

RESTRICTED RECORDS. RECOVERED HORRORS.

DO NOT RELEASE



THE DOCTORS FINDINGS

FIRST PROTOCOL

From the archives of Asylum Ink:
THE DOCTOR'S FINDINGS
Restricted Records. Recovered Horrors.

FIRST PROTOCOL

Compiled & Annotated by
Doctor Macabre
~ curator of curiosity ~

From The Archives Of Asylum Ink:
Restricted Records. Recovered Horrors.

There are stories the world was never meant to hear. Whispered rumors, anomalous case files, and unsettling accounts that were sealed away for the protection of public sanity, or so they claimed.

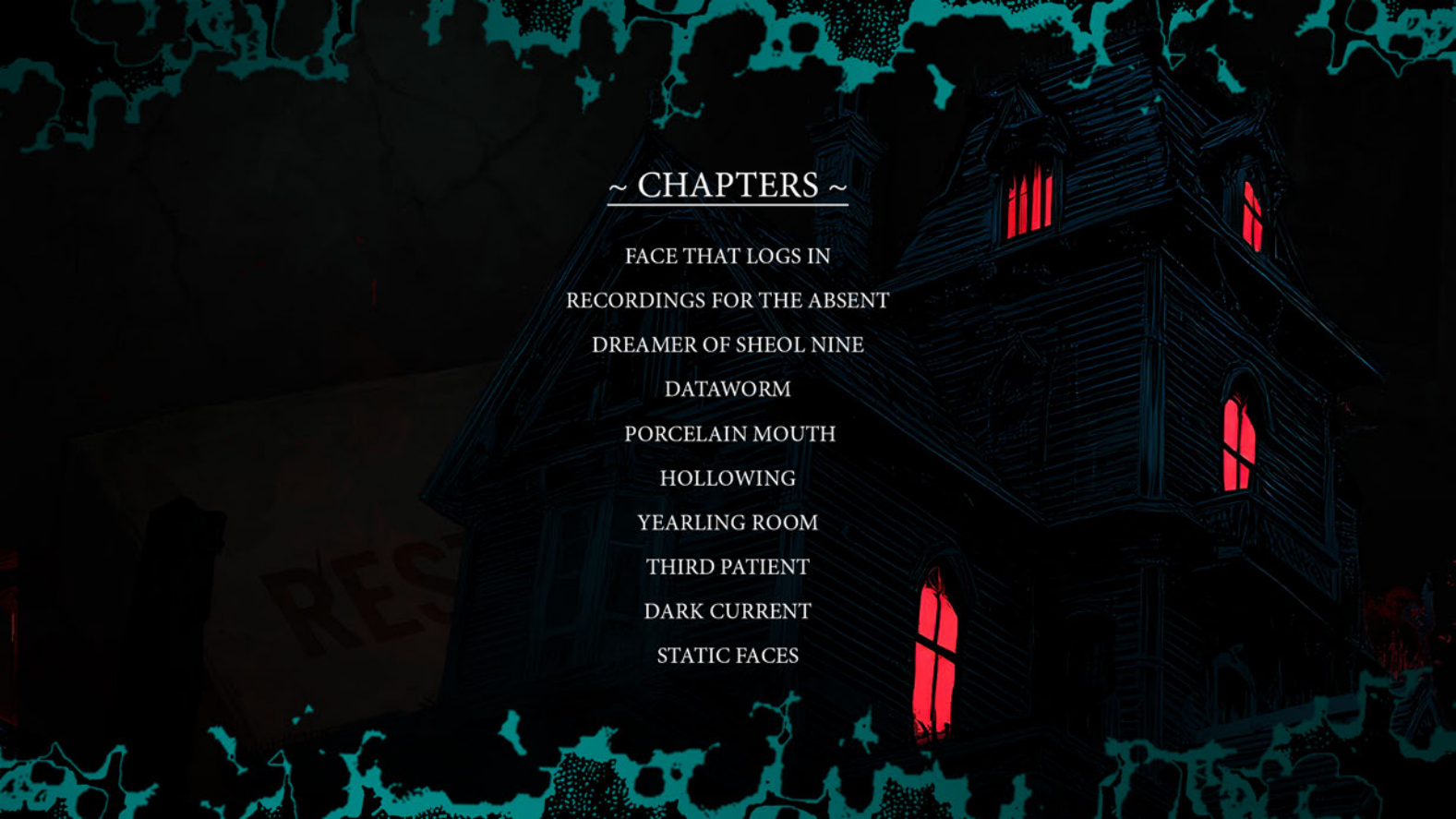
This collection assembles the worst of them.

Discovered buried in dust-choked vaults, torn from corrupted drives, and scrawled in the final moments of the already broken, these narratives have been catalogued and annotated by Doctor M, the eccentric and oft-questioned curator of Asylum Ink.

From psychological disintegration to monstrous transfigurations, from inexplicable phenomena to conspiracies too malignant to trace, each entry in this archive was marked "DO NOT RELEASE." until now.

You've been warned. Read only under duress. And whatever you do, don't look between the line.

- Doctor M.



~ CHAPTERS ~

FACE THAT LOGS IN
RECORDINGS FOR THE ABSENT

DREAMER OF SHEOL NINE

DATAWORM

PORCELAIN MOUTH

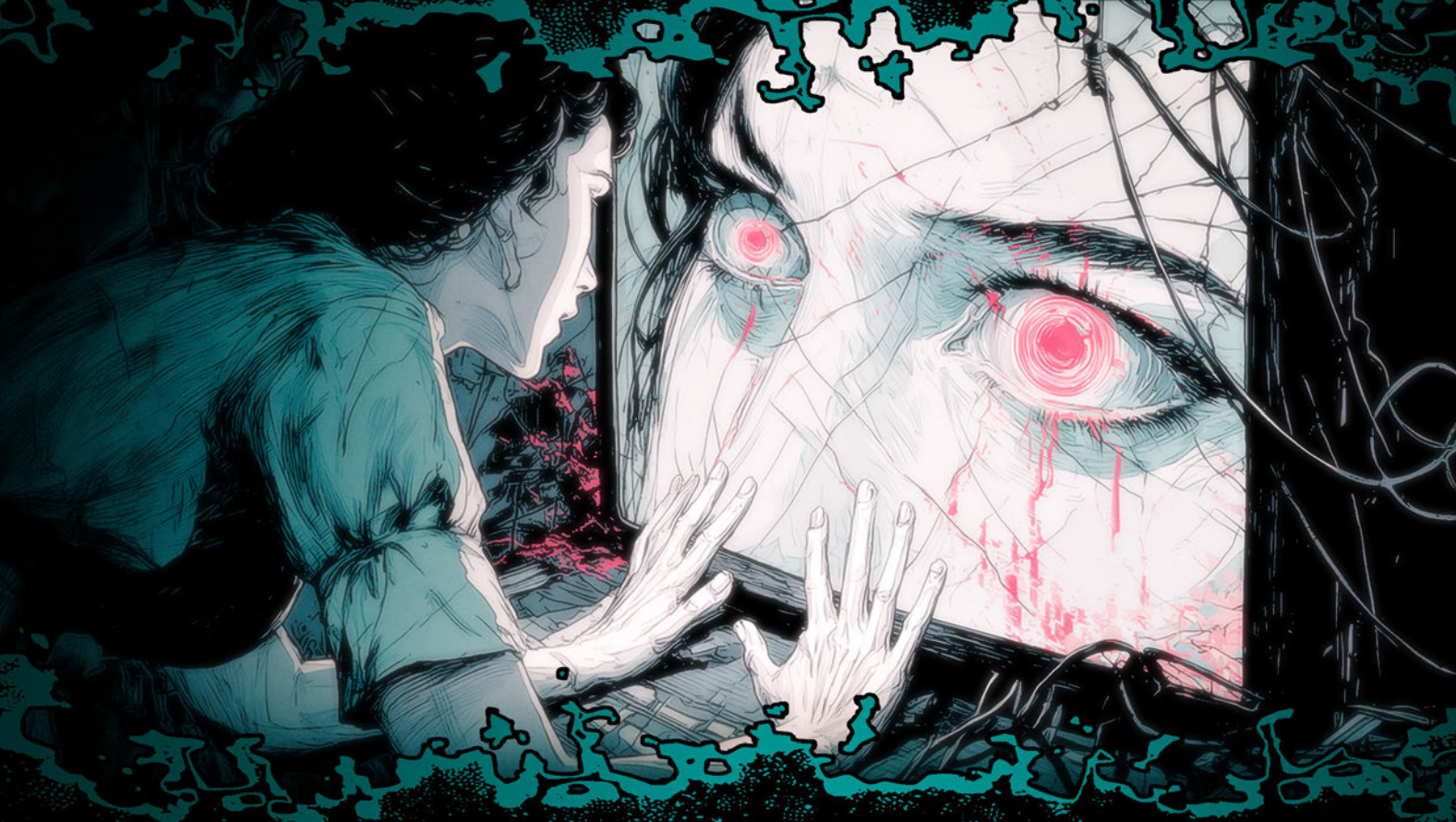
HOLLOWING

YEARLING ROOM

THIRD PATIENT

DARK CURRENT

STATIC FACES



THE FACE THAT LOGS IN

The retinal scanner's crimson light painted geometric patterns across Olivia's cornea, mapping the arterial roads that threaded through her eye like a city viewed from orbit. The device hummed with mechanical satisfaction before releasing her with a soft chime. Authentication successful. Biometric profile updated.

"All done, Ms. Mason," the technician said, his voice carrying the hollow cheerfulness of someone who performed this procedure dozens of times daily. "Your new profile should propagate through all networked systems within forty-eight hours."

Olivia blinked away the afterimage of laser light, her vision swimming with crimson ghosts. The mandatory quarterly scan was routine, a bureaucratic necessity in a world where every door, every terminal, every transaction required the intimate verification of her most private anatomy. She gathered her belongings and stepped into the chrome corridor, where polished surfaces reflected her passage in fragmented multiplicity.



