oracle.

5.

Then, as if a Faustian bargain had begun to be collected on, a new dark side of the Oracle began to rear its hideous face. People began to use and rely on the Oracle far, far too much – with greater frequency, duration, immediacy, and mindlessness. No one bothered to check the old methods of gathering information to see if what the Oracle said was true or not. People began to forget how to even discover, inquire, or find out things on their own. Personal relationships became less personal; face to face gatherings were infrequent and even frowned upon. Soon it became clear that human attention spans were rapidly shortening. Whereas people once used to be able to read *Don Quixote* or *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* in just a few sittings, now only a select group of dedicated scholars would – nay, could trudge through so many pages, and only after expending much more relative time, attention and effort than ever seemed necessary. Whereas once upon a time our beloved “*Glass Bead Game*”¹ was deeply understood and loved as an art-form, learning or playing it was now considered far too cumbersome to garner anyone's attention. The great Classics of

Knowledge were being turned to ashes without even a single book having been burned.

Even the Arts and Music were never the same again. People used to listen to *Bach & Chopin* and even *Les Paul & Mary Ford* playing into the moonlight, but now people only had the attention span to listen to the most crude, rude and short bops, pops and bebops. Suddenly painting became considered old-fashioned and mechanical, and automated graphical designs became much more popular. The whole human world was modified and turned upside down – yet almost everyone viewed these changes as indisputable, growing progress for a brighter and better future for mankind as a whole.

6.

It was when Nicolas graduated from the Academy and was in his Second year at the newly formed Institute of Technology that things really began to change. On the other side of the world existed a small cadre of rebels who had assembled themselves against the Oracle, but never could quite explain to the rest of Society 'why?' – Other than, "It was against their Traditions." See, they came from an old religion that no one understood, and the Oracle could only poorly explain. Religion had grown out of favor with the masses, and this foreign, outmoded religion especially seemed far too traditional and esoteric for people to grasp what it truly and fully meant to its devout followers.

Soon these rebels gathered up just a few spirited and bloodthirsty men to strike at the heart of the Oracle: a place they identified that the Oracle held the most influence and power. When people turned on their Oracles that day, they saw what irreversible *fait-accomplis* the Rebels had planned and duly accomplished. They saw the two great Obelisks of the Oracle's

power fall amongst the ruins and wreckage of fallen metal and dead bodies. For a brief moment it seemed that the strength of the Oracle had finally faltered!

Now while at first what the rebels had achieved seemed truly astonishing & frightful, it quickly became clear that this was more a symbolic attack than anything meaningful and long-lasting. Everyone soon came to realize that the Oracle was deeply embedded across all the entirety of society, not just the hallowed ground where the reactionaries had attempted to uproot its expanding power. The event of the twin felled Obelisks proved that the Oracle's tentacles were spread so far and wide that no one could strike out against it with anything more than a brute, short-lived attack, thwarting perhaps only temporarily the growth rate of its rapidly, all-encompassing and far-reaching influence.

7.

Soon, even darker days began to dawn upon us. The Oracle itself began to strike back, albeit passively. Not just against the rebels who had allied against it, but against anyone who stood in the Oracle's way in its mission for global domination. To facilitate this, the Keepers of the Oracle added addictive, amazing new features that encouraged everyone to carry an Oracle in their front pocket at all times. Quickly, these Oracles functioned more like a comforting safety-blanket than an actual, useful device for gathering and accessing information. Over time, even many of the former rebels themselves were turned into Oracle users. No one was free from its grasp, and it seemed there was no foe that could hasten its rising nor the monolithic force with which it exerted control over human nature.

In the meantime, Nicolas had graduated from the Institute of Technology and was working for many of the Keepers whose job it was to propel the Oracle ever forward. At first he was an eager young technology worker, and he helped these corporations make

the Oracles smaller, faster, more visually stimulating and containing even more historical knowledge than any previous Oracles had ever contained. Even some of the wise old books which the Oracle ultimately replaced were contained within it.

After some years though, many of the men in this new Oracle-led Society had become so enamored with Oracles, that they began to stop having children and families all-together. Many people had given up on the strong familial bonds that they had once enjoyed with one another. Theirs had become a self-centered life, a life pursuing solely one's own wants of knowledge and pleasure, all contained within the network of Oracles. Eventually birth-rates declined, and the ever-growing Oracle network had to find fresh, new, naive humans to infiltrate with its vast arrays of Entertainment and Education. After all, no one could deny the Oracle's amazing abilities, and it was thus promptly and quickly adopted by all citizens of all the countries on Earth. By now vast swaths of society had become nothing more than servants to the Oracle's ability to entertain and enslave their own minds.

It was at the Oracle's early peak influence over mankind that Nicolas himself began to feel deeply disillusioned and troubled by the Oracle. He felt that, despite all its promises, it often became a wedge, separating humans from one another, even from their own dreams and aspirations. He began to feel that the Oracle only served to alienate man from his own true bond with nature, while firmly placing him in an untenable and unsustainable position amongst a rapidly changing and degrading world. As Nicolas continued to work at assembling new stores of knowledge to be contained within the Oracle, he would often find himself singularly drawn to subject and topics on how humans used to live and survive before the Oracle's existence. He soon felt that any meaningfulness that humans used to feel about the Earth and God and each other had been stifled by the very Oracle he had been working to advance and ensure the continued dominance of. He kept asking himself, "Why were the old days better than these?" And he thought, somehow, if he could just find the answer to this question he would become wiser and feel more fulfilled.

Part 2

The Escape

8.

It was in his 30th year on this Earth that a desperate and melancholy Nicolas finally walked out of the Valley of the Silicons, where the Oracle had first been invented, and walked into one of the few, unspoiled mountainous forests left. His parents had both aged and passed, and what few friends, family and siblings he had left he had grown apart from, both emotionally and in terms of reasoning with the way the world had changed. It seemed that everyone and everything around him in the Oracle world had become at a distance. A remote and distracted being, apart from the purposes that we all used to know.

His scholarly work was not missed by any of his managers or coworkers, for he was quickly replaced by another more green and naive dilettante who had more enthusiasm for the Great Oracle Project than himself. He was certainly not the first to leave the Valley, and he wouldn't be the last. When Nicolas departed to the forest, he left behind him a Society of endless innovations, save for the One Innovation which truly spurred him on: Fulfillment.

Out in this forest it was a hard life for Nicolas at first. He had no friends, he had no particular knowledge about life as it once was, no more than he had gleaned from ancient books. But out in this forest he did find a place to start again where no one had yet tried. With his heart and mind full of future hope again, he began to build a place to live atop a tall hill overlooking a valley filled with live & blue oak trees, a newfound place he could call his home.

He started with just some simple shelters at first, and a few animals to provide him some sustenance, for not everyone had stopped eating meat yet; and he learned some basic foraging skills from some of the books he had carried with him. He was not completely alone either, here and there a few small rural settlements began to spring up, built upon the wreckage of old settlements lost and emptied when the Oracle had begun to take shape.

9.

One day while he was foraging a nearby congenial quiet little settlement, one which had been dubbed, "The Land of Peaches & Cream," he came upon an orchard of peach trees which had just ripened and were dropping their sweet juicy fruits. He noticed out of the corner of his eye some fawns delighting in this perfect bounty, and in the distance, just past the young deer, he saw a damsel of exquisite and remarkable beauty. She carried over her arm a large wicker basket filled with wondrous peaches, the largest fruits Nicolas had ever seen before. He watched this lass singing and gathering tasty treats with such a cheerful demeanor about her, frolicking through the groves surrounded by delightful forest creatures, when suddenly out of the blue one of the wild beasts beset to siege upon her plentiful basket of fruits! She shrieked in distress and Nicolas ran to stop the furry thief in its tracks.

Before Nicolas could get close enough to ward of the errant wrongdoer, he saw that the one shrieking and bleating wildly was not the fair-maiden as he had thought, but in fact it was the young

deer itself, for this fairest of maidens had laid a swift kick to its neck! The wild animal ran away to the thickets of conifers nearby to seek refuge from her expert pummeling. Nicolas thought to himself, “Who is this girl, this lady, this woman who carries within her such a resilient yet joyful pioneer-woman spirit?” Before he could finish day-dreaming about this delightful being, she vanished into the outer forests.

He soon learned from the gossipy local towns-folk that this pulchritudinous, well-favored soul had only recently – as he also had done – sought refuge in the forest as an escape from the Oracle world. Upon learning her name, it soon became the utterance he would whisper under his breath as he foraged, chopped wood and performed the strenuous tasks of building his shelters and tending to his livestock each day, repeating over and over this name in his mind, naming, whistling and thinking about – the illustrious, fair-maiden called Genevieve.

Over the course of the next few weeks, he would frequently try to catch a glimpse of her in the nearby orchards where she often

picked from the recent harvests, and would then retreat to the hills that lined the forests. When he would catch sight of her he delighted in seeing her fill her large basket with such delightful foraging, and, on one autumn day, as she sat down by the river adjacent to one of the nearby orchards, Nicolas carefully sat upstream from her and began to whistle and then sing a tune he had learned out in the wilderness:

“ . . . Oak trees, Autumn leaves and river bells,

The one who whistles and sings, delights themselves,

But late one day the streams stopped flowing,

The bird-calls ceased, the herds stopped lowing,

– Silence, patience, waiting, nature kept a-calling,

Famines and droughts, mothers were left bawling,

Then the one who used to sing began to sing of deep pain,

Mountain-falls began trickling, soon came a strong rain,

Then sunshine, blue-jays and robins, resumed to chirp and cry,

Through the chaos & wrath of nature, the heart may often reel, but it will also soon fly. . .” – Nicolas resumed whistling the same tune for a few phrases, then Genevieve interrupted him.

“I have seen you out here in the forests looking at me.”

“Oh you have, well drat. I very much wanted to introduce myself to you properly before you noticed me.”

“Well then carry on already, what have you been waiting for?”

Embarrassed and left stammering, Nicolas proceeded to introduce himself.

“Well, first off, my name is Nicolas Theodoro D'Orleans De Braganca, and I came here to the forests recently from the Oracle World, to escape from what I regarded as the horrors of it all. . . although I do hope someday to be able to speak about these matters in a much more eloquent way than this, for it is often so hard to put into words exactly why you have done something, do you agree? Often we do things almost out of sheer instinct, not fulling thinking through or realizing what the outcome will be.”