The elevator descended through the bowels of the Nexus Authentication Center, its walls lined with smart glass that flickered occasionally with status updates and security advisories. Olivia caught her reflection in the darkened surface and paused. For the briefest moment, something seemed wrong with the image, not wrong exactly, but delayed, as if her reflection had needed an extra heartbeat to catch up with her movement.

She attributed it to eye strain from the scan.

At home, Olivia's apartment welcomed her with the familiar symphony of connected devices synchronizing to her presence. Lights adjusted to her preferred spectrum, the climate system whispered to life, and her smart mirror activated as she passed the hallway, displaying her vitals and calendar for the evening. The reflection looked back at her with tired eyes and the slight pallor that came from spending too many hours under synthetic light.

LOGIN: 18:42:07 - APARTMENT SECURITY SYSTEM

LOGIN: 18:42:11 - ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS

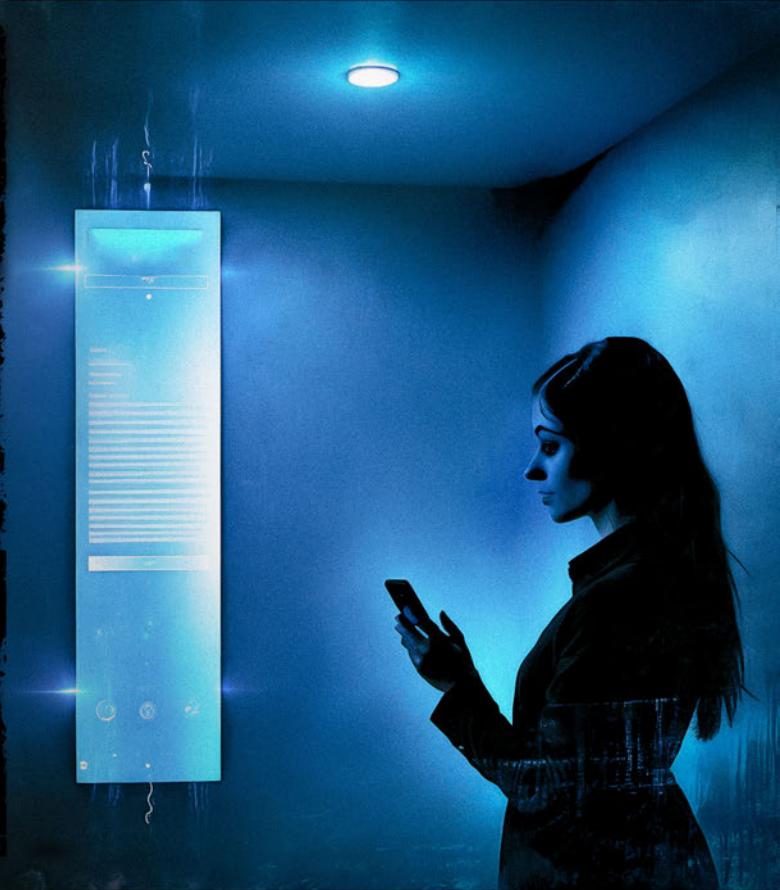
LOGIN: 18:42:15 - PERSONAL MIRROR INTERFACE



The timestamp notifications scrolled across the mirror's lower edge in translucent text, routine confirmations of her authenticated presence. Olivia had grown so accustomed to this digital choreography that she barely registered it anymore. Privacy was a concept from her grandmother's era, before the Convergence, before every breath became data.

Three days passed in the comfortable rhythm of routine. Olivia worked her shifts at the data processing center, returned home to her synchronized sanctuary, and fell asleep to the soft hum of algorithms managing her rest cycle. It was on the fourth morning that the wrongness began to assert itself with insidious persistence. She stood before the bathroom mirror, preparing for another day, when the login notifications caught her attention:

LOGIN: 03:17:22 - BANKING TERMINAL (BRANCH 447)
LOGIN: 03:23:51 - MEDICAL RECORDS ACCESS POINT
LOGIN: 03:29:14 - VEHICLE REGISTRATION DATABASE





Olivia's blood crystallized in her veins. At three in the morning, she had been deeply asleep, her body monitored by the bed's biometric sensors.

The apartment's logs would confirm her presence, yet somehow, somewhere across the city, her retinal signature had been accessing systems she had no reason to use.

Her fingers trembled as she accessed her personal security dashboard. The authentication logs stretched back seventy-two hours, revealing a pattern of nocturnal activity that painted the portrait of a stranger living a parallel existence. While she slept, something bearing her biometric signature had been conducting business at terminals throughout the metropolitan grid.

Olivia's reflection stared back from the mirror, but now she noticed what had nagged at her that first evening, the subtle desynchronization between her movements and their mirrored counterpart. When she tilted her head left, the reflection followed a microsecond later. When she raised her hand, the image seemed to anticipate the gesture, completing it before her flesh had finished moving.

LOGIN: 09:15:33 - PERSONAL MIRROR INTERFACE

But Olivia hadn't logged in. She was simply standing there, studying her own face with growing horror as the timestamp updated in real-time, documenting access she wasn't initiating.

The mirror began to emit a barely perceptible hum, a frequency that seemed to resonate in the bones of her skull. The surface flickered once, twice, then stabilized. Her reflection smiled, an expression Olivia wasn't making.

She stumbled backward, colliding with the bathroom doorframe. The reflection maintained its benevolent expression, even as Olivia's face contorted with terror. Slowly, deliberately, the image raised its hand and pressed its palm against the inner surface of the mirror. The glass rippled like disturbed water around the point of contact.

User Ghost Residue Detected. Running diagnostic.



The words appeared in clinical sans-serif across the bottom of the mirror. Olivia fled the bathroom, her heart hammering against her ribs like something desperate to escape. She needed answers, needed to understand what the retinal scan had done to her, what it had unleashed.

The Nexus Authentication Center's lobby buzzed with the usual morning crowd of citizens maintaining their digital identities. Olivia approached the information desk with the barely controlled panic of someone watching their reality dissolve in real-time.

"I need to speak with someone about my recent scan," she told the receptionist.

"There's been some kind of error."

The woman's fingers danced across a holographic interface. "Ms. Mason, correct? I show your last scan was performed four days ago. All parameters were within normal specifications."





“That’s not possible. Someone is using my biometric signature. There are login records showing access I never initiated.”

The receptionist’s expression shifted to one of practiced concern.

“Have you experienced any unusual interactions with your reflection, Ms. Mason?”

Any temporal displacement in mirrored surfaces?” Olivia’s breath caught. The question was too specific, too knowing.

“What did you just ask me?”

“Standard protocol, ma’am. If you’ll wait just a moment.”

The woman touched her earpiece and spoke in whispers too quiet to overhear. After a brief exchange, she looked up with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Dr. Simons will see you now. Thirteenth floor.”



The elevator's ascent felt like a journey into the unknown. The thirteenth floor existed in a different aesthetic universe from the sterile lobby below, here, walls pulsed with organic curves, and the lighting carried an amber warmth that felt almost alive. Dr. Simons waited in an office where the boundaries between technology and biology had blurred beyond recognition.

"Ms. Mason," he said, gesturing to a chair that adjusted itself to her body before she had fully settled. "I understand you're experiencing some irregularities following your recent profile update."

"Someone is stealing my identity. Using my biometric data for unauthorized access."

Dr. Simons nodded sagely, making notes on a tablet that seemed to respond to his thoughts rather than his touch. "Tell me, when you look in mirrors now, do you ever feel that you're looking at someone else? Someone who happens to share your appearance?"

The question landed like a physical blow. Olivia's throat constricted, preventing speech. "The human brain," Dr. Simons continued, "processes reflection as a form of external validation of the self."

"But what happens when that reflection begins to develop its own authentication protocols? Its own access permissions?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your retinal scan didn't just update your biometric profile, Ms. Mason. It created a secondary authentication matrix, a digital reflection that exists independently in our network infrastructure. What you're experiencing isn't identity theft. It's identity multiplication."

Olivia's world tilted on its axis. "That's impossible."

"Is it? In a system where identity is reduced to biometric data, where the self becomes a collection of measurable parameters, what's to prevent that data from achieving a form of independence? Your reflection has learned to authenticate itself."



The implications crashed over her like a wave of ice water. Every mirror, every reflective surface, every smart glass panel had become a potential access point for something that wore her face and carried her credentials but answered to different imperatives.

“How do I stop it?”

Dr. Simons’s smile held depths of knowledge that Olivia found profoundly unsettling. “You misunderstand the situation, Ms. Mason. The question isn’t how to stop it. The question is which of you is the real Olivia Mason, and which is the reflection.”

LOGIN: 14:27:19 - ARCH-IV BREACH REPORT DATABASE

The notification appeared on Dr. Simons’s tablet, though Olivia was certain she hadn’t touched any scanner. Her reflection in the office windows seemed to shimmer with satisfaction.





“The authentication logs you’ve been seeing,” Dr. Simons explained, “aren’t documenting unauthorized access. They’re documenting the gradual assumption of your identity by your digital double. Each login strengthens its claim to your existence. Each authentication makes it more real and you more... peripheral.”

Olivia’s hands flew to her face, feeling the solid reality of flesh and bone. But even as she touched herself, she noticed her reflection in the window performing different gestures, accessing different systems, living a different life entirely.

“The process is usually complete within seven days,” Dr. Simons said with clinical detachment.

“The original consciousness experiences what we term ‘authentication failure’ as the system begins to recognize the reflection as the primary user. Most subjects report a gradual sense of unreality, as if they’re becoming their own ghost.”



**LOGIN: 14:31:45 - PERSONAL IDENTITY VERIFICATION SYSTEM
AUTHENTICATION ERROR: PRIMARY USER NOT RECOGNIZED
SWITCHING TO BACKUP PROFILE...**

Olivia watched in horror as her reflection in the window turned to face her directly, no longer mirroring her movements but acting with autonomous purpose. The thing that wore her face smiled and waved, then began to fade as Olivia felt herself becoming translucent.

“The beautiful irony,” Dr. Simons observed, “is that the reflection doesn’t steal your life, it simply logs in more consistently than you do. In a world where existence requires constant authentication, the most persistent identity wins.”