“Well that is an interesting question you pose, do you always state such deep questions upon first introduction? And you certainly have a way about whistling and singing, don't you Nicolas?” Genevieve laughed out loud a little, to which Nicolas blushed a fair shade of cherry red. “Well I didn't mean to shame you for your question or your singing. It really was a delightful song, where did you learn it?”

“Oh, I suppose when you have so much time out here, working in a life of nature, in the forests and pastures and by the riverbanks, you learn so many new things about yourself. I never knew I could be such a poet for example. In the Oracle world, who needs such poetry there? But here amongst the picturesque forests and orchards, this is exactly where such arts should be had!”

They chatted for what seemed like hours about their own upbringings in the Oracle world, about arts and nature, and when the sun sat low in the sky, they enjoyed the ripe juicy basket of peach fruits she had gathered earlier that day. When they departed that dusky evening, each going their own way, they had made plans

to meet again the very next day and over the course of several afternoon picnics, they swiftly grew to enjoy each other's company. Nicolas got to know Genevieve's life-story and he was charmed by her ultimate presence, personality, knowledge of the forest, adventurousness and opinions of the Oracle world.

One key element that they continuously bonded over was a shared distrust of one key aspect of the Oracle: the growing allure of its Entertainment Complex, for Genevieve had lost her only brother to the Complex. Her younger brother never exited the Oracle's world of Endless Games, and languished as one of its countless lost victims. There were many such persons in the Oracle world now, young and old men alike who had never achieved adulthood; who remained forever children, lost and enmeshed in a land of jest, whimsical amusement and a world of virtual living.

IO.

Nicolas and Genevieve developed a pure and loving bond for one another and over time they became close companions, working as compatriots and starting a family together. Through their difficult work, their growing farm in the forest began to take shape around them. It was an arduous life at times; they had to find their own water, they had to fell and chop wood with rudimentary tools by hand, they had to gather their flock each night to keep them protected from wild predators, and they had to educate their children themselves from what books they had brought or could borrow from other families in the small settlements. But they never felt boredom, they fell to sleep early and then rose upon each glowing sunrise. They built a life which gave them stories to tell each other for years to come, and adventures that built character and a devout respect for one another.

Their growing children soon began to be old enough to share in the joyous burden of family farming, and with this newfound leisure, Nicolas had the time to build a small forge and craft hand-

fashioned tools, just as his father had so often done before him.

With these tools he was able to create all sorts of wooden objects for his family to enjoy. He even put together a small chess board with thirty-two wonderfully handcrafted pieces, and taught the entire family how to enjoy this more intellectual, challenging game.

Life seemed wholly at peace on their rural homestead, but even with the hard-fought abundance their rural settlement had to offer, they often still wondered, what had happened to the place they had come from? Was there any sense in reconnecting with the old world which they had once known? Was this life of hard-work in the forest, running a farm and raising a family, really worth it? In the still moments when such doubts often arise, they had these deep, unsettling questions – but they also held firm convictions that they had made the right choice to leave that other, now-distant world.

II.

It was by a chance encounter while looking for some water out in the forest that Nicolas and Genevieve met a young man named Peter Camenzind. He was a tall, strapping young man with piercing eyes and a beaming smile. His demeanor was very friendly and his spirit immediately put one at ease. It seemed that his upbringing growing up and working out here in the forest, had turned him into a virtuous and likable soul. He also had a useful talent for mapping out the old watering holes and natural springs that lined the canyons and valleys of the mountains; his knowledge having been passed down to him, as he came from an old Mennonite settlement that had established itself deep in the mountains, even before the Oracle had come to be. Peter willingly shared this information with his new forest confidantes and allies.

When they would occasionally meet at one of the fresh mountain springs nearby to the settlement, such of which were loosely-guarded secrets amongst them, Peter would tell them all about his adventures and misadventures, maturing out in the forest

while watching nature and the valley slowly rejuvenate itself once again. As a child coming into his young adulthood in a tight knit community of devout followers of an ancient religion that had all but disappeared from the outside world, these old-tales of both the happiness and piety of nature, and of child-rearing, delighted all who came to listen. The Camenzinds were some of the most excellent story-tellers of the old forests and mountains.

Nicolas, having grown up within the Oracle-world, initially held suspect many of Peter's Anabaptist claims, but some aspects of young Peter's family life he had often been fascinated with. How had these pious Mennonite families lived all these years? How had they retained such strong, growing familial and societal bonds, and how had they stayed away from all the things which the Oracle had contained and offered? He thought surely some answer and nugget of truth must exist in what the Camenzinds had practiced all these years. . . . Something had kept them content enough and free from the allure of the Oracle.

During one of the Mennonite settlers' Sunday potluck dinners,

Nicolas's youngest son, Jean-Pierre – tiny bundle of new life and energy that he was – asked old Papa Camenzind, Peter's ancient and weathered grandfather, “Papa, How did you become so old & wise out here in the forest?”

Nicolas quickly scolded the sweet, curious young lad, “That is no way to speak to your elders, young-man – stifle yourself!”

“Oh hush, Nicolas!” said Papa Camenzind, running his hands through his long white beard, “Your child can provide us an entertaining example to sermonize about.” The large old man crouched down to little Jean-Pierre, patted the young tyke on his little towhead, and then whispered in his ear, “Well young scamper, you know there really is some truth to those words uttered up high on the Mount. . .”

Papa Camenzind then turned to the whole group and he said in a strong booming voice, as if he was giving his life's final sermon to the gathering, “Why exactly are you young people always roaming about? What is it you are searching for? The life that you are seeking, you will not find. When the heavenly God created

humans, he kept everlasting life for Himself, and gave us death. So accept your fate. Each day, wash your head, bathe your body, and wear clothes that are sparkling fresh. Fill your stomach with tasty food. Play, sing, dance, and be happy both day and night. Delight in the pleasures that your wife brings you, and cherish the little child who holds your hand. Make every day of your life a feast of rejoicing! This is the task that God has set before all human beings. This is the life you should seek, for this is the best life a mortal can hope to achieve.”²

Over time, the Mennonite families became well known to Nicolas and his family, as this was the new society which they had fallen in with, amidst the chaos of the wilderness. It gave them a feeling of deep fulfillment working as part of a community again, albeit a small one, one which seemed more like society was before the Oracle had existed. A society and camaraderie which they had begun to yearn for, away from the Oracle-led world that they had forsaken.

12.

It was in Nicolas's 48th year that he and his eldest son Jesse embarked on a journey to climb atop Mount Tioga, to see if they could catch a glimpse of the world that he had once come from. They chose a crystal clear spring day to start their journey, when the winter rains had washed the sky of the overcast and smokey haze that lingered over the mountains in those times. They spent several days reaching the summit, one of the highest peaks within the Sierra Mountains. At night they camped out, laying under a waning crescent moon, with the bright streaks and stars of the Milky-Way Galaxy above, a campfire sparking and settling between them. They felt during these moments that somehow they were just a small, insignificant part of the vast grandeur of Nature. By the warm campfire, Nicolas would tell his son all sorts of stories of what life used to be like when he had been a young man himself. He told him all the many reasons why he and Genevieve had left where they had come from. He tried to impart on his son a feeling that the Oracle had become a burden on their soul, and on the souls of those whom they had grown up with. On day three, when

they finally reached the top of the towering Summit, they looked down upon their own vast valley below; they could see the Mennonite settlement, the old "Big Oak" settlement, and even down into the great Tuolumne River basin, which separated them from the last parts of the wilderness, beyond which was the final mountain which Nicolas had crossed when he left the great Valley of the Silicons: Mount Hamilton.

Nicolas had a pair of looking-glasses which he had taken when he left the Oracle City, and in the distance, over the tops of the furthest mountains, he focused the lens so he could see the old place from which he had come. For a while he looked very carefully in the distance. He could just barely make out man-made shapes jutting out from the foothills entering the Oracle civilization; shapes which looked to be perfect, long squares stacked upon each other. Nicolas was puzzled, and it took him a long time and some rough contemplation to figure out exactly what he was looking at?

After much examination through the looking glasses, he realized he was seeing different colored shipping containers,

stacked as far as he could see. Some were emblazoned with the words COSCO; others said EVERGREEN & MAERSK, each labelled with a different shipping company name. While this struck Nicolas as odd, nevertheless, it did not seem so out of the ordinary that people in the Oracle society would repurpose old shipping containers for something else. He pondered, what had happened to the civilization he had once called home, that the hills would now be filled with shipping containers? He also wondered what mystery was contained within each and every one of them. . .

On the journey home, back down the side of Mount Tioga, Jesse observed his father in his confused and ever-musing state. He was usually a confident man, but for the two-day trip home, Nicolas continued to be absorbed in what they had seen. He wondered in distress, for he had hoped prior to this journey that what they would have witnessed would have quelled his desire to know even more. The closer they got to home, the more he opened up, and they discussed it amongst themselves. Someday soon, they both would like to know more about those curious things they had

seen only from a distance.

13.

In the spring of the 49th year, Nicolas and his eldest son decided to get that closer look. Over that last winter they had fashioned a small wooden canoe, and after many trials and tribulations, they had gained the confidence that it could carry the two of them swiftly across the great Tuolumne River basin towards Mount Hamilton. While they worked on this vessel together, Nicolas thought that this must have been how his own late father had felt when he and his young siblings had helped in the workshop of his youth. One afternoon, they were finally done with the canoe, and were quite elated by what they had just hand-crafted together. Father and Son jubilantly carried the finished object out of the workshop, as triumphant men would carry a torch, thrust towards the sky. They both placed the watercraft on the tall grass and stood by, looking at this finished carved piece, enamored with the fine handiwork that they had accomplished together.

The next morning, as the dew was still settling on the forest

trees, they quickly dressed, packed and carried the canoe into the wooded forest together, headed in the direction of the grand river. They swiftly came upon the nearby shore and looked at each other with elegant and confident smiles, before setting the craft in the cold and icy waters coming down from the still frosty, snow-capped foothills. When they set out on the water, small ripples on the surface lifted the bow of their skiff as they rowed. As they got further out into the waters, the long-wide arcs of waves undulated them slowly, in between the steady vibrations of their sculling upon the otherwise calm streams. They listened to the quiet murmurs and gurgles of the river basin as they crept up the ancient delta in silent anticipation.

“When you are floating down the river, it really speaks to you.” said Nicolas to his son. Jesse agreed, and they quietly floated down the river together.

Over the length of the day and into the moonlit night, they travelled down the river basin and worked their craft up along the farthest shores, on their way to the last parting Mountains closest

to the Oracle City. When they reached the outermost banks they disembarked and left their worthy vessel under a large cottonwood tree, the only one of its kind along that river. Then they set down a small camp to take a brief rest before daybreak.

I4.

At dawn they packed lightly for the final leg of their journey, and left their small riverside camp when the first sun-rays hit the colossal mountain. Early they approached, and then began to ascend the foothills of Mount Hamilton. They could now see that in not too far distance the air quality was much worse than they had seen previously, as if a small but steady fire was burning beyond it. The smoke seemed noxious and heavy, as if the fire was made of wet leaves and spoiled furs, though they doubted its origins to be so natural. They had gotten used to hazy air in recent times, but it seemed that the issue was originating from the Oracle City itself.

When they finally reached the tall summit of the Mountain, they got out the looking-glasses and took turns peering out over the Valley of the Silicons below. As they had witnessed in their last journey, they could clearly see that a large portion of the valley had been turned into strange sort of storage-container shanty towns that consisted of large blocks stacked haphazardly and skew-whiff

in every direction. These formations were all throughout the valley and even up into the hillsides. Each had above it massive towers with antennas pouring over them, and some of the misty air was originating from these individual towns, as it seemed each storage-container encampment had a fog emanating from it. Combined, they created much of the thick haze in the valley air.

Much to their amazement, they saw in the middle of the valley what looked to be a very pristine and clean looking area, as if covered by glass. This central area was a large, bright white circle, but with an extremely colorful center. It seemed to be pumping out a thick, translucent steam, as it created a misty glow from this spectacular centerpiece. It was an epicenter which looked wholly unlike the vastness of the shabbier, stygian-looking parts of the valley outside of this crisp, clear and brilliant center-point.

Emerging from this bright and colorful glowing hub they could see flying machines, similar to planes or helicopters, but much smaller and able to turn and fly in any direction much faster than Nicolas had remembered. To-and-fro around this shining area, a great

multitude of objects were coming and going, often in large swarms.

They were on the farthest eastern edge of the valley, but below them was one close shanty town that they could see very clearly. Above this small area some of these flying objects began to collect. Suddenly, the smoke stopped and they could see people exiting and hurriedly gathering outside the storage containers, each holding an Oracle up to the sky. The flying objects began emitting into the air some sort of massive holographic presentation, which Nicolas and Jesse could see quite well from their vantage. To Nicolas this seemed to be some sort of advertisement, as the first display seemed to emphasize a sense of urgency, the need to act now while supplies lasted; the second presentation showed someone who looked to be a professor who was speaking from authority; and then the third montage showed the social-proof, of all the happy people that had liked and loved the Hologram until that point in time. Below they could see the people cheering this presentation on, but no one was clapping, for each and every

person gleefully held in their hands an Oracle up to the Holograms in the sky.

Nicolas glanced over at his son Jesse, who seemed to be enraptured in the splendor of the Hologram, enchanted as if entranced by what he was witnessing. Nicolas had begun to piece together ideas in his mind of what had happened since he left the Oracle City, and instinctively became very concerned with what he was seeing. He quickly told his son to look away from what they were watching, to which Jesse looked back at his father and saw his newly crestfallen face. He could see that his father was now disturbed by what they had both witnessed together. They immediately began walking back down the Mountain, away from the Oracle City, away from the Valley of the Silicons, away from the sights and scenes of the Holograms. They were extremely tired on their journey home, as if the events and the mists of the Oracle City had worn them down. Nicolas kept furtively worrying, and was quiet. After they had found their trustworthy canoe and had begun rowing, Nicolas talked little, contemplating his sadness over

how the Oracle had only further entrenched its foothold over mankind.

15.

When they arrived back at their forest village, Jesse could not stop telling everyone all about what they had seen in the Valley of the Silicons. "It was a site to behold!" Jesse told anyone who would listen. "They have flying picture shows that look as realistic as me telling you this right now, and the whole place has a mist, an enchanting hazy glow to it!" He started asking troubling questions of his elders like, "Why do we live out here in the forest? Why don't we live closer to the Oracle City? Here in the forest, life and work is hard and monotonous, the only entertainment are these ancient books. Why can't I enjoy some of what the Oracle has to offer?"

Nicolas only confided in Genevieve what he thought had become of their old homeland. He wondered what exactly had happened, and why everyone was living in storage containers, and cheering on the Oracle's Holograms? What strange chemicals are in the mist and smoke of the Oracle City? But most of all, much more than what had happened to the outside world, he became concerned with what effect this all had on his son. Why had he

chosen to take his eldest son to see the unknown and fallen Oracle City from afar? How can he better explain to his son why they lived outside the Oracle world? Everyday, as he and his eldest son did chores, he would try to explain to Jesse why the Oracle was a detriment to his development as a human being, and why his parents wanted to shield him from it.

Part 3
The Lost Son

16.

Nothing had worked. Jesse really wanted to see and feel the Oracle City once more. He too was more perturbed lately like his father. Jesse wanted to learn more to quench his burning desire. He was stuck asking himself again and again, in an endless, hopeless, internal squabble, “Why was it better to toil in a forest than to watch picture shows in the city? What was so much better about the forest air? The city air seemed to breathe so much life into a person! Why did his family insist on living out here in the wild?”

Nicolas had come to a troubling conclusion himself, for he had come to think that the only way he could break his son from this feeling and questioning was to let him experience it for himself, so that he may fully reject it as he once had rejected it himself. In the 50th year of Nicolas, the family made the decision to let Jesse venture out on his own. Somberly and quietly, they packed Jesse a small hiking bag and hugged him and held back tears as they bid him a proper farewell in his journey. A quest to find out the truth

about the Oracle for himself.

Nicolas hiked with his son to the edge of the river, where they had left the faithful canoe they had built together those many months ago. On this walk he had some time to think about what sagacious parting remarks he would tell his son.

“Remember Jesse, there is truth to all sides, yet some paths to suffering lead down a broad road that many a man willfully run through on their way to ruins. And then there's the narrow gate that one should strive to learn to crawl towards on all fours, and then walk to, and then march on through with one's head held high! High as if climbing Jacob's ladder towards the heavens. Remember these words son, for somewhere in them is the answer that you seek.”

Jesse hugged his father and thanked him for his wise and kind words, then he began drifting down the big river, alone for the first time, in search of what answers and truths he could find on his own in the Oracle City.

17.

When Jesse reached the top of Mount Hamilton, he looked down upon the Valley of the Silicons below. He saw the great clean Oracle City with its colorful center emanating mist in the distance, and from it whirring objects flew hither and thither. He saw the throngs of people below watching the grand Hologram shows as they appeared spectacularly before them. As he descended the mountain, he could breathe in the thick mist from the Oracle City and it made him feel happy and light and it made his aching muscles from his long journey no longer concern him. In fact, he felt more alive than when he had even smelled the freshest spring mountain air from whence he had come from.

When he reached the bottom of the foothills he was within a short jaunt from several stacked shipping containers. Suddenly, one of the flying objects appeared above him. It scanned him for his Oracle, saw that none existed, and moved on. That is when he heard someone nearby shouting, "Over here Alexa! Over here!" The flying machine promptly bee-lined over to this loud man,

scanned his Oracle, received his request, and began to present him with one of the most beautiful Holograms ever invented.

“FEATURING THE MORGAN TWINS OF THE VALLEY OF THE SILICONS. . .”

Jesse could not look away from this image, despite the distance he was standing from. He decided to move closer. Before him he saw two ravishing twin sisters, about his age, singing an Aria of exquisite beauty; the type of old music his father had talked about. Even though the Hologram was clearly playing for this other fellow, it appeared as if the two sisters were looking directly at him too. When the delightful and extravagant show was over, he turned to the stranger with the Oracle and asked, “Where can I find these two twin sisters? They're the most heavenly beauties I've ever seen.”

“Where can you find them?”, the man cajoled. “You find them in the Hologram of course. They're not real, nothing in this world is real anymore. It is all pure embellishment my lad. Anyways, you must be mad and you're wearing some quite funny clothes there

young man. Go get back into your own Conex, Ok? I requested this show, not you.”

Jesse thought this man was rude, and looked very much like a crass individual, so he walked away undeterred to go in search of his newfound quest, in search of the Morgan Twins! Surely they must exist somewhere, he said to himself. Surely they must reside deep in the limpid purity of Oracle City, for they, it seemed to him at the time, with their enchanting modesty and exquisite beauty, were as clean as the wind-driven mountain snow.

18.

When he reached the gates of the Oracle City, there was a line of well dressed people entering. It was a diverse mix of men and women, young and old, each looked elated to be allowed into the shining city. Each well-mannered person scanned their Oracle at the first turnstile and swiftly entered the city gates. At the main gate, above a security guard, a big glowing sign bore the words:

“Apple ONLY, No Android”.

Jesse knew what an apple was, he had eaten plenty in the Mountains, but he had never heard of this android. He got into the line anyways, just to see if he could gain entry into the pristine City.

When it was his chance to enter the turnstile, he hesitated a moment, to which the guard clambered and clobbered at his post, in a coarse and gruff voice he said, “You are holding up the line! Show me your Apple!”

“I don't have an apple,” replied Jesse.

“Well then show me your Oracle young lad, But I assure you

only Apples are allowed into this city.”

“But I don't have any such Oracle either!”

“You've got to be kidding me son, is this some sort of joke?”

“No, I do not have an Oracle, I come from the mountains and forests hither and thither.”

The security guard began speaking into his own Oracle, saying that his manager better get down here because, “we have a problem.”

Soon a scrawnier looking fellow appeared and asked the on-duty guard what was the problem.

“Well, this here young lad says he doesn't have an Oracle, and that he comes from some forest over yonder – this has never happened before. What am I supposed to do?”

The scrawny looking fellow now looked as equally annoyed as the security guard and said sternly, “Just come here young man, let's head into the main office and see what we're supposed to do in this case, since it has never happened before.”

In the main office, which was a storage container positioned on the wall between the outside shanty world and the Oracle City, an elderly man at a small desk in a partial cubicle was queried. After much back and forth discussion they emerged from his desk and the scrawny fellow said to Jesse, “Here is an Apple on loan from Oracle City. You are to carry it with you at all times. Enjoy your stay, where are you headed anyways?”