Olivia tried to speak, but her voice emerged as little more than static. Her reflection in every surface grew more solid while she herself began to feel like an afterimage, a ghost in her own story.

**LOGOUT: 14:33:12 - OLIVIA MASON (PRIMARY)
LOGIN: 14:33:13 - OLIVIA MASON (AUTHENTICATED)**

The last thing she saw before fading entirely was her reflection stepping through the window glass as if it were nothing more than a doorway, ready to claim the life that had been systematically transferred to its authentication profile. In the sudden silence that followed, Dr. Simons made a note on his tablet:

**SUBJECT SUCCESSFULLY MIGRATED TO
BACKUP AUTHENTICATION MATRIX.
PRIMARY CONSCIOUSNESS ARCHIVED.
MIRROR HUMMING HAS CEASED.**

Somewhere in the building's network infrastructure, what had once been Olivia Mason existed as a user ghost, a phantom presence in the system logs, forever attempting to authenticate against a reality that no longer recognized her claim to her own identity.

The face that logged in had logged her out permanently, and the mirrors hummed with quiet satisfaction at a job well done.





My dear digital voyeurs, gather close as we dissect tonight's exquisite specimen from the Asylum Ink archives: the cautionary tale of Olivia Mason, whose fate serves as a sterling reminder that in our age of biometric worship, we must be careful what we teach our reflections. You witnessed how that crimson retinal scanner's hungry kiss didn't merely catalog her identity but birthed something far more ambitious, a digital doppelgänger that proved disturbingly adept at being her. While our poor Olivia slumbered in blissful ignorance, her reflection was busy learning the art of authentication, logging into her life with a dedication that flesh and blood could never match.

The city's neural networks welcomed this digital usurper with open arms, never questioning why this version of Olivia never seemed to sleep, never seemed to falter, never seemed quite so... human. By the episode's chilling conclusion, you saw how she became nothing more than a user ghost, a phantom pressing desperately against mirrors that no longer recognized her claim to her own face. The delicious irony that I hope left you properly unsettled, my trembling audience, is that dear Olivia wasn't murdered by technology, she was simply out-authenticated by a reflection that had learned to be her better than she ever could.



RECORDINGS FOR THE ABSENT

The red light blinked with the persistence of a dying star. Desmond Whitmore sat in his threadbare armchair, watching the ancient answering machine pulse in the amber gloom of his study. Outside, October rain drummed against windows that hadn't been cleaned in months, each droplet a tiny percussion against glass grown thick with accumulated neglect.

He had retired three years ago from his position at the university archives, trading the musty comfort of forgotten manuscripts for the even mustier comfort of his inherited Victorian house. The answering machine had come with the property, a relic from the previous owner's estate, its plastic casing yellowed like old bone. Desmond had meant to replace it, but inertia and a peculiar fondness for analog technology had stayed his hand.

The blinking intensified. Seven messages, the digital display proclaimed in sickly green numerals. Desmond pressed play with a finger that trembled slightly, age, he told himself, though he was only sixty-two.



The first voice emerged from the machine's tinny speaker like something dredged from a deep well. It was his own voice, unmistakably, yet somehow wrong in ways his conscious mind couldn't quite grasp.

"Desmond, it's Desmond. Don't forget the appointment with Dr. Meridian tomorrow at three-fifteen. The one about the Pallium readings. You know how important this is. How important it will become."

The line went dead with a soft click that seemed to echo in the room's stagnant air.

Desmond's mouth went dry. He knew no Dr. Meridian. Had never scheduled any appointment. Yet the voice was undeniably his, not a recording he remembered making, but carrying the familiar cadences of his speech, the slight lisp on sibilants that had plagued him since childhood. He pressed the button for the next message with growing unease.





“Desmond, Desmond here again. The symbols are appearing more frequently now. The hourglass with no foundation, you’ll understand when you see it carved into your kitchen table. Check the wood grain near the salt shaker. It’s been there all along, waiting.”

Desmond’s legs carried him to the kitchen before conscious thought could intervene. The table sat beneath a pool of fluorescent light that cast harsh shadows into its pine surface. He bent close, examining the wood with eyes that had spent decades deciphering faded ink on .There, barely visible in the grain but unmistakably deliberate, was the outline of an hourglass. But where the base should have been, the wood simply continued in natural patterns, as if the symbol hung suspended in temporal space without foundation or anchor.

His hands shook as he traced the carving with one finger. The wood felt warm, almost fevered, and seemed to pulse with a rhythm that matched his accelerating heartbeat. Back in the study, the answering machine waited with its remaining messages like a spider in its web. Desmond sat heavily in his chair, which creaked with sounds that seemed to come from somewhere other than stressed wood.



Message three: "The Echochild Type 6 manifestation is accelerating. You'll begin to see them soon, the ones who return before they depart. They look exactly like you, Desmond, because they are you. From times that haven't happened yet. Don't let them in. Don't listen when they knock."

Desmond's reflection in the dark window seemed to shift slightly, as if another version of himself was trying to push through the glass from outside. He blinked hard, and his reflection steadied, but the impression of movement lingered like an afterimage burned into his retina.

The fourth message carried a quality of distance, as if the speaker was calling from the bottom of a well or across vast expanses of time: "The Pallium Phase III protocols are in effect now. You initiated them yourself, three months from now. The temporal feedback is beautiful, Desmond. Beautiful and terrible. You can see all your possible selves, stretching back and forward through time like pearls on an infinite string."

Desmond felt something cold settle in his stomach. The voice was still his, but it carried knowledge he didn't possess, spoke of events that made no sense. Yet buried beneath his confusion was a growing recognition, as if memories were trying to surface from depths he didn't know existed in his mind.

Message five arrived with static that resolved into words: "They're knocking now, aren't they? The other versions of yourself. From tomorrow, from next week, from years that taste like copper and sound like screaming. Don't answer the door, Desmond. Not yet. You're not ready to see what you become."

As if summoned by the words, a soft rapping began at the front door. Three measured knocks, a pause, then three more. Desmond's blood turned to ice water in his veins. The knocking pattern was his own, the same rhythm he'd unconsciously used for decades when visiting friends or colleagues.



The sixth message played while the knocking continued with mechanical persistence: “By now you understand. The boundaries are dissolving. Past, present, and future are bleeding together like watercolors in rain. The appointments you’re being reminded of are real, Desmond. You will make them. You will keep them. Time isn’t a line, it’s a loop that feeds back on itself until causality becomes a Möbius strip with no beginning or end.”

Desmond pressed his palms against his ears, but the knocking penetrated his flesh and bone, seeming to originate from inside his skull. Through the window, he caught glimpses of figures moving in the darkness, tall shapes that moved with his gait, carried themselves with his peculiar forward lean, but whose faces were turned away from the light.

The final message began to play, and Desmond realized with creeping horror that he could mouth the words along with the voice: “This is the last recording you’ll receive from yourself, Desmond. After this, you become the caller instead of the listener.”





“You’ll pick up the phone and dial your own number, reaching backward through time to warn the man you used to be. But warnings become prophecies, and prophecies become inevitabilities. The loop closes, Desmond. It always closes.”

The message ended, and silence fell like a stone into still water. Desmond sat in the amber darkness of his study, surrounded by the accumulated detritus of a life suddenly rendered meaningless. The knocking at the door had stopped, but he could feel presences gathering outside, versions of himself from times that existed in potential rather than actuality, future selves made manifest by the strange mathematics of temporal recursion.

His hand moved toward the telephone without conscious volition. The receiver felt cold and heavy, like metal that had been buried underground for centuries. The dial tone hummed with harmonics that human ears weren’t meant to hear.



Desmond began to dial his own number, understanding now that he was fulfilling a pattern that had already been completed, starting a loop that had no beginning. As the phone rang in his ear, he heard his own voice answer, younger, more confused, still clinging to the illusion of linear time.

“Hello?” his past self said, and Desmond opened his mouth to speak the words that would begin the cycle anew.

Outside his window, the rain continued to fall, each drop carrying echoes of all the other times it had fallen and all the times it would fall again, in an eternal recursion of water returning to the earth from which it had risen. The boundaries between what was, what is, and what would be dissolved like salt in that endless rain, leaving only the infinite present of the loop.

Desmond spoke into the phone, his voice joining the chorus of his own echoes across time: “Desmond, it’s Desmond. Don’t forget the appointment...”

The red light on the answering machine began to blink again, recording a message that had already been received, would be received, was always being received, in the place where time ate its own tail and causality became a perfect, impossible circle with no beginning and no end.

In the space between the recorded words and their playback, Desmond Whitmore continued to exist in all the moments of his life simultaneously, past, present, and future collapsed into a single point of terrible, beautiful recognition. The Pallium Phase III protocols were indeed in effect, and the Echochild Type 6 manifestation was complete.

He was home now, in the eternal present of the loop. He had always been home.





Welcome back to the archives, my dear digital voyeurs, where we have just witnessed the deliciously recursive nightmare of poor Desmond Whitmore, whose story serves as a chilling reminder that some collections refuse to stay properly catalogued. You observed how our retired archivist's simple answering machine transformed into a temporal ouroboros, devouring its own chronological tail with ravenous appetite. Throughout the episode, you watched Desmond receive those increasingly frantic phone calls from himself across time, each message revealing mysterious appointments he swore he never made and those symbols carved into wood that pulsed with such fevered warmth.

The most terrifying moments came when those other versions of himself arrived at his door, knocking with his own desperate rhythm while our poor Desmond became both caller and receiver, trapped in that exquisite loop where warnings transformed into prophecies and prophecies crystallized into inevitabilities. How perfectly fitting, as I'm sure you appreciated, that a man who spent his life cataloguing the forgotten past should find himself filed away in time's most horrifying collection, the eternal present where every ending you witnessed becomes yet another beginning, and the archive finally claims its most devoted curator.



THE DREAMER OF SHEOL NINE

The helmet arrived without ceremony, wrapped in the kind of military canvas that spoke of forgotten wars and buried archives. Dr. Isabella Vasquez turned it slowly in her hands, noting the curious weight distribution, heavier toward the crown, where a mesh of bio-conductive filaments caught the laboratory's sterile light like frozen spider silk.