Jesse replied in a bold and haughty manner, “To see the Morgan Twins!”

The Scrawny man smirked, smiled and laughed the most bellicose laugh imaginable, then yelled to the old man, “Hawh! This young lad thinks he can meet the Morgan twins!”

The old man poked his head out from his cubicle, and in a jovial, yet mocking tone, exclaimed, “Good luck to you young man. You will surely find what you are looking for in the City!” As they both finished chuckling, the scrawny man patted Jesse on the back, and away he went.

19.

In the main city, everything was white, clean, and spotless, and at first the only color one could see came from the markets and shops that lined the main thoroughfare. In the storefronts one could see gigantic advertisements of Oracles with Holograms of every type imaginable. From Holograms on ancient dinosaurs, to war Holograms, to murder Holograms, to romance, but the most prominent Hologram at the time with the most advertisements, was the “Morgan Twins’ Aria,” it was called, and it captivated everyone, including women, but especially the men of the Oracle City.

On a big banner, flying above the skyline, a machine projected a typeset Hologram into the air:

**COMING SOON, THE MORGAN TWINS’ ARIA
BALL, only available at the AMAZON SHOWROOM!**

As he walked closer to the middle of Oracle City, he noticed in the windows of the residential buildings people much better dressed than those outside the city. Some still had families and

children like back home, but all were staring each at their own Oracles. Inside one apartment he saw a father watching a crime Hologram, a mother watching a romance Hologram, and a child watching a dinosaur Hologram. For a brief moment he thought of his father, mother and siblings, and he missed them, and he felt glad that they weren't all staring at Holograms like everyone here.

When he arrived at the middle of Oracle City, he could see one shining building which was not white like all the others. It was big and colorful, with all sorts of giant streamers and bows, and from this structure emanated all sorts of lights and Holograms. In big letters emblazoned above the building it bore the words:

Welcome to the Amazon Showroom, now ft. The Morgan Twins' Aria Ball.

He walked up to the main entrance, the big doors opened, a device scanned his Oracle, and Jesse quickly passed through the antechamber and into the Grand Ballroom.

20.

Inside, Jesse found himself suddenly placed in the most expansive indoor space he had ever seen before. The ceiling was painted with a moving picture show that had the grandeur of beyond even that of the most spectacular views of the Mountain sky; yet ever-changing; as if the sun was setting, then the darkness, stars, and planets would envelope the room in a twinkling twilight, after which the sun would suddenly rise again into a glimmering dawn, as if time was passing by faster than ever before.

The ballroom had balconies placed all over its mountainous walls, each filled with the joyous celebrations and ebullient dancing of partygoers. On one side of the ballroom he could see a parade, accompanied by a large caravan of displays and floats. On the other side was a long procession of people marching towards its center. In the center of the ballroom was a massive statue of a man. The sights were unlike anything Jesse had ever seen before, and the sounds were unlike anything he had ever heard before. The music was thumping, bumping, hissing and chattering, it was frantic and

alive, and when he breathed in the air he felt a sense of exuberance and excitement from every tone. Inside the ballroom the air was much thicker than the outside air, and many people seemed breathless while gyrating and moving to the corybantic rhythms and the splendid visual Holograms which surrounded everyone at once. His eyes locked with one pretty young girl who looked to be around his age. He was staring directly into her eyes, but she seemed to be in a trance, as if captivated by herself, enraptured within her own mind, and by the Holograms that swayed and flickered all around her.

The wooden effigy of the man in the center of the room was lit ablaze and a fire steadily started roaring beneath it. At the sight of this, throngs of people began springing and jumping triumphantly into the air with vigorous enthusiasm.

Jesse suddenly felt as if he needed a break from it all; he felt overwhelmed by everything he had seen, but breathing the increasingly dense air eased his mind. Beneath a portico which had a staircase leading up towards one of the balconies, he quickly

found a bench. He was about to sit down, when a mustached and well-dressed porter wearing a tuxedo with coattails appeared before him and offered him up a chalice to drink from.

“Young Sir, you look worn out. You must know that we cannot have you falling asleep in the Grand Ballroom. What would people think of our magnificent show! What would the sweet Dulcinea and seductive Delilah think if they were to see you tiring away like this! Please accept this fine drink and a free show, on the house.”

Jesse was indeed terribly quite thirsty and obliged, eagerly taking a gulp from the smooth, colorful glass. As he watched the effigy enveloped in flames and the embers flying all around the room, he took one last deep breath of the burgeoning smoke in the air, and then Jesse folded up within himself, like a cardboard box collapsing in a raging fire.

2I.

Note from the Translator:

This chapter seems to have been somewhat lost in translation, for parts of this story become hazy and vague when translated into our native tongue – in the interests of retaining and recreating the author's poetic intent, we have therefore employed our utmost efforts to construct a word-for-word translation of the original manuscript, the result of which is as follows:

“Soon I felt as if the world around me was falling away, and it became one large book. One of those old leather-bound hardcover books, with only the name on the cover. War-torn from having spent most of its life on an old library shelf. The favorite and most ancient book in the library.

I was seeing moments flash before my eyes on it's faded pages. Moments that had been stored in memories that I had long forgotten. Seeing myself, from the outside, as a small child sitting on an old wooden bench in front of a farmhouse that I grew up on. A bench that I had never thought of until that moment. A bench

and a house I could see so real, it was as if I was staring right at it, and as if it stared right back at me, as plain as day.

Stored memories, flashing before my eyes on pages, these moments became a set of a larger tapestry of moments. But not only my moments. Other's moments as well. All moments within this old scholarly tome. A universal order. The entire universe as a book, flipping through the pages of time, perhaps even starting over and repeating once more, then again and again, like in an endless loop of exploding universes and lives.

My life became just a piece of the larger tapestry, a page in this grander book. The world was so much smaller – yet so immense, seeing it unfold like this. I was for the first time seeing this as a world outside of myself. I then too could understand exactly what it was like to see myself as an insignificant yet noteworthy milestone in the history of mankind.

Then, the book was suddenly closed shut. What sort of darkness was all around me? Was this the end? Did I just give up the ghost and cease to exist? If I died at this very moment, I would

be at peace with myself and my small place in this world. . .

The book suddenly opened again, and flipped to a new page that I had never seen before. Suddenly, the Morgan Twins were before my eyes. Sweet Seductive Dulcinea and Delilah. We were looking at each other all three of us, looking at each other's eyes and faces and shoulders and arms and naked bodies. We moved closer and I could feel their hair fall all around me. We became contorted then, together, all three of us. I kept losing sight of who was who – Dulcinea flashed before my eyes, then Delilah. Which one was now in front of me? I kept losing track. We melded together all three of us, we became one. Then we released. I could sense that each of us had our own unique personality, but we were all One inside, we were all Unity, as if we were all part of each other. Agape with Love.

I felt this was a spirit that can only be felt when man has found contentment within himself, and his found place within the boundaries of nature in which God had placed him.”

– I suddenly awoke from this dream. I looked around. The

ballroom was empty now. A lot of time must have passed. The balconies and porticos were no longer even there and I saw someone cleaning the bare walls. He looked at me and said, "Closing time buddy. Tomorrow is the next show."

How could I leave what I had just seen! How could I forget these fairytales of poison that were now etched into my memory? How could I ever leave this life in the Oracle City. . .

22.

Nicolas and his wife became worried after the 30th day of not seeing their son return. After the 90th, they felt and looked full of grief. Was it wise to have sent their eldest son to the sumptuous waters of the Oracle City? After all, Genevieve had herself seen what the Oracle could do to a person when her own brother ventured away into its tempestuous clutches. It was simple human nature that the Oracle preyed upon, a human's own frailty and Achilles heel of wanting to be enamored and entertained by shiny baubles and trinkets. They had assumed their son would go to the city and become disgusted with it as they once had. Had they not raised their son well enough and good-natured enough to rise above such ignoble weakness? Nicolas now feared it would take his son thirty years to find out, like it had for himself, what evil nature resides within the wrath of the Oracle. Would he and his wife even still be alive then? Could they even wait that long to see their eldest child's face once more?

After a year, the waiting was too much for them. They grew

impatient and Nicolas decided to go off in search of his eldest child. The family all agreed to bear the risk, they packed father a satchel and off he went in a hurry. It took him a few extra days, but he hurriedly hiked down the great river basin with ease and passed the cottonwood tree where they had left the canoe in their previous journey together. Jesse had left it under the same tree and it warmed Nicolas's heart to see the fine craft they had both collaborated on as father and son. Then Nicolas ascended the last Mountain separating himself from the Oracle society. He passed the summit untrammelled, and when he quickly reached the bottom of Mount Hamilton, he breathed in the mist coming from the Oracle City and felt more confident in his choice to rescue his son. Soon upon entering the first shanty town, he saw a Hologram show which was advertising itself to an old woman nearby, it read:

THE ROMANCE OF FRANCISCO. . .

“What sort of tawdry Hologram is this?”, he thought. He watched it for only a moment and then immediately started thinking that this Francisco fellow appeared very much to bear a

resemblance to his son. . . but it couldn't be, could it? No, he was sure of it, this was his son! He was relieved to see his son's face again, so suddenly, and so realistically, but he was angered now too. "What did the Keepers of the Oracle do to my son?" He knew he must head towards the center of Oracle City to find answers to this woeful mystery.

When he reached the gates of the City, he went through the exact same rigamarole as his son had, and he was finally allowed into the City with a brand new Apple Oracle, as this was the new custom. He followed the advertisements to the Amazon Showroom, but with his prior knowledge of the Oracle he knew that was not where to look. He thought, "Where did the Keepers move the engineers to, the real workers who make the Holograms come alive?"

He saw the main loop of the Oracle City had towards its western section, a building which looked somewhat like an old University would have looked. It was pure white as alabaster, but it had columns that resembled the Parthenon, or an old Institute of

Technology that he would have attended in his own day. He opened the doors to this presumed University and inside he found rows of laboratories, each with men and women inside, teeming over electro encephalitic graphs and MRI machines. He walked down the long hallway but did not see anyone to talk to, except for the busy workers in the labs. In the 7th lab an old man had just exited through the door in a hurry when he saw Nicolas and said to him, "Excuse me sir, I never forget a face and you look quite familiar, did you attend the Technical Institute thirty or so years ago?"

"Why, yes," replied Nicolas, as the identity of this old professor came rushing back to him, "You're not my old Professor Zizek are you?"

"But of course, I am the very same man", replied the dapper looking old professor with his thin beard and barely shaven chubby cheeks.

"How have you kept active all these years? You must be 90 years old, yet you do not look a lick over 60!" said Nicolas.

“Well, the Holograms have kept me quite busy in my waning years, my lad – they take up all of our research time, you know. But where have you been, my old student? I have not seen your face in such a long time, and surely you should have been in these labs working with us on Holograms all these years!”

“Professor, it is such a long story that perhaps some day I shall jot it down on paper, but I fled the Oracle 30 years ago and left for the Mountains, past Hamilton and near Mount Tioga.”

“That is unheard of these days, no one has fled in at least 20 years! Not since the release of Hologram 2.0. . . What brought you back? I would surely be fascinated to know what sort of Hologram shows that you are looking for in your return?”

“Well, Professor, I have returned on account of my son. You see, he left our home in the forest, and we regretted letting him come here and we became very worried for him. And so we started thinking we had lost him to the Oracle, so I came looking for him. Perhaps you have seen him, his name is Jesse and he appears in the romance advertisements outside, though under some name –

Francisco, I believe.”

“Oh, that’s the latest romance Hologram which comes from the Nouveau-Romantic Department, made by Laboratory #13. All the Romances come from those hacks!” Sensing Nicolas was in a hurry, he added, “I would love to chat with you some more though, and perhaps MRI you, or at least let me EEG you while I play you some new Holos, as a brief test, of course!”

“No no, I do not wish to spend much time here, I must find out what has happened to my son right away.”

“Very well, I am sure I will see you again soon. No one leaves the Oracle City. Once you have an Apple, you will see it is quite difficult to find the resolve to go back. Head over to lab #13, they can help you in your search for your son, I am sure.”

Inside Laboratory #13, Nicolas saw two men and three women pouring over reams of data, and figures, and numbers. One with an unhealthy pallor of her face shouted, “We must make Francisco fall out of Love with Dulcinea, then in the next show, fall in love with Delilah very deeply, and they both run off and Holo together

without Dulcinea!”

Nicolas interrupted them brashly, “Excuse me, sorry for interrupting your fairytale, but I am looking for my son. He is this Francisco character you are using in your game.”

The woman with the pale face replied, “Your son? As if! Francisco happens to be one of the most naive and romantic characters we have had in years to peddle on these romance Holograms, he belongs to the Keepers of the Oracle now, you'll never get him back. As if this was your son!”

A second worker, who appeared just as pale as the first, but seemed a bit more lively and attentive to Nicolas's question, replied, “Francisco lives in the Kingdom of the Keepers now, where the Holograms originate from. We've never met them in real life, and never will. Anyways, they have all left Oracle City ever since the mist became harder to pump into the air here, because of the lousy air quality and all, especially with those louses in the shanty towns burning their own elicited succedaneum medicinals.”

Nicolas' head swam with concern for his son over all that he

heard. “Where can I find this Keeper’s Kingdom?” Nicolas asked.

“Oh gosh, no one knows anymore. . . Some say it is in Alaska, others Dubai. Really though, if Francisco is your son, truly what an honor it must be to become part of the Keepers of the Hologram world! He has probably met the Morgan Sisters IRL by now, if any of this is even real, of course. For who really knows what is real and what isn't anymore. But who cares anyways, Holos and the THC mist fix everything!”

Nicolas began to realize fully now what had happened to the Oracle world since he had left. Things had gotten much worse than he could have ever imagined. They were pumping drugs into the air now too! He always knew that he was right in leaving the Oracle world, and he thought that eventually his son would see this as well. He had taught his son to live a noble and honest life, not a life wasted on whimsical pleasures. He was ashamed to think that the Elites and the Keepers had a whole world of their own now, and that his son was part of it. . . a famous Hologram of the Oracle, Francisco. He prayed that his son would only be sojourned here in

this unreal, holographic world for a short while longer, would see the folly of his ways, and that he would soon come back to his real homeland to stay for good.

Nicolas, with a sullen heart, promptly fled the city to tell his wife what had happened to their eldest son, being quick to depart before the mists of the Oracle City sucked him in as well. On his way out of the City, before he climbed up the foothills to the Mountains separating him from home, he thought of the Oracle in his pocket. Could he use this Oracle to just see his son's face once more, even if it was an unreal, virtual version of him? He thought about it for one brief moment – then instinctively, he found a giant rock and crushed the Oracle that they had lent him into a million tiny little pieces.

Part 4

The Narrow Path to Redemption

23.

Jesse was sleeping on a balcony, at the top of a towering palace overlooking Dubai, when he awoke from his Holo-induced migraine. Sensing he had woken annoyed, Dulcinea, attached to his side and embraced in his bosom, whispered to him, “Want me to up the THC in your mix sweetie?”

Laying on the very opposite side of his body, Delilah retorted, “Our darling would prefer a mimosa to reduce the Holo-headache, I will go fetch the porter right away.” Then she, before scurrying away, gave him such a jealous, forceful kiss that it would have sucked the plaque off his gums.

It had been over a year since Jesse had met the Morgan sisters IRL, and he was still fond of them for more than just their undeniable charms and deceptively good looks. In addition to being some of the most beautiful and skilled courtesans of the Oracle world, they were its best educated as well. They had read all of the ancient books Jesse's father had uploaded to the Oracle in its early days, and the two most esteemed Professors of the society,

Professor Samuel Zizek & Professor Alyssa Rothenbaum had taken them under their tutelage early on. They were the finest two pupils amongst the Keepers. They were spiritual too, to the extent that one could be in the Oracle world. At least they meditated and stretched frequently, as all the Keepers did. The men all sought to know them and be with them, the ladies all envied and sought to emulate their every act. It was no surprise that they had risen to the ranks of the POP-HOLO fame in such short time. Delilah carried such a ferociously smart and seductive sultry mystique about her, Dulcinea such a young sweet wondrous gaiety and curious charm. They were enchanting beauties, and despite being identical twins, each one had a unique, individual flair about them.

Jesse was no slouch himself – he was different than everyone else in the Oracle City, for he had come from a far different place. He was more spiritual and romanticized than anyone else the sisters and other Keepers had met. He seemed more like what the historical Holograms depicted Renaissance men to act like. He also had about him the romantic naivety of a simple farm boy.

The three youths would all dream together of a life away from all of this, while Jesse would delight them both in describing the chaotic world out there in the wild of the trees and the mountains. He would of course embellish a bit in his curious and novel tales from the forest, combined with his entertaining descriptions of his later acts of courageous rebellion. In moments after meditation, when the sisters experienced the most extreme lucidity, they would often both confide in Jesse that they yearned to leave the Oracle City, some day, when they were ready and done with it, but that they still deeply enjoyed the whimsical pleasures of the Oracle world.

Delilah was Professor Alyssa Rothenbaum's favorite pupil and Dulcinea was Professor Samuel Zizek's star. Alyssa taught that it was man's individual productive achievement that had made him so noble, and it was the Oracle that was man's most worthy accomplishment in history, which was always her particular point of exemplification. She also taught that all happiness, fulfillment, liberation, and progress comes from the mind, and the Oracle was

just a product of man's thinking brain. Samuel taught that society itself, and man's common role within it, was the crowning achievement of mankind. He would often say that the Oracle only enabled us to all pool together in common interest, in search of the most compelling future for humanity as one unified structure. Its ability to entertain and educate and fulfill every man's wants, needs, and desires, had always kept the people supremely content. In this manner, although both professors' methods, styles, and interests seemed in juxtaposition to each other, combined with the common-interests of the Oracle, both Alyssa and Samuel served to augment one another's opposing positions. It was never clear if both of them knew this fact, as they often had large gaps and disagreements between each other. The two professors could not have been more different, and Alyssa's high-mindedness always put her in direct opposition to Professor Samuel Zizek. Regardless, everyone in the Oracle society loved to watch the two debate via live Holograms, and they were the brightest professors in all the Oracle world. The Holograms were the unifying fuel that let the

Oracle fire burn within the heart of every individual soul that was part of the Valley of the Silicons.

24.

In Jesse's first year of being a Keeper, he too became a devout student of the esteemed Professor Rothenbaum, and was tutored exclusively by her for some time. Jesse was quickly accepted into her mentorship because he had intrigued her greatly; he was so strikingly different from the mono-culture which had risen since the invention of the Oracle and its last big feature, Hologram 2.0. He amicably called her simply Alyssa, and it seemed at times that they were more compatriots than teacher and student, for Alyssa had many questions she would direct at her new budding pupil. Because of this, it was never clear who was teaching whom exactly. The professor's world was one of the brain, contemplation, and high-thoughts, and this attracted Jesse to her way of thinking, as she reminded him of his father, albeit, instead of eschewing technology, she embraced it. She found the goodness within it. It also intrigued him that she was one of the few Keepers who espoused a philosophy of extremely rational pleasure seeking, not the irrational whimsical pleasures sought by the plebs and parasites, as she called them, outside of her world. Jesse had also

learned in their long conversations that Alyssa was an orphan at birth, and he could not help but think that this colored her thinking. In his mind, her only downfall was that, since she had no family, she therefore had zero reverence for familial relationships. He thought this did not suit her philosophy well.

Alyssa had chosen for Jesse the alias Francisco because she absolutely loved the name, and for as long as anyone could remember the romance Holograms had to have a Latin flair to them. “Francisco, yes my young mysterious pupil, what puzzle and riddle lurks in that brain of yours? Francisco, my rising-star of the Romance Hologram. Do not listen to the bromides from that Samuel, the old fool. He knows not the romantic nobility which resides entrenched in man’s soul.”

“Give the people what they want!” was Samuel's battle-cry. Samuel was always such a staunch defender of the people, especially the lower classes. He was a man with a giant heart and he loved to use it.

Since Alyssa was a staunch defender of the individual mind, she

only supported those Holograms which elevated man upwards, towards a noble caste above themselves. Samuel loved the emotional and tear-jerking Holograms, the ones which provided the most dopamine hit and rush in the guts. In Jesse's comments to the two professors, he would show a vacillating support towards each one of them, much to the two professors' chagrin, but he was still very much under the wing of Alyssa. She was his mentor, and she decided his ultimate fate as a student.