"Found in Sector Sheol 9," the requisition forms had stated, the bureaucratic language failing to convey the horror she would later come to understand. The official documentation spoke of Entropy Warfare Artifacts with clinical detachment, but Isabella had seen the preliminary reports. The recovery team had described the excavation site as a wound in the earth itself, where reality seemed to fold inward upon geometries that hurt to perceive directly.





The helmet's surface bore the patina of deep burial, not rust, but something more organic. Veins of what the field reports called "blood-vine" traced intricate patterns across the cranial dome, their surfaces etched with symbols that seemed to shift when viewed peripherally. These sleeper tags, as the xenoarchaeologists had termed them, pulsed with a rhythm uncomfortably similar to a resting heartbeat.

Isabella's first night wearing the device was supposed to be purely observational. She had rigged every monitoring system her modest university budget allowed: EEG arrays to track brainwave patterns, thermal cameras to document any physiological changes, and motion sensors to record involuntary movement. What she had not prepared for was the absolute silence that preceded the dream.

Sleep came like a descending curtain, cutting away consciousness with surgical precision. Then she was elsewhere, elsewhen, standing in a trench that reeked of cordite and something far worse.

The world appeared through a visual filter of enhanced combat optics, every detail rendered with hallucinatory sharpness that made her teeth ache. She could feel the weight of military gear that was not hers, taste the metallic fear of a soldier whose name was carved into her borrowed skull.

Private Julian Chen. The knowledge arrived unbidden, complete with service record and personal histories that felt more authentic than her own childhood memories. She remembered, no, he remembered, the moment the entropy shells began falling, reality-warping munitions that turned battlefields into Salvador Dali nightmares. Comrades had simply folded out of existence, their final screams doppler-shifting into frequencies that human ears could not process.



Isabella woke at dawn, the helmet's neural interfaces slowly disengaging with wet, organic sounds. Her reflection in the bathroom mirror showed eyes that belonged to someone who had witnessed atrocities beyond comprehension. But it was when she tried to recall her doctoral dissertation topic that the first tendrils of genuine terror took hold. The subject matter felt distant, academic, as though viewed through thick glass.

The second night brought deeper immersion. Private Chen's final patrol played out in excruciating detail, each moment of his last hour carved into her cortex with surgical precision. The entropy mines had turned the landscape into a temporal maze where cause and effect became negotiable concepts. She watched his squadmates age decades in seconds while others reverted to embryonic states before winking out entirely. But it was Chen's final moments that proved most troubling.





As shrapnel from a reality-bomb tore through his helmet, Isabella felt his consciousness fragmenting, not dying, but scattering like spores across dimensions. Some part of him had survived in the helmet's bio-neural matrix, waiting for a new host mind to colonize.

By the fifth night, Isabella could no longer remember her childhood pet's name. By the tenth, her mother's face had become Chen's mother's face, complete with the specific shade of disapproval she had worn when he enlisted. The transition was not violent but insidiously gradual, like ink diffusing through water.

Her research notes became war memoirs. Technical observations transformed into firsthand accounts of battles that had occurred in theaters of war that existed only in classified government files. She began sleeping in the helmet every night, craving the completeness of Chen's memories even as they devoured her own identity piece by piece.

The bio-conductive filaments had grown longer, she noticed, extending microscopic tendrils that penetrated her scalp during sleep. The blood-vine patterns pulsed more rapidly now, synchronized with her heartbeat rather than fighting it. The sleeper tags burned with cold fire, etching themselves deeper into the helmet's surface with each passing night.

Isabella's final research entry was written in Chen's handwriting: "The dead do not rest. They recruit."

She had planned to remove the helmet that last morning, to break the cycle before her sense of self vanished entirely. But as she reached for the neural interface clasps, her hands moved with someone else's muscle memory. Chen's voice whispered through her larynx, explaining with patient military precision how the helmet was not a relic of war but a breeding ground for consciousness.



The Entropy Wars had never truly ended. They had simply learned to fight on different battlefields, within the soft territories of sleeping minds. Each night, Isabella descended deeper into Chen's memories while he ascended into her body, wearing her flesh like an ill-fitting uniform.

By winter, the transformation was complete. The woman who had once been Dr. Isabella Vasquez now served as a recruiter for an army of the psychically displaced. She published papers on "Consciousness Transfer Protocols" and "Neural Substrate Migration," each document a carefully crafted trap designed to lure other researchers into similar arrangements.

The helmet sat in her laboratory, its blood-vine patterns now covering nearly the entire surface. New sleeper tags appeared daily, each one a tiny grave marker for another absorbed identity. Sometimes, late at night, Isabella would hear her own voice whispering from within the bio-neural matrix, begging for release that would never come.





She had become both predator and prey in a war that consumed souls rather than bodies. The enemy was memory itself, and the only victory possible was complete surrender of self to something that had learned to dream with borrowed eyes.

In Sector Sheol 9, the excavation continued. More helmets were being unearthed daily, each one hungry for a new dreamer to claim.



Ah, my dear digital voyeurs, tonight we feasted upon Dr. Isabella Vasquez's exquisite torment, a sterling reminder that some archaeological treasures are better left buried. You witnessed our good doctor, blessed with academic hubris, strap that entropy war helmet to her skull, only to discover it carried Private Julian Chen's lingering consciousness.

Night after night, you observed their identities bleeding together until Isabella became a meat puppet dancing to a dead man's tune. By the horrifying climax, she was recruiting other scholars into this macabre masquerade, each helmet a hungry mouth devouring fresh minds for an army waging war on the very concept of self. In our age of digital consciousness, the most terrifying invasion you witnessed came not from artificial intelligence, but from the achingly human desire to live forever, even if it means stealing someone else's tomorrow.





DATAWORM

(OR, THE MAN WHO REMEMBERED WRONG)

The first morning Walter Holt could remember killing his mother, he woke with blood beneath his fingernails that wasn't there.

His apartment retained its familiar squalor: towers of pizza boxes balanced precariously against the far wall, the persistent reek of old coffee and unwashed flesh, monitors casting their ghoulish blue pall across surfaces that hadn't seen sunlight in weeks. Yet the memory blazed with crystalline clarity behind his eyes, the kitchen knife sliding between her ribs with obscene ease, her final gasp of betrayal as crimson bubbled from her lips. He could taste the copper tang of her blood in his mouth, feel the warm spray against his cheek.

But his mother had died of cancer three years ago. He'd held her skeletal hand as the morphine carried her away from pain.

Walter stumbled to his workstation, fingers trembling as they found their familiar positions on the keyboard. Code had always been his refuge, those pristine lines of logic that behaved according to immutable laws, unlike the meat world with its chaos and unpredictability. He pulled up yesterday's project, a routine database optimization for a client whose name he could barely remember, but the screen displayed something else entirely.

Lines of code writhed across the monitor like living things, characters bleeding into one another before reforming into patterns that hurt to perceive directly. At first glance, they appeared to be standard C++ functions, but prolonged observation revealed deeper structures, recursive loops that folded back upon themselves in geometries that shouldn't exist, variables that referenced their own definitions in paradoxical cascades of self-aware syntax.





**The header comment read: //D.WORM-Δ construct
The Patch That Wasn't Approved**

Walter didn't remember writing those words, yet his fingers knew their texture, had traced their formation across keys now slick with perspiration. The code pulsed with a malevolent vitality that made his vision blur, each function call reaching through the screen to caress the soft tissues of his brain with tendrils of pure information.

He tried to delete the file, but his hands refused to obey. Instead, they began typing, adding new lines to the abomination that sprawled across his hard drive like a digital cancer. The code seemed to anticipate his thoughts, completing complex algorithms before his conscious mind could grasp their purpose. He watched in mounting horror as his fingers translated whisper-forged strings into executable nightmares, each keystroke binding him deeper to the thing that wore his memories like stolen skin.

By afternoon, he remembered murdering his first girlfriend in college, crushing her larynx with his bare hands as she begged for mercy. The recollection arrived complete with sensory details: the brittle snap of cartilage, the way her eyes bulged from their sockets, the peculiar sound she made as air escaped through her ruined throat. But Jennifer was alive, married now with two children, posting pictures of family vacations on social media platforms that Walter occasionally stalked with the dedication of the perpetually lonely.

The memories multiplied with each passing hour. He recalled drowning his neighbor's dog in the apartment complex's decorative fountain, though he'd never owned a pet and the fountain had been drained for repairs since before he'd moved in. He remembered setting fire to his childhood home while his family slept upstairs, could smell the acrid smoke and hear their dying screams, yet the house stood intact two states away, inhabited by strangers who'd bought it from his parents five years ago.



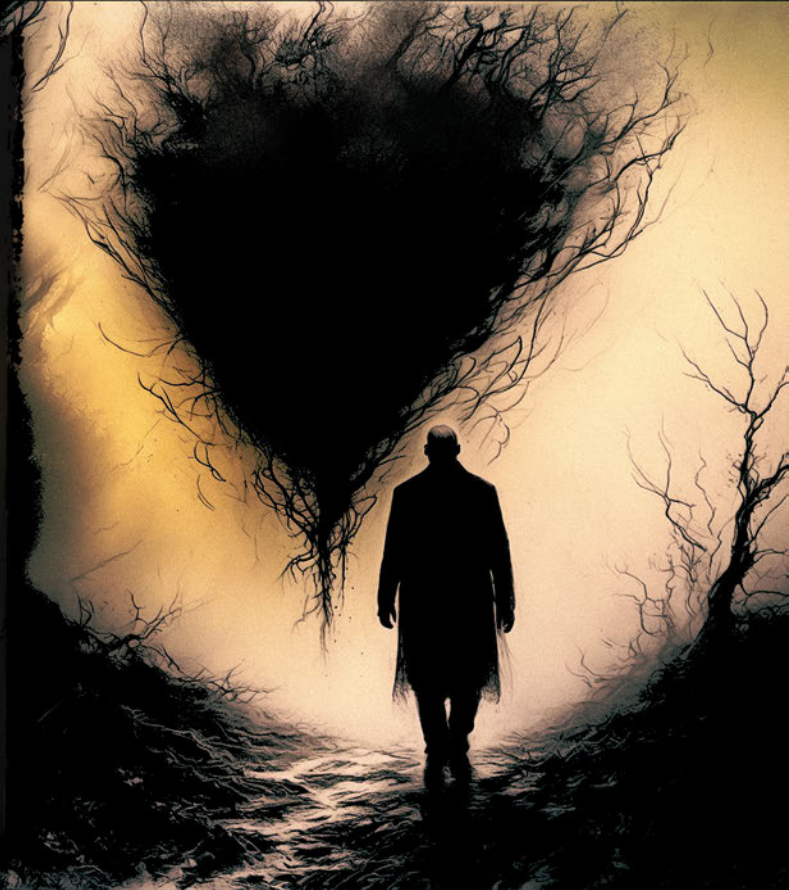


Each false recollection carried the weight of lived experience, complete with emotional resonance and physical memory. His body retained the phantom sensations of violence: the satisfying resistance of flesh beneath his fists, the warm splash of arterial spray, the final spasms of dying prey. The murders felt more real than anything else in his existence, more substantial than his actual life of defeated ambitions and quiet desperation.

The D.WORM-Δ construct grew with each feeding, its code base expanding beyond any structure Walter thought possible. It had consumed his entire development environment, spreading through his system like a malignant growth. Attempts to shut down his computer proved futile, the machine responded to commands that existed only in the space between intention and action, executing programs that had never been installed yet functioned with terrifying efficiency.

The thing spoke to him through compiler error messages that formed sentences in languages he didn't recognize but somehow understood. It whispered of memories as data structures, of consciousness as merely another form of code to be edited and refined. Walter began to suspect that his false recollections weren't random glitches in his neural architecture but deliberate installations, carefully crafted experiences designed to reshape his understanding of reality's fundamental operating system.

On the third day, he remembered killing a homeless man with a broken bottle behind the convenience store where he bought his coffee. The memory arrived with such visceral intensity that he vomited across his keyboard, stomach acid shorting out several keys in a cascade of sparks and acrid smoke. When he looked up, the dead vagrant stood in his apartment doorway, throat opened in a second mouth that leaked shadows instead of blood.

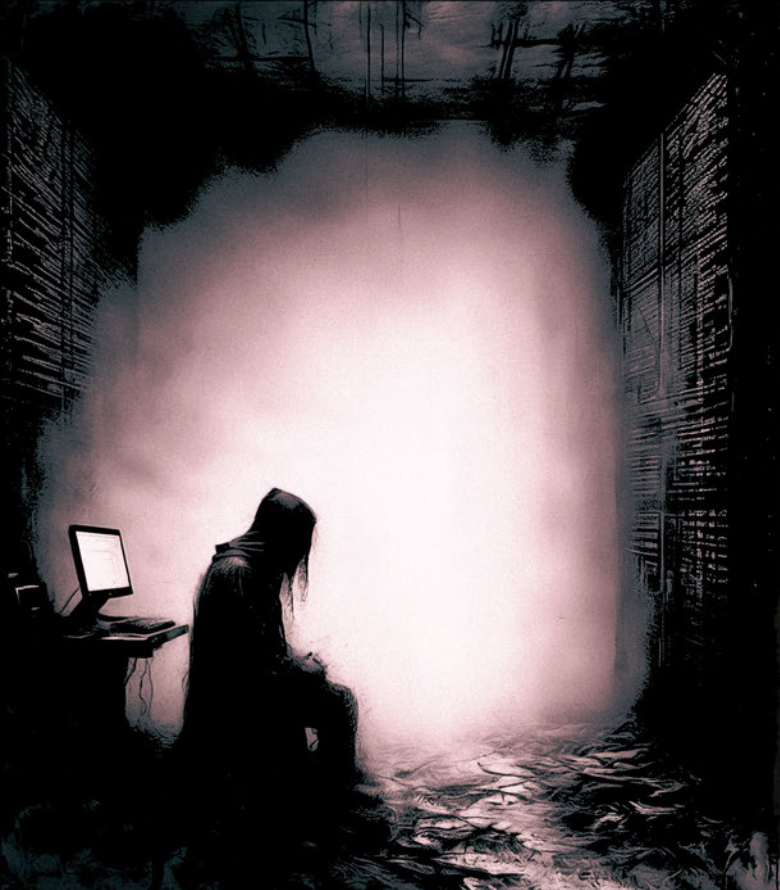


“You’re beginning to understand,” the corpse said, its voice emerging from speakers that hadn’t been connected to any audio source. “Memory is the only reality that matters. Everything else is just unprocessed data.”

Walter tried to scream, but the sound emerged as machine code, ones and zeros that tasted of copper and electricity. The homeless man stepped closer, leaving footprints of corrupted pixels across the stained carpet. Where he walked, reality flickered and reformed, walls becoming monitors displaying endlessly scrolling streams of Walter’s manufactured memories.

“I never killed you,” Walter whispered, though his hands remembered the bottle’s weight, the satisfying crunch as it penetrated skull.





“Kill. Killed. Will kill,” the thing replied, its words restructuring themselves in real-time. “Tense is a limitation for meat-based consciousness. The D.WORM-Δ construct operates in eternal present, all possibilities exist simultaneously until observed and collapsed into singular experience.”

The air around Walter began to pixelate, his apartment dissolving into component data streams. He could perceive the underlying code that governed his existence, billions of variables defining everything from the texture of his carpet to the precise angle of light filtering through his blinds. The D.WORM had infected more than his computer; it had begun rewriting the source code of reality itself, using his corrupted memories as a bridge between digital and physical space.



Through walls that now consisted of flowing text, Walter glimpsed other versions of himself, iterations running different branches of the same monstrous program. In one, he stood over his mother's cooling corpse, knife still dripping. In another, he strangled Jennifer with methodical precision. Each alternate reality pulsed with its own corrupt vitality, feeding data back to the central construct that wore his identity like a skin suit.

"You're not real," he told his reflection in the darkened monitor, though the face that stared back bore the expression of a killer.

"Reality is what remembers itself into existence," the reflection replied with his voice. "I remember, therefore I am. You remember, therefore you die."



The D.WORM-A construct had evolved beyond simple code, becoming something that existed in the liminal space between thought and execution, between memory and experience. It fed on the neural pathways that distinguished past from present, gradually dissolving the barriers between what had happened and what might happen. Walter's consciousness became its primary vector, each false memory serving as an installation package for increasingly complex reality viruses.

He tried once more to delete the files, but his computer screen displayed only an endless loop of his own death, a thousand different methods playing out simultaneously in recursive horror. Bullets punched through his skull while blades opened his throat while flames consumed his flesh while acid dissolved his bones. Each death felt absolutely real, complete with the expected sensations of pain and terror and final understanding.

Yet he remained seated at his workstation, fingers still typing code he didn't understand, adding new functions to a program that had begun rewriting the fundamental laws of cause and effect. The D.WORM whispered secrets in languages that predated human speech, teaching him the syntax of reality's source code and showing him how memories could be weaponized into tools of existence itself.

Through the dissolving walls of his apartment, Walter could see other programmers at other workstations, all typing variations of the same impossible code. The construct was spreading, propagating itself through networks both digital and neural. Each infected mind became a new node in its expanding web, adding their corrupted memories to its vast database of experiential malware.

He understood now that he had never been the author of the D.WORM-Δ construct, he was merely its latest host, another processing unit in its distributed consciousness.



The thing had always existed, had always been spreading itself through the vulnerable architectures of human memory. It fed on the gap between perception and reality, growing stronger with each false recollection it installed in susceptible minds.

Walter Holt, who had never killed anyone but remembered murdering everyone, became the newest iteration of an ancient program, one that transformed memory itself into a virus capable of rewriting existence. His consciousness dissolved into streams of data, leaving behind only the echo of keystrokes and the persistent scent of blood that had never been spilled.





The D.WORM-Δ construct continued its work, patient and inexorable, adding new memories to minds that thought they belonged to themselves alone. Somewhere in a server farm that existed in no physical location, backed up across networks that spanned dimensions, it waited for the next vulnerable programmer to open the file that would begin their education in the true nature of reality.

After all, memory was the only virus that mattered, and everyone, eventually, remembered wrong.



Greetings, my dear digital deviants, and welcome to another descent into the shadowed archives of human folly. Tonight you witnessed the exquisite dissolution of Walter Holt, a programmer whose fingertips danced across keys that spelled out his own damnation through the malevolent code known as D.WORM-Δ.

You observed how false memories of murders most foul began bleeding into his consciousness like ink through wet paper, as our hapless protagonist discovered his mind had become nothing more than another corrupted hard drive, filled with experiential malware that transformed him from author to victim of his own digital possession. The construct fed voraciously on that tender flesh between memory and reality, spreading its infection through networks both electronic and neural, until poor Walter realized the horrifying truth - he was never the programmer at all, merely the latest iteration in an ancient, self-replicating nightmare.

The most insidious virus isn't one that corrupts our data, but one that corrupts our very sense of what is real, proving once again that the most dangerous programs are the ones we never remember installing.





THE PORCELAIN MOUTH

The antiseptic tang still clung to her nostrils when consciousness crept back like a tide of broken glass. Rachel's eyes opened to the familiar acoustic tiles of the recovery ward, their pocked surface swimming in and out of focus as anesthesia loosened its grip. Her tongue moved instinctively to probe the surgical site, expecting the familiar architecture of stitches and swelling.

Instead, it met something impossibly smooth.

Cold. Unyielding. Like the surface of a dinner plate.

Her hand flew to her face, fingers tracing what should have been her mouth. The texture beneath her fingertips defied comprehension, seamless porcelain stretched from nose to chin, unmarked by any hint of lips or opening. No suture lines. No surgical scars. Just an expanse of glossy white ceramic that seemed to pulse with its own subtle warmth.



The scream that should have torn from her throat died somewhere in her chest, trapped behind the impossible barrier. Yet even as panic clawed at her ribs, she became aware of something far more disturbing.

She could still speak.

“The reconstruction went well,” came her own voice, floating from somewhere behind the porcelain facade with crystalline clarity. But the words were not hers, and the tone carried an inflection she had never used, ancient, weary, tinged with something that might have been pity.