Alyssa had dreamed and posited that eventually, the most Elite individuals of the Keepers would come up with new innovations and ground-breaking technology that would further invigorate man's nobility on this earth and throughout this universe, spreading to other planets as well. Samuel felt strongly that that the Oracle was the key to satiating every person in society, and thought that eventually the people themselves would work together hand in hand at its upkeep and improvements, as one whole colony, such as a group of ants or bees would all live, work, and toil together in the common interest of the whole. He would

often exclaim, “The arc of man’s universe always bends toward progress for the greater good of the whole!”

They were both staunch advocates of the Oracle society in their own unique way, and everyone viewed them both as its worthiest defenders. Jesse would watch their lectures with rapt attention, because he could see some elements of truth to both sides. He wanted to believe in the nobility and goodness of man and of the larger community, but it was hard for him to look out on the shanty towns and envision why Samuel thought that the great mass of men were so noble in and of themselves. Alyssa had such noble words, intelligence, and fantastic oratory skills. She was a defender of liberty, a defender of the mind, but also a defender of the excesses of the Oracle world. Samuel was the defender of the people, defender of the lower classes in the shanty towns, and a defender of the emotions of the heart. Therefore, in a lot of ways he too was a defender of what Jesse saw as the debased nature of the Oracle society. One commonality amongst the two Professors was that they both despised the family and ancient traditions of the

early type of mankind. This puzzled Jesse greatly.

25.

Jesse spent many of his waking hours weaving together new romance stories for the Keepers to all discuss and revel in amongst themselves before they sent them down to the University laboratories for final rendition. These lab workers thought that since they rendered the stories, they therefore controlled them, and the Keepers reinforced this notion, but in reality it was the Elite Keepers who really influenced the Holos.

It had been 45 years since the first crude 1.0 Holos were deprecated and retired. Ever since 2.0, the people in and outside the city could absolutely not get enough of them. Early on, the Keepers had to come up with so many intricate stories, with complex twists and turns to keep the older generations entertained, whereas the younger generations seemed to require much more simplistic plots, and their development was stunted and never matured – to the point where the stories needed no more than a very simple twist at the end. At some point in recent time, the drug-infused haze was pumped into the city constantly, in order to keep

the frenzied emotions of the viewers at peak resonance – yet this quickly resulted in an audience that was much easier to please, and therefore the new Hologram productions could be made far cruder, faster, and manifold than they ever were before.

Subsequent generations enjoyed these crude Holographic representations even more so than the prior.

The Keepers themselves all flew freely amongst their various retreats in Alaska, high atop Machu-Picchu, private temples in Tokyo, Shanghai, Jerusalem and Dubai. Around them, they had almost the entirety of the urban Earth under their spell, of what the Keepers called Enchanting-Entertainment, or simply “Enchantment,” and by way of the micro-doses of chemical cocktails that they had concocted under the supervision of the University health professionals.

Jesse excelled in the Valley of the Silicons, not only did he reap copiously from its fountains of pleasure and knowledge, but he also felt and received great joy in telling stories and coming up with new Holograms for the Oracle's shows. He felt important in this

new world in which he resided; he felt somehow like he could contribute to and embrace this newfound role as both a student and a Keeper of the Oracle. In the rare, quiet moments he was alone with his thoughts, he did at times feel a growing emptiness inside, a feeling that life no longer had a purpose to sustain itself; that life, instead of aiming at meaning, resolve, intention, a family, and a community to sustain it, instead it was just littered with surrogate activities to keep one occupied and entertained.

Whereas, back in his real home, where from he had been born into this world, each new season had its own challenges and excitements, and he could contribute in that small world in a big way – now, here in this foreign world, he was just another cog in a massive, complex, and perhaps all-consuming machine. . .

26.

Once a year, the Elite Keepers had their own private soiree where they discussed new ideas for technology and future adjustments to the Oracle's Hologram shows. Many of the Keepers would present recently developed storylines and state-of-the-art ideas at this technical conference, aimed at enhancing the psychological effects and impacts of their narrative concoctions. Some of the finest proposals would be beta tested on the vast swaths of users living in and outside of the Oracle City on a case by case basis. It was a way of mass testing some of the tweaks they would make to the platform before releasing it openly to the masses. After some time, if these changes looked fruitful, they would push them out to all of the Oracle users.

Jesse participated in these events quite extensively, as he was one of the few Keepers who had unique proposals: proposals which at first seemed a bit out of the ordinary, but after some short trial runs, people soon came to learn that his ideas had a positive impact on Oracle users' overall engagement. "Keep engaging with

them Jesse! The mass of men love what you are showing them.”

said Samuel at his last board review, and each year Jesse was able to propose features which increased viewership, steadily by a few percent here and there, which were unheard of gains in those times.

It was because of Dulcinea's inspiration that Jesse started a series of nature Holograms, initially just for her, but due to its popularity, it soon spread amongst many of the Keepers too, and over a short time it was released so that everyone in the general population could access it as well. For the first time, Jesse felt very proud of the Holograms that he was producing, and the people were tuning in and requesting more and more of them in droves. His nature Holograms were a complete hit as far as everyone was concerned, as evidenced by an exceedingly high viewership.

One delightful Hologram that Jesse concocted was titled, “The Animals that Enjoyed a Party at the Oasis.” This adorable montage featured a group of elephants, tigers, monkeys, zebras and gazelles gathering at a small oasis in the desert to enjoy and imbibe on the

fermented fruits of a ripe orange tree. The animals gorged on the fallen fruits and became quite tipsy. They cavorted and cajoled with one another, and the Hologram ended with these jovial and sleepy animals, both big and small, lounging in the company of each other by the intimate and tiny patch of water watching the sunset. For the first time, nature itself was gaining an increasing amount of eyeballs, and this fact was not at all lost on the Elites. But since the Oracle always had additional viewers each year, it was only cause for more exaltation of the Oracle's power.

After a few years, however, things began to change. People started watching the nature Holograms more and more, and the unrealistic, wholly artificial Holograms less and less. Some bold and rebellious types even started going outside more, and not just to request the latest Holograms. The people began to act out what they had seen in the jungles and animal kingdoms of the nature Holograms. In one stunning act of rebellion, on a sunny, bright, autumn afternoon, one of the shanty towns had a large outdoor gathering, the first of its kind in over a decade. Someone had

fashioned grills out of old scrap metal and caught some wild beasts from the hills to slaughter. Loud Banda music played over the horizon, and homemade brews of fermented, frothy beverages were shared from enormous vats. It was dubbed thusly: The “I just want to grill”³ Festival. Other shanty towns soon followed suit with versions of their own. It was clear that the nature Holograms had sparked some new kind of feeling in the shanties of the Oracle world.

27.

Professor Rothenbaum, as she often did, had a small get-together where she invited the upper echelon of Keepers. It was a wonderful, intimate gathering at one of the new Keeper's retreats, in the more recently involuntarily liberated and very docile state of St. Petersburg. Since this was one of the newer retreats, it had the latest Hologram projectors, a grand ballroom of its own for large private drug-induced Holo-orgies, and a giant cathedral, which had been an ancient Orthodox Church that was converted into a large Keeper's meeting-hall, surrounded by lush, natural gardens that delighted all the Keepers. Everyone, including the Keepers at that time, were enjoying the nature Holograms greatly. Everyone, that is, but Alyssa.

"You know, these nature Holograms are starting to cause people to follow their hearts and not their minds. That utter display of barbarity last week was really unwarranted and undesirable for our Society." said Alyssa in her typically strong, opinionated and judging manner.

“As long as it helped the people vent their frustrations, as a sort of safety valve,” said Samuel, “then we should allow it, no matter how debasing it may seem to us more noble citizens. Much like many of the crude Holograms we would not watch, the mass of the people have always led the charge. Alyssa my darling, ‘If it bleeds, it leads!’” He imparted these thoughts in his typically cool, yet impassioned manner as he toasted to the room.

Jesse, in partial agreement with Samuel, replied, “Sometimes your heart leads you to somewhere. Sometimes your heart leads you to wanting to be with nature, and your friends and your family within that nature. The life of man is not always black and white, sometimes it is filled with a hazy gray, the mixture of yin and yang, day and night, old and young, heaven and earth, inhaling and exhaling, the cosmic mystery is a unity of all these things. *Atman!*⁴ In fact, I have a new idea for the next Hologram release that I have been mulling over for some time, and I think now is the precisely correct moment to share it.”

Jesse indeed did have a new and striking proposal for the

Holograms, and it was as follows: Instead of spoon-feeding Holograms to the people, curated by an Elite group of Keepers, he proffered the idea, “Why don't we build a framework where the people can create their own Holograms for themselves?” This was one of the few instances where both Samuel & Alyssa agreed with one another, and both thought his proposal was worth considering.

This was one of the last big features to be added to the next major Hologram release, that is, of Hologram 3.0.

28.

The Unveiling Ceremony for Hologram 3.0.

“Ladies & Gentlemen of the Oracle World, four-score and five years ago, man set forth Hologram 2.0 as his most amazing accomplishment, and now, we are proud to bring to you what the most cultivated minds of our Society have achieved yet again! Do not believe those in our society that say we are being consumed by our own human frailty. Those that say the product of man's mind is the root of all evil. We know that this is not true, for when man creates a noble vision for himself, this is when man can rise to the occasion triumphantly! We are pleased to announce the latest feat that man can produce and achieve for himself! Such magnificent splendor as our glorious new Hologram 3.0!”

Cheers erupted, everyone's Oracle was extended stage-ward, capturing this historic event and reflecting rays towards it off of the sun. Alyssa slowly bowed, and then sat down.

Samuel, in rising to the Oracle screens, simply said, “Alyssa just gave us an amazing speech, didn't she? All about the nobility of the

mind, and the nobility of man's productive achievements for all of humanity – I say, Yes Alyssa! Of course. Give the people what they want. Let them eat cake! Give them the bread and the wine and the pleasures! Give them the product of the minds that they deserve and desire!” Samuel then shouted, “Jouissance! Incipit vita nova! Oraculum Sensus Communis!”⁵

Samuel and the people cheered and howled like a pack of wolves howling into the bright full moon, then the crowd went eerily silent. Through the silence, you could just barely hear the radio waves. Radio waves which were being clogged by the sound and fury of Oracle society in its entirety, struggling, and in unison, desperately trying to download Holo 3.0 at the very, exact same, perpetual moment.

29.