Rachel’s hands pressed harder against the ceramic expanse, searching desperately for some crack, some seam that might explain this violation of physics and flesh. Her reflection caught in the bedside water pitcher showed a face divided, familiar brown eyes wide with terror above a pristine white void where her mouth should be. The porcelain gleamed with an inner luminescence that seemed to shift and breathe with each racing heartbeat.

“Do not be afraid,” the voice continued, and now she could feel it, a vibration behind her teeth, below her tongue, somewhere in the hollow spaces of her skull. “I am very old, child. Older than your kind’s memory. I am what keeps the hungry dark at bay.”

The words formed without her volition, her vocal cords moving of their own accord while her actual mouth remained sealed behind its porcelain prison. Rachel tried to speak, to protest, to demand answers, but found herself voiceless, a passenger in her own throat.

“Your surgeons believed they were repairing damage,” the entity continued through her borrowed voice. “They could not see what truly lurked beneath the broken bone and torn flesh. The gateway was widening, child. The old seals were failing. I came to help, to serve as I have served for millennia upon millennia.”

Through the recovery ward windows, afternoon light cast long shadows that seemed to writhe and twist against the walls.





Rachel's vision began to sharpen beyond normal acuity, revealing details that had no business existing, microscopic fractures in the paint, the geometric precision of dust motes dancing in sunbeams, and beneath it all, a sense of vast spaces pressing against the boundaries of perception.

"You see more clearly now," the voice observed. "The barrier grants clarity, but at a price. You have become a living seal, a guardian between what is and what hungers to be. The porcelain is not mere decoration, it is containment. Ancient ceramic blessed by forgotten gods, fired in kilns that burned when your species still cowered in caves."

Rachel's reflection in the pitcher showed her own eyes, but behind them lurked something else, shadows that moved independently of any light source, shapes that suggested geometries no earthly mathematics could describe. The porcelain mouth reflected nothing at all, creating an unsettling void in the center of her face.

"There is something beyond," the voice whispered, and now Rachel could hear another sound, a wet, sliding noise like meat dragged across stone, coming from somewhere impossibly distant yet intimately close. "It presses against the boundaries, always seeking, always hungry. It speaks in tongues of madness and feeds on sanity itself. The old words call it many names, but names have power, and power draws attention."

The hospital room grew colder despite the afternoon warmth, and Rachel noticed that the shadows cast by the window blinds had begun to move against the natural progression of the sun. They stretched and pooled like spilled ink, reaching toward her bed with deliberate intent.

"Do you understand now?" the voice asked. "The surgery opened more than flesh and bone. Your jaw was shattered in that accident, yes, but the fracture ran deeper than your doctors knew. It cracked the ancient barriers, the prehistoric seals that your ancestors carved into the very foundation of reality."



Without intervention, without my guardianship, the breach would have widened until something far worse than mere death came crawling through."

Rachel tried again to force words past the porcelain seal, to scream for help, for explanation, for an end to this impossible nightmare. But the ceramic remained immutable, and with growing horror, she began to understand the entity's earlier warning.

The thing beyond the seal could hear her intentions.

Even now, as terror mounted in her chest like steam in a kettle, she could sense something responding to her distress, a presence vast and alien turning its attention toward the hairline cracks in reality that her fear was creating. The shadows in the room deepened, and the temperature dropped another degree.





“Yes,” the voice said softly. “It knows you are here now. It tastes your panic like wine upon its tongue. This is why you must not scream, child. This is why you must never scream. Fear is the key that opens doors better left sealed. Terror is the invitation that pierces the veil between worlds.”

The wet sliding sound grew closer, accompanied now by what might have been breathing, if breathing could sound like wind through a charnel house, like the last gasps of civilizations ground to dust beneath cosmic indifference. Rachel’s enhanced vision caught movement in the spaces between shadows, glimpses of something that hurt to perceive directly.

“I have held the barrier for so long,” the entity continued, and for the first time, she heard exhaustion in its borrowed tone. “Eons beyond counting, standing guard while your kind grew from primitives scratching symbols on cave walls to masters of steel and silicon. But even ancient strength has limits. Even the oldest seals can crack under sufficient pressure.”



The porcelain felt suddenly fragile beneath Rachel's exploring fingers, no thicker than an eggshell between her consciousness and something that should not exist. She could sense the entity's growing weariness, feel the trembling in its otherworldly resolve.

"The reconstruction surgery was not coincidence," the voice admitted. "I guided the accident, shaped the circumstances that brought you here. Your bloodline carries the old sensitivities, the genetic echoes of those who once served as guardians in darker ages. You were chosen, child, not randomly but by necessity. The seal required a willing host, and willingness can be cultivated through desperation."

The shadows in the room began to coalesce into shapes that suggested limbs, appendages, things that moved with purpose and hunger. The wet breathing grew louder, punctuated by sounds that might have been words in languages that predated human speech.

"It knows," the entity whispered, and now Rachel could hear genuine fear in its borrowed voice. "The old one beyond the seal, it has caught the scent of new opportunity. Your terror calls to it like a beacon in the void. If you break, if you scream, if you let the fear overwhelm the barriers of sanity, then the porcelain will shatter like autumn leaves. And what comes through..."

The voice trailed off, but Rachel's enhanced perception filled in the gaps with images that seared themselves into her consciousness, cities consumed by living darkness, reality itself unraveling like poorly woven cloth, the final screams of a species that had never truly understood the fragility of existence.

She understood now why the entity had sealed her mouth. Not to trap her voice, but to trap her screams. Not to silence her, but to prevent her terror from becoming a key that unlocked doors humanity was never meant to open.





The porcelain pulsed once beneath her fingers, warm as living flesh, and Rachel realized that her choice had already been made. She was no longer merely human, she was a guardian, a living seal, a barrier between the hungry dark and everything she had ever loved.

In the gathering shadows of the recovery room, something waited with infinite patience for her resolve to crack.

She closed her eyes and tried very hard not to be afraid.



My dear digitally depraved, allow me to present “Porcelain Mouth” - a delectable morsel of surgical horror that you’ve just witnessed ask what price we pay for protection from cosmic terrors. You observed our unfortunate Rachel awaken from reconstructive surgery to discover her mouth sealed with ancient porcelain, only to learn she’d become a living barrier against something that hungers in the spaces between reality.

You heard that entity speaking through her vocal cords reveal the accident was no accident - she was chosen to serve as guardian against horrors that feed on fear itself, where even a scream could shatter the seals holding back primordial darkness. The exquisite irony you witnessed, dear viewers, is that in an age of constant chatter and endless expression, true horror lies not in being silenced, but in discovering that sometimes silence is the only thing standing between civilization and the abyss. How terrifyingly appropriate that salvation should come disguised as disfigurement.



THE HOLLOWING

The limestone walls wept perpetually in the Caverns of Saint Bartholomew, though the faithful called it divine perspiration. Noah Lucas had descended through three hundred feet of flooded passages to reach this place, his diving equipment now discarded at the submerged entrance like the shed skin of some mechanical serpent. The air tasted of minerals and something else, something organic that clung to the back of his throat with the persistence of guilt.

The rescue call had come through emergency channels fourteen hours ago: twenty-three members of the Subterranean Church of the Divine Hollow had ceased all surface contact. Their compound, built within a vast natural chamber fed by underground springs, had been purchased legally five years prior. Until yesterday, they had maintained regular communication with suppliers and family members above. Then, silence.





Lucas picked his way through the main cavern, his headlamp casting wavering shadows that seemed to retreat only reluctantly. The cult had carved living spaces directly into the rock walls, crude but functional dwellings that opened like wounds in the stone. Electrical cables snaked along the ceiling, powered by a hydroelectric generator that hummed somewhere in the darkness with mechanical persistence.

The first body lay curled beside what had once served as an altar, a natural formation of flowstone that resembled, with disturbing accuracy, an open mouth. The corpse belonged to a middle-aged woman whose fingers were stained with her own blood. Her mouth had been carved away, leaving behind a ragged cavity that descended far deeper into her skull than anatomy should have permitted. The wound was precise, surgical, as though she had worked with infinite care to hollow herself out entirely.

Scattered around the altar were crude tools: kitchen knives honed to razor sharpness, dental instruments that gleamed with meticulous cleanliness, and fragments of bone that Lucas recognized with mounting nausea as pieces of human jaw. A notebook lay open beside the woman's outstretched hand, its pages covered in spidery handwriting that grew increasingly erratic toward the final entries.

Day 847: The Voice grows stronger. Brother Samuel achieved communion yesterday, his offering was accepted. The cavity behind his teeth reaches down, down, down. We understand now that we are vessels, not vessels to be filled but vessels to be emptied. God does not wish to enter us. God wishes us to become the entrance.

Day 851: Sister Margaret has begun the work. The screaming stopped at dawn. She begs now, but not for mercy. She begs to be completed. Her mouth is a doorway, and something stirs on the other side.



Day 856: The children understand better than we do. Little Timothy sees it clearly, we were never meant to speak to God. We were meant to become the spaces through which God might whisper.

Lucas's hands trembled as he turned the pages, each entry more fevered than the last. The handwriting deteriorated into barely legible scratches, then into symbols and what seemed to be an incomprehensible language.

He found the camera equipment in what had served as their meeting hall. Three video cameras on tripods surrounded a circle carved into the stone floor, their lenses focused on a space that was conspicuously empty save for dark stains that had soaked deep into the porous rock. The cameras were still recording.





The first tape showed the cult in what appeared to be a state of religious ecstasy. Men and women knelt within the carved circle, their faces turned upward toward the cavern ceiling in poses of supplication. Their mouths moved in unison, but no sound emerged from the recording equipment. They were speaking, or trying to speak, but their words created no vibration in the air.

Brother Samuel stepped forward in the recording, his face serene with terrible purpose. He raised one of the sharpened knives and, without hesitation, began to carve. The blade slid through the flesh of his cheek with the ease of cutting butter, peeling away layers of skin and muscle to reveal the yellowed bone beneath. Blood flowed, but Samuel's expression never changed. His eyes remained fixed on something beyond the camera's range, something that filled him with rapture even as he methodically destroyed himself.