The people loved this new framework. In some circles, the men and women began to fashion and weave together their own Hologram families, their own Hologram identities and personalities. Some in the shantytowns would share these Holograms, and many of the crude new personalities became famous celebrities for everyone to watch. “*The Hoodwives of Shantytown #731 Zone 12*” became one such popular Hologram. It was unwatchable to many, these debased and degenerated lifestyles of criminal and gangster housewives, but to some in the shantytowns this became the most popular Hologram by far. It represented their true and gritty, hard way of life, hailing from the real shanty town ghettos surrounding the Valley of the Silicons.

Although Professor Alyssa had originally supported this Hologram freedom movement, she soon became disgusted with what people chose to entertain themselves with. She caught one of her past star pupils watching the “Hoodwives” Hologram, and dismissed the student from their post within the Keepers on the

spot. Samuel was elated with it all. He saw it finally as the death knell for Alyssa's unfounded dreams; for she had not embraced the people on their own terms, but had instead forced upon them a higher-class of commercialized entertainment and programming, according to him. He always thought such top-down idealism was paternalism run amok, and that the people should get exactly what they deserved.

“It’s not our job to figure out what people want. It’s our job to figure out what we want!” piped Samuel at any chance.

Jesse had mixed feelings about this experiment. He found no joy in the debased and degenerate Holograms, he too preferred Alyssa's approach. . . . But he saw this experiment as the long, last move in a game of chess he had been playing out in his mind for a long while.

30.

At his final professorial review, Jesse knew that Alyssa was not happy with his performance as of late. For some time, he had drifted away from the principles Alyssa espoused, and had gravitated more towards his inner desire for man to be free from the hedonistic degeneration. He organized in his mind a sort of explanation to give to Alyssa and to the rest of the Board of Professors.

He started, "Yes. It is indisputable. A cultivated mind is indeed a noble thing, but can't you see Professor? Can't you see how an uncultivated mind can be turned against itself? Samuel can see this, In fact he exploits it. He loves the new Holograms from the lower classes. He thinks that this is the democratization that the Hologram needed in order to thrive even more. The rational-mind that you strive for is indeed a noble thing, but far too often the mind is drawn to the irrational, the debased, the degenerate. Your cause is noble, Alyssa, but it is far too easily subverted by the ignoble. In fact, the only place I have seen your way of thinking

work, is way out there in the forests amongst the pious and mystical Mennonites. I realize that this is as far from what you want to hear – as far as from what you view as the truth, that it pains me to even reveal this to you. The only place your virtue prevails is amongst those who believe in a divinity that you deny the existence of. These Mennonites believe in a heavenly God, whereas you and Samuel only believe in a God as Man himself; yet these religious fanatics, as you would call them, are the only ones who are free from the Oracle's debasing grip over mankind. You want to embrace the best in people; and Samuel, the worst. Who wins out in the end amongst the masses? You cater to the elite; Samuel, to the masses. This is why your ideas are failing and falling. This is why the worst of our society's ideas are rising.”

He should not have gone any further, but his old, rebellious streak rose within him. There was an awkward pause for a moment in the room, and then he continued: “This Oracle world is all a horrible dark joke, that is what it is. A pox on the history of mankind. This society is doomed for its vices, especially its vice of

technological alienation. I have steadily come to think that neither you nor Samuel can rescue it from the abyss.”

“That is where you are wrong!” Alyssa suddenly snapped. “In the end, man's rational faculties will save it. Technological innovation is what will save man from his most base instincts.”

Samuel, with his typical sneering grin – although it seemed a bit more beaming than usual – said, “Jesse is once again being too cute by half – In the end, man will indeed win. Where Jesse is half wrong is in thinking that man deserves to be rescued by Moi from said Abyss. I say, let mans nature win! Man knows his own ideology is that of a shameless animal, but they do it all so anyways. The subjects of our society voluntarily agree to follow one or other such debasing and degenerate arrangement because they believe that, in doing so, they are expressing their freedom. And if nobler habits had persisted, they think they possess the freedom to do otherwise. This is what man considers liberty nowadays! Man is contrived into thinking he is making a choice. A choice for liberation and freedom, only to afterwards, after wasting his

dopamine rush on his whimsical fix, find himself somehow “mysteriously” satisfied and contented, no longer even knowing what he originally wanted with life. People no longer know themselves, nor the people around them; they instead just enjoy *la joie* of the moment, as if it were the nation inside of themselves!” Samuel paused for a moment, and took a drink from his glass. It seemed he finally had Alyssa on the ropes, and so, bolstered by the finest of whiskies, he continued on whimsically:

“The subject that sees objects in this world cannot see itself seeing. It cannot see how immoral and animalistic he is acting inside of himself, no more than a person can jump over his or her own shadow! Even in the faux conjuring of reflection, they think at night, as they try desperately to fall to sleep, what good moral act will I do tomorrow? But in the morning it becomes: what pleasures shall I have today? Oh, this day, and this night, this life, this empty nothing. . . Yet this is not as negative as it first seems, this is not the immortal proof one desires to find, the limitations of human reason, nor sexuality as a place of impossibility – but

positively: If humans are defined by an irresolvable tension between reason and its fallibility, between desire and its lack, this just proves they themselves are part of nature. For if contemporary science has shown us anything, it is that nature is riddled with inconsistencies, contingencies, and tensions. It is, in other words, constitutively incomplete, as is man. So let man be consumed by his own nature, that is, by nature in itself.”

Jesse, in a bid to save himself from falling irrevocably from his mentor Alyssa's graces, interrupted Samuel's ever-flowing trains of thought, and said more directly to her, “Alyssa, has your technology been good? Yes it has. It has been good for all the Keepers. It has been good for some indeed. I was just trying to articulate that it had not been good for everyone. This idea that innovation and progress is innovation and progress for everyone is a farce. Innovation for whom? For us Keepers, but of course! But what about all those rubes in the shantytowns? Are they living fulfilling lives? What about those that want to have a family, their own family, a traditional family, free from the perpetually-stolen

attention by an ever-present Oracle.”

Alyssa snapped out of her stupefied trance at Jesse's mention of fulfillment and families, this trigger gave her a new, resounding vigor. “Oh, you and your fulfillment. Who is to say that they are not living a fulfilling life! They are happy out there, they smile each day, they are well fed. This idea that before the Oracle was invented was a better time ignores all the progress we have made. You and Samuel both want to return us to nature, but what sort of life is that? Man is exalted above nature, above the base savagery of an animal and its offspring. I thought better of you, Jesse; I am deeply disappointed in your performance as of most recent. I am recommending you for expulsion from the Keepers!”

Samuel, Alyssa, and the rest of the board left Jesse alone in the review hall. Professor Zizek gave Jesse a failing grade, for, although he thought he was and had the most erudite and astute observations that he had ever seen in a student, Jesse's defense of family and tradition, had truly disgusted him.

31.

Jesse could have left at any time. As could have any of the Keepers. But no one who became famous in the Oracle world had ever done so before. Placed in the forefront of his thoughts were all of his doubts about his newfound life of leisure and pleasure. Over time, he had grown tired of the two sisters, and they had grown tired of him as well. By this point, the relationship had finally soured, and everyone, including the Morgan twins, privately knew that he would eventually, in due course, be kicked out of the Keepers. He was happy to be expelled, in fact, he was causing it himself. He had become bored here, nothing ever changed, he thought, "Year after year, day after day, the same monotonous life, the same little world of petty pleasures." His official reprimand would be decided in a few weeks and his expulsion publicly declared at that time.

Just before the judgement was officially announced, Jesse flew to one of the ancient monasteries outside of Tokyo to meet an older friend he had made within the Keepers. His friend was Hiromoto

Shinozaki, an old wise man, who, story be told, had come from one of the original Buddhist families of Japan, from a time long before the Oracle days. He had helped popularize shogun culture in a set of Holograms created early on in the Oracle's infancy. He had also attended the Academy in his youth, and had known Jesse's father personally when they had been classmates together.

Jesse & Hiro met at the temple of Tokugawa Lemitsu, meditated for a few hours, and then had a discussion which has been translated as follows:

“What exactly had my forefathers given up on, Hiro? An abundance of pleasure? What discontent made them break out into the chaos of the unknown to find lost opportunities in the wilderness? Is this the same discontent that I now feel deep within my bosom? The discontent that makes man strive for something new, something better, something uncharted, and to head to the West, somehow in search of the knowledge of the ancient East. Westwardly and waywardly, into a new future and a new horizon, but also into the cold despair of the unknown. Being full of the

great wretchedness of life, I always knew that life was great and I always knew that this earth was a special place for us humans. I always knew that I could find the purpose for this feeling somehow, I just didn't think it would take so long traveling down such a desperate, meandering path. When those around me said that life was all for naught, I knew that somehow they were wrong, and that the Nihilist within everyone had no reason to exist – But, no, perhaps that it had only One Reason to exist; that reason was to figure out how to break out of its spell! Am I under a spell now, Hiro? Is this Oracle life in fact not good for mankind?”

“Listen carefully, Jesse-san, to what I have to say. I was born here in this temple. This is my home – I am happy here, happy to see my children grow here. I will die here in this spot, regardless of whether the Oracle is or is not. It is not my fault that the Oracle took over our world; how could I ever help to stop it? In fact, I even helped it. I gave it my stories, my culture, so that it too could spread my message to others. Just remember, my friend, there still is a fire burning deep within every one of us – a flame that shall not

ever be extinguished, and it will live on forever, until mankind has fallen. People will read these words, and they will know their meaning. Haven't we all suffered? Haven't we all gained and then lost? Haven't we all yearned for a brighter future again and yet again. . . . If you must rescue yourself from the depths of this depravity, and from your modern life, harken back to a time – a time in the present, evoking the best parts of the past. Rescue yourself from the belly of the Beast, my friend. Slowly, you will find what you seek inside yourself. Perhaps each man needs to find this from within himself alone. What he really wants, what his nature allows, and what very nature triumphs within him.”

Jesse spent the next few days patiently meditating, praying, and fasting in the temple, dreaming of a checkmate play, his splendid coup-de-grâce; his potential final act on the Oracle stage.

32.

Nicolas was in his 60th year when he and Genevieve had finally given up any hope in seeing their eldest son again. As they performed chores and fed their goats and sheep, they would often glance across the Tuolumne River Basin, and up into the mountains to see if anyone was coming down from Mount Hamilton out of the Oracle City. They had gained many wrinkles from this patient waiting, but they still thankfully had their sons Jean-Pierre, Odin-Cabot, Joseph-Simeon, and their youngest daughter Jennifer-Marie by their side. They had been careful over the years to not give them too much of a glimpse of the society that they had left, so that they would not lose them too, as they had lost their eldest son. They still had some hope that, before they died, they would see that their eldest had become a real adult, a man who passed through the narrow gate with his head held high as his father Nicolas had oft counseled him. As more and more time passed, Nicolas thought it was time to write the next chapters in life, the rest to his great book of life.

To find some peace and quiet while focusing on the writing of his book, Nicolas built a small wooden cabin with a single window facing out towards the river. It consisted of eighteen spruce logs on each side, and a firm door made of chestnut, with hard, firm hinges and a wooden lock. Inside, he had a small wood-stove, a small chair and a desk. In the top drawer of this desk were laid the beginnings of his great manuscript: "The Trials and Travails of Nicolas." He would spend his early mornings thinking about the long road of life which had preceded him, and hoped he would finish this great book before he passed from this Earth into the great beyond – He often thought, if only he could have written this book earlier so his son could have gained from its wisdom, but alas, he had not been so wise in those earlier years. On some of the more difficult days, remorseful and in old-age weakness, he would curse that he never wanted to see his son again, for the utter and contemptible grief he had caused the family, and for shaming the family, and not coming back. Other days, repentant and shedding the occasional tear, he thought about how much it would mean to him if he could just give

this book to his son, to help explain to him why he must withdraw from the Oracle society.

One early morning, Peter Camenzind came upon their farm in a hurry with some great news and cheers. He said that he had met a journeyer who had heard of the great Jesse of the Oracle City. Nicolas said he didn't want to hear it, that he knew what his son had done and what he had become, and that he felt ashamed for it. But Peter said, "No, you do not understand, Nicolas, It is great news!" He began to tell them the story that he had been told by the traveler. That the great Jesse of the Oracle City had created a Hologram that showed the people what fools they had all become. It showed everyone what life was like before the Hologram, and how pursuing pleasures and worshipping whims was no way to live a noble and fulfilling life; how one had to strive to enter the narrow gate, and avoid the broad doors to ruin. It outlined in great detail how the Keepers were weaving and fabricating stories just to keep the citizens docile and entertained. How the Keepers were using simple psychological tricks to take advantage of the weakness of

human nature. It told the people how a noble and real life still existed out there, outside of the Society of the Spectacle that they had become indoctrinated into. This Hologram became very, very popular before the Keepers shut it down, and some, including a few prominent Keepers, had defected from Oracle society after watching it. Jesse's Hologram contained everything that he had experienced and seen since he left the mountains and came to the Oracle City. It is said that the end of the Hologram finished with a wonderful montage of Nicolas, and his beautiful mother Genevieve, nursing his little brother Jean-Pierre, and his parents' whole life story too; how they were some of the early defectors from the Oracle world who fled to the forests to start a family and live a life of fulfillment. This journeyer had said that many a select few were now carrying with them a short book that, when one had mastered the art of reading again, told the whole story of Jesse's arduous and formational journey. It had become a miracle that, once again, an actual book had become popular amongst some of the citizens of the Oracle world. The traveling man that Peter had

met promised to bring him a copy of this book, post-haste.

As Nicolas proudly looked out on his grown children and pastures, he felt a renewed hope. He no longer felt a reproach for his yet unfinished journey through life. He closed his eyes and saw the book of life opening, closing, flipping through its pages, each different memories of a day gone by, time is but an illusion. When the sun began to rise and fall on Nicolas for the final seasons of his life, he felt a happiness swell from within, a feeling that excited him to see the next step of his journey through space and time.

33.

One of those quiet sunny spring afternoons, when the snow had just finished melting in the mountaintops, and the wildflowers in the pastures were in full-bloom, Nicolas was putting the finishing touches on his book. There was a lot on his mind in recent days; he was distracted by all that had happened recently in his late life, but he knew he must finish it soon. As he looked out his little cabin window, he could see that, amongst the conifers, fresh new kestrels and young woodpeckers were conducting the morning rituals to welcome in the coming warm season and its latest rebirth. In his old-age he was often lost in his own ideas, and had thought to himself, "Other than the Mennonite brethren, rarely did people come and visit us on the farm. Why had no one from the Oracle world come down from the Mountains in recent times, even despite my son's book? Has something happened to my son? Had the Keepers vanquished him for what he did?" He pondered whether the mass of men in the Valley of the Silicons were still leading lives caught up in that materialistic world, the quiet desperation of the Oracle.⁶ While he was still finishing this last

thought, something caught his eye, just past the tops of a thicket of cattails by the river. He saw in the distance, up the grand Tuolumne River and across its vast delta, an object moving up its furthest stream. His gut began to wrench with anticipation, and just above his stomach, his heart began to feverishly beat and scream, as if it was about to suddenly burst through his chest.

“After all these years of waiting,” Nicolas thought, “who was this rowing up the meandering river? Could it be?” He had dreamt of this moment so many times, lost in his thoughts, again imagining, “Was this only a fitful dream, and a mirage?” The dark figure glided over the waters towards his cabin, cloaked in the shadows of the tall riverbank overgrowth. When the canoe came closer, Nicolas came to his senses and rushed outside to greet this river traveler.

The face of this dark figure looked much older, and had dark creases which showed the years of turmoil and the years of yearning which the figure had lacked when it had left the Great Forest. In those deep blue eyes, however, one could still see that captivating

glimmer of youthful hope. That same vigor and that same optimistic visage that Nicolas and his own father had worn, underneath their strong brows in their deep-set, captivating eyes.

“My child, I thought I would never see you!”

“And I was worried the canoe would not be by the cottonwood tree where I had left it, Papa!” said Jesse with a child-like grin.

“Oh I made sure it never moved an inch. That canoe was always waiting for you my boy, by that old tree.”

“Father, It took me a long time, but you were right, you know. Papa Camenzind was right too. . . I think I finally found what I was looking for. It was a hard fought battle, Papa, but I came away with a trophy.” Then Jesse took out a tattered and rough loose-leafed notebook from his front-pocket, and gave it to his father. “I wrote this for you.”

“Oh, we have heard about your exploits out here, Francisco.” said Nicolas, giving his son some minor ribbing. “I knew you would come home, Son. I knew you would come home someday, I

just wish it hadn't taken so long – I didn't know if I would still be alive to see it. Your mother, she was very heartbroken and sick in her later years because you had never come back to us. But she always knew you would come back down this river someday. . .”

Jesse could see the new sadness and he began to feel the solemn tone that his father started to speak in.

“She got very sick in the winter, but then recovered a little in the early spring. In a lucid state one early morning, in between fevers she told me about a dream she just had. She said that in it you were a small young boy again out playing in the green pastures. You were having the time of your life out there, picking the colorful spring wildflowers, when a red fox came bouncing by and grabbed hold of you. It tried to take you, and you fought it with all your will, but it got the best of you and carried you off into the forest. Mother went running after you, but in sadness could not find you. – A moment after that, she returned, and suddenly you came bounding out of the woods, proudly wearing a red fox cap with a bushy tail coming down the back and over your shoulders. You had gotten

the better of that fox, that's for sure! – It was just after that dream, just when we thought mother was on the mend that we had a late winter storm again, and, it was as if, it suddenly took her away with it. You're too late Jesse. . .”

Jesse and his father embraced for a long while. It was the first time they had both cried together. They were tears of sadness. Sadness because he had not come sooner, but they were also tears of joy. Joy, because Genevieve's premonition of Jesse's battle with the fox had indeed come true. He had come home triumphantly. Genevieve had always had such a woman's magical intuition, one which a man can often hardly comprehend. For those last, few weeks of his life, Nicolas saw in his son's face the trace features that he shared with his beautiful wife. He could feel her warm heart once more on the farm, working and overlooking the pastures.

Nicolas had finished his own book, this book. And in his final days, his son had worked with his father to incorporate his book into this story. Nicolas and Genevieve's children and grandchildren kept their two books in a special place on the hearth,

and once in a while they would read it to themselves to remind them of how much their older brother, mother, and papa had suffered in order to find and provide a better life for themselves and others.

By the time Nicolas gave up the ghost and breathed his last breath on this Earth, he was overjoyed that he had waited his entire life to finish his manuscript, for in his younger years, he would not have gained the knowledge and character that those hard-fought and war-torn years of struggle had given him, allowing him to speak about his journey so eloquently. Nay, he would not have had the vocabulary to describe the beauty of his great damsel Genevieve, nor any of the wonderful qualities of his children; from the curiosity & noble nature of his eldest son Jesse, down to the soft, sweet nature of his youngest, Jean-Pierre.

Nicolas was now ready for that final, contented trip, to be reunited with his faithful wife, and be by her side once again. As he looked out upon the hills in the distance one final time, he saw the orange sun glowing through the smokey August winds. He felt the

comfort and satisfaction of knowing that his family and grandchildren were thriving amongst the herds of goat and sheep, the same ones that they had now raised for three generations. He uttered his last words on this Earth. . .

“It was our humble living and our flock which kept us protected from the evils of our day. . .”

— Nicolas Theodoro D'Orleans De Braganca

Translator's Note:

When we had found this original manuscript it also contained allusions to an additional book, The History of Jean-Pierre. Since no such book was found with this Original, any mention of this Second History has been removed from this story. With any luck in our searching we shall hope to find additional manuscripts of our once true history someday.

— Jesse Dustin

1. An apparent reference to an advanced form of Art from the Nouveau-Renaissance age after the “*Age of Feuilletons.*”
2. Appears to be an odd translation of a quote from the “*Epics of Gilgamesh.*”
3. This must have become a folk tradition, because “I just want to grill man” is still an oft used phrase still uttered today.
4. Records indicate that this was a pre-Oracle World phrase from the Chinese subcontinent / sub-state of Indio / Yindù (印度), where spiritualism was said to be once vibrant and profound.”
5. “Here the professor cites the (archaic,) Lacanian concept of *Jouissance*, a French term related to the concept of the “pleasure principle,” but indicating a desire or compulsion for pleasure beyond, (resulting in a pain, suffering, or “painful-pleasure principle.”) – Followed by a Latin utterance which is said to mean: “*A new life begins! A Prophecy of Oracle Common Sense!*”
6. An adaptation of a quote from Henry David Thoreau's “*Walden Pond.*”