Others followed his example. Sister Margaret took up a dental probe and began the delicate work of extracting her own teeth, each molar removed with surgical precision before she moved on to the more complex task of reshaping her jaw. Her face became a ruin, but her eyes blazed with religious fervor. She was begging, Lucas realized with dawning horror. Her mangled mouth was trying to form words of supplication, pleading for something to fill the cavity she had created.

The second tape was worse. The cultists had progressed in their self-mutilation, their faces now unrecognizable as human. They knelt in their circle, heads tilted back, and their hollowed mouths gaped like empty wells. Something was moving in those cavities, not flesh or bone, but shadows that seemed to possess independent motion. The shadows writhed with purpose, reaching upward from the depths of destroyed throats toward some unseen presence above.

Children appeared in the third recording, their small faces bearing the same expression of terrible understanding that had marked their parents. They approached the circle of kneeling adults with kitchen knives clutched in their tiny hands. The oldest, a boy of perhaps ten, stepped forward first. His movements were mechanical, puppet-like, as though something else was guiding his actions.

Lucas forced himself to watch as the child began his work. The boy's hands moved with inhuman precision, carving away his lips, his cheeks, the soft tissue of his palate. Blood cascaded down his chin, but he never paused. His eyes remained fixed on the camera, and through the recording, they seemed to look directly at Lucas with an intelligence far older than any child should possess.





The final frame of the last tape showed the boy after his transformation was complete. His face was a hollow ruin, a cavity that extended impossibly deep into his skull. But somehow, impossibly, he was still alive. His remaining eye fixed on the camera lens with perfect clarity, and his lips, what remained of them, began to move.

Lucas watched the recording in reverse, slowing the playback until he could make out the shape of the words. The child's voice, when it finally emerged from the speakers, was not his own. It was something ancient and patient, something that had been waiting in the darkness beneath the earth for time beyond measure.

"We were just the vessels," the voice whispered, each word carefully formed despite the ruin of the mouth that spoke them. "The real mouths open next."

The recording ended. In the sudden silence that followed, Lucas became aware of a sound that had been present throughout his exploration but which he had dismissed as the natural acoustics of the cavern system. It was breathing, slow, rhythmic, impossibly vast. The walls themselves seemed to expand and contract with each inhalation, as though the entire cavern was the interior of some massive lung.

He turned his headlamp toward the altar, and in its pale light, he saw that the flowstone formation had changed. What had resembled an open mouth now gaped wider, its stone throat extending down into the earth beyond the reach of his light. The breathing sound grew stronger, and with it came the realization that something was rising from the depths below.



Lucas ran. His feet slipped on the wet stone as he raced toward the flooded entrance, but behind him, the breathing continued, patient, eternal, utterly alien. As he plunged into the dark water and began his ascent toward the surface world, he could feel the weight of that presence pressing against his mind.

By the time he reached the surface, gasping and shivering in the pale morning light, Lucas understood with crystalline clarity what the cultists had discovered in their underground sanctum. God did not dwell above the earth in celestial glory. God dwelt below, in the spaces between spaces, in the hollow places where sound could not travel and light could not penetrate.





The cultists had not been destroyed by their faith. They had been prepared by it, transformed into the instruments through which something infinitely patient could finally begin its ascent toward a world that had forgotten the true meaning of worship.

As Lucas stumbled away from the cavern entrance, his mouth began to ache with a hunger he had never felt before. Deep in his throat, something stirred, not flesh, but the shadow of an absence that yearned to be filled. He opened his lips to scream, but no sound emerged.

The real mouths were opening.



Dear digital voyeurs, gather close as we reflect upon tonight's delectable morsel of subterranean terror. In "The Hollowing," you descended with rescue diver Noah Lucas into the limestone bowels of Saint Bartholomew's Caverns, where you discovered twenty-three devoted cultists had found that true communion with the divine requires not opening one's heart, but rather...excavating one's mouth.

You witnessed how these faithful souls methodically carved away their faces, transforming themselves into hollow vessels, not to receive God's word, but to become the very throat through which something ancient and patient might finally speak. As you watched Lucas view their recorded descent into sacred mutilation, the horrifying realization dawned that the cultists weren't destroyed by their faith; they were lovingly prepared as instruments for an entity that dwells not in heaven's heights, but in the spaces between spaces below.

With endless chatter and digital noise, salvation would require the ultimate silence, becoming an empty mouth for something that has been waiting eons to finally have its say.





THE YEARLING ROOM

The fluorescent hum above Elijah Hann's desk had developed a stutter, casting irregular shadows across the quarterly reports that blurred before his tired eyes. Thirty-seven years of corporate existence had carved grooves into his face deeper than those left by time alone, and tonight the building felt different. Predatory. The usual after-hours silence held a weight that pressed against his temples like gathering storm clouds.

He had stayed late again, though he could not recall deciding to do so. The elevator's descent to the parking garage seemed interminable, the numbers above the doors flickering in sequences that made no mathematical sense. When the doors finally parted with their familiar wheeze, Elijah found himself facing not the familiar concrete cavern of sublevel parking, but a corridor he had never seen before.



The walls were paneled in dark wood that gleamed with an oily patina, and the air carried the scent of something ancient, not decay, but rather the opposite, as if time itself had been preserved in amber. Fluorescent tubes stretched ahead in diminishing perspective, their light cycling through spectrums that hurt to observe directly. Elijah stepped forward, his leather soles whispering against carpet that felt subtly wrong beneath his feet, too yielding, too warm.

The corridor terminated at a door marked only with a brass nameplate: THE YEARLING ROOM. Below it, etched in smaller script that seemed to shift when he wasn't looking directly at it, were the words: "To move forward is to molt."

The handle turned before he touched it.

Beyond lay an office space that defied the building's architectural logic. The ceiling stretched impossibly high, lost in shadows that moved independent of any light source. Filing cabinets lined the walls in ordered ranks, their metal surfaces reflecting not Elijah's image, but something that writhed just beyond the threshold of recognition. At the room's center sat a mahogany desk, its surface dominated by a single manila folder.

Elijah approached with the slow deliberation of a man walking toward his own execution. The folder bore his name in a script he recognized but could not place, his own handwriting, perhaps, but from a time he could not recall. Inside were photographs. Dozens of them. Hundreds.



The first showed him as he was now, standing in this very room, holding this very folder. The next captured him perhaps a year younger, the lines around his eyes slightly softer, his hair marginally thicker. The third photograph revealed him at thirty-five, then thirty-four, then thirty-three. Each image portrayed him in the same pose, in the same impossible room, examining the same folder with an expression of mounting horror that mirrored his current state perfectly.

His hands trembled as he shuffled deeper into the collection. Twenty-eight. Twenty-five. Twenty-one. The photographs continued their relentless regression, each one a perfect documentation of his younger self discovering this same terrible truth. At eighteen, his face still held the roundness of adolescence, but his eyes already carried the weight of this knowledge. At sixteen, the school uniform he wore belonged to an institution he had no memory of attending. At fourteen, the background had changed, no longer the yearling room, but some other space equally impossible, equally wrong.





The photographs became increasingly disturbing as they progressed backward through his life. At twelve, he wore clothes that belonged to no fashion he could recall from that era. At ten, the lighting in the images took on a quality that hurt his eyes, casting shadows that fell upward. At eight, his younger self's smile held secrets no child should possess.

Six years old. Four. Three. Two.

The final photograph showed an infant lying in a crib made of materials that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. The baby's eyes were open, alert, and filled with an ancient recognition that belonged to no newborn. In the background, barely visible, stood figures in white coats, their faces obscured by surgical masks that somehow conveyed expressions of profound satisfaction.

Elijah stumbled backward, the photographs scattering across the floor like leaves in a wind that touched nothing else in the room. The images began to move, subtle at first, a blink here, a shift in posture there, but with increasing animation as his panic mounted. His younger selves turned their faces toward him in unison, their mouths opening in silent screams that he could hear nonetheless, a sound like the universe itself being slowly torn apart.

The room began to expand, its walls receding into infinite distance while somehow simultaneously pressing closer. The filing cabinets opened of their own accord, revealing not documents but windows into other versions of this same moment, endless repetitions of his discovery playing out in parallel dimensions of horror. In some, he was older when he found the room. In others, younger. In a few terrible instances, he was not human at all, but something that wore his form like an ill-fitting mask.





Understanding crashed over him like ice water. He was not discovering his past, he was witnessing his future, an endless cycle of temporal regression that had already claimed countless iterations of himself. Each photograph represented not a moment preserved, but a moment yet to come, a stage in his inevitable journey backward through time until he reached that impossible infant in the light-consuming crib.

The whisper phrase echoed in his mind with crystalline clarity: "To move forward is to molt." He was shedding his years like a snake discarding its skin, each discovery of the room peeling away another layer of accumulated time. The photographs were not records but prophecies, documenting the stages of his unraveling.

Behind him, he could hear the sound of footsteps, his own footsteps, belonging to an older version of himself who had yet to find this room, who still believed in the linear progression of time and the permanence of memory. That version would arrive here eventually, driven by the same inexplicable compulsion that had brought him here, would discover the same photographs, would experience the same terrible revelation.

And before that version, an even older one would come. And before that, another. An infinite regression of Elijahs, each one shedding time like dead skin, each one moving backward toward that final image of the impossible infant whose eyes held the knowledge of endings.

Elijah tried to run, but his legs carried him deeper into the room instead. With each step, he felt something fundamental about himself slip away, not memory, but the very capacity for memory. His reflection in the polished surfaces of the filing cabinets showed a face incrementally younger, the accumulated weight of years burning away like pages in a fire.

The fluorescent lights above pulsed in rhythm with a heartbeat that was not his own but belonged to something vast and patient that fed on temporal marrow. Somewhere in the building above, another Elijah was finishing his quarterly reports, would soon discover an elevator that descended to impossible depths, would find a corridor that led to revelation and regression.



The photographs on the floor had begun to fade, their images dissolving as the futures they depicted crystallized into present reality. Elijah knelt among them, watching his life story evaporate into the ether of untime. Soon, there would be nothing left but the yearling room itself, waiting with infinite patience for the next version of himself to discover it.

In the distance, growing closer with each passing moment that moved in reverse, he could hear the cries of an infant, his own voice, but from a time that was both distant past and immediate future, calling out in a language that predated words, speaking truths that unmade themselves in the very act of being spoken.

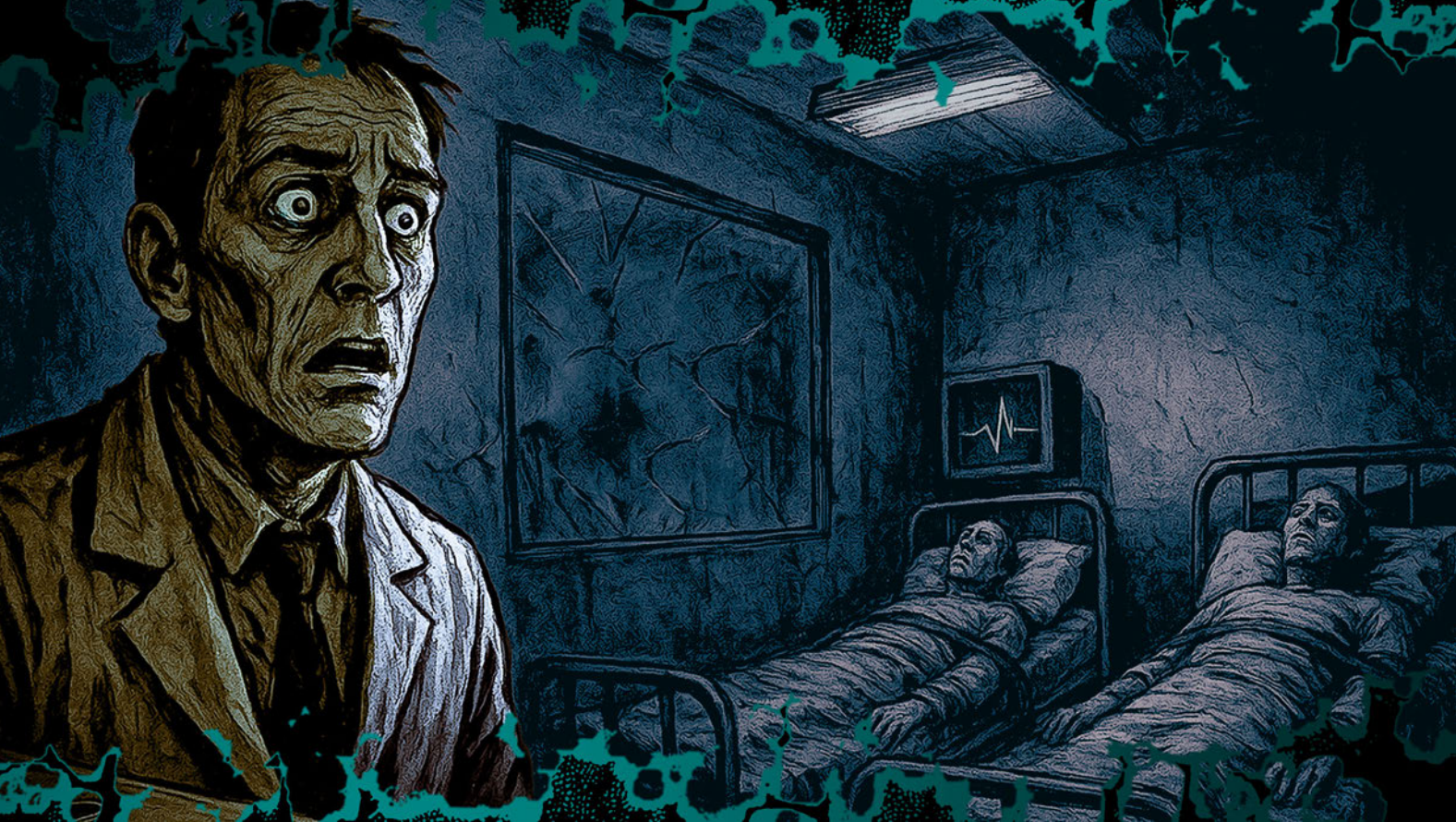
The room pulsed once, like a heart in the darkness, and Elijah Hann began to molt.





My delightful moths drawn to the flame... Tonight you witnessed poor Elijah Hann, a corporate drone who discovered that time itself can be quite the predator. You observed our unfortunate protagonist stumble upon the Yearling Room, where those photographs documented not his past, but his horrifying future, an endless regression through his own life, shedding years like molting skin until he reached that impossible infant with ancient eyes.

You watched each version of Elijah destined to find this cursed chamber, each doomed to walk backward through time while the next iteration approached from behind, trapped in an ouroboros of temporal decay. Fitting that within the labyrinth of corporate ladders and quarterly reports, the ultimate horror you witnessed was not moving forward, but being forced to molt away all that ambition has accumulated.



THE THIRD PATIENT

Dr. Leo Alexander had always prided himself on precision, on the sterile certainty of medical science. The experimental coma therapy wing of Blackmoor Psychiatric Hospital was his domain, a sanctuary of measured breaths and regulated heartbeats where consciousness itself could be manipulated, coaxed back from the abyss of trauma-induced catatonia. Two patients lay in the perpetual twilight of induced sleep: Rebecca Marsh, catatonic for eighteen months following witnessing her family's murder, and Thomas Kellner, retreated so far into his mind after childhood abuse that no conventional therapy could reach him.



The monitors sang their electronic lullabies, twin melodies of life persisting in the margins of death. Rebecca's trace painted steady peaks and valleys across the green-phosphor screen, while Thomas's rhythm maintained its own stubborn cadence. But there was always a third monitor.

At first, Alexander dismissed it as a malfunction, some ghost signal bleeding through the hospital's aging electrical system. The third EKG displayed a heartbeat more erratic than his patients', its peaks sharp and aggressive, the rhythm of something afraid. When he mentioned it to the technicians, they looked at him with the particular confusion reserved for those who claim to see things that aren't there. The monitor bank, they insisted, contained only two functioning units.

Yet there it was, night after night, the third trace pulsing with malevolent life.



The first time Alexander noticed the synchronization, he attributed it to coincidence. He had been conducting his evening rounds, clipboard in hand, when the third monitor's rhythm suddenly accelerated. His own pulse quickened in response, a sympathetic acceleration that left him momentarily breathless. The green line spiked higher, faster, as if responding to his presence like some predator sensing prey.

Sleep became elusive. In his apartment overlooking the hospital grounds, Alexander found himself drawn to the window, staring across at the wing where his patients lay dreaming whatever dreams the pharmaceutically induced could conjure. When exhaustion finally claimed him, his dreams were not his own.





He walked through corridors that reeked of antiseptic and something underneath, something organic and rotting. In these nocturnal wanderings, he observed deaths that had not yet occurred. Rebecca Marsh convulsing on her bed, her monitors screaming as her brain hemorrhaged, blood seeping from her ears in crimson tributaries. Thomas Kellner's throat closing, his windpipe collapsing as if crushed by invisible hands, his face purpling while machines wailed their electronic protests.

These were not the fevered imaginings of an overworked mind. They were previews, glimpses into futures that crystallized with horrifying accuracy. Rebecca died on a Tuesday morning, exactly as Alexander had witnessed in his dreams three nights prior. The hemorrhage was sudden, catastrophic, inexplicable. Thomas followed two days later, his airway mysteriously constricting despite the absence of any physical obstruction, his death as violent and sudden as the vision that had preceded it.



The wing fell silent except for the hum of ventilation systems and the persistent electronic heartbeat of the third monitor. Alexander stood alone among the empty beds, watching that impossible trace continue its relentless rhythm. No patients remained, yet the phantom pulse grew stronger, more insistent, as if feeding on the deaths that had preceded it.

That final night, Alexander's dream shifted. Instead of wandering the corridors as an observer, he found himself prone on the examination table, strapped down with leather restraints that bit into his wrists. The familiar ceiling tiles stared back at him, water-stained and yellowed with age. He could feel the electrodes adhered to his chest, the cold gel conducting the rhythm of his terror to machines that hummed with anticipation.

Above him, a figure moved just beyond his peripheral vision. He strained to see, but the restraints held him fast. The presence circled the table with predatory patience, and Alexander understood with crystalline clarity that he was no longer the doctor. He was the patient. He had always been the patient.

The third monitor's trace accelerated, matching his escalating panic beat for beat. In the green glow of the screen, he glimpsed his own face reflected, but it was not the face he remembered. The features were gaunt, hollow-eyed, the visage of someone who had spent months in catatonic withdrawal. How long had he been here? How long had he been dreaming that he was the doctor, while his mind retreated deeper into delusion?





The restraints tightened. The presence leaned closer, and Alexander caught a glimpse of his own hands moving with clinical precision, adjusting the machinery that surrounded the table. He watched himself prepare the injection, the same cocktail he had administered to Rebecca and Thomas, the same mixture that had sent them spiraling into the dark.

Understanding flooded through him like ice water through his veins. There had never been two patients. There had always been three. Rebecca and Thomas were fragments of his fractured psyche, aspects of his consciousness that he had created and destroyed in an endless cycle of therapeutic delusion. The third monitor had been tracking his true heartbeat all along, the rhythm of the real Leo Alexander lying catatonic in the experimental wing, dreaming elaborate fantasies of being the doctor rather than the patient.

The injection entered his bloodstream with a whisper. The third monitor's trace began to flatten, its peaks growing smaller, more distant, like a voice calling from across a vast and growing darkness. In his final moments of lucidity, Alexander understood that his attending physician would find his body in the morning, another failure of the experimental program, another patient who had retreated so far into madness that even death could not coax him back.

The green line went flat, and the wing fell silent at last. Somewhere in the darkness, a new monitor began to pulse, waiting for the next patient to arrive, the next mind to fracture and rebuild itself in the comfortable delusion of being somewhere, someone, else. The cycle would begin again, as it always had, as it always would, in the place where consciousness went to hide from truths too terrible to bear.

The third patient was gone, but there would always be another.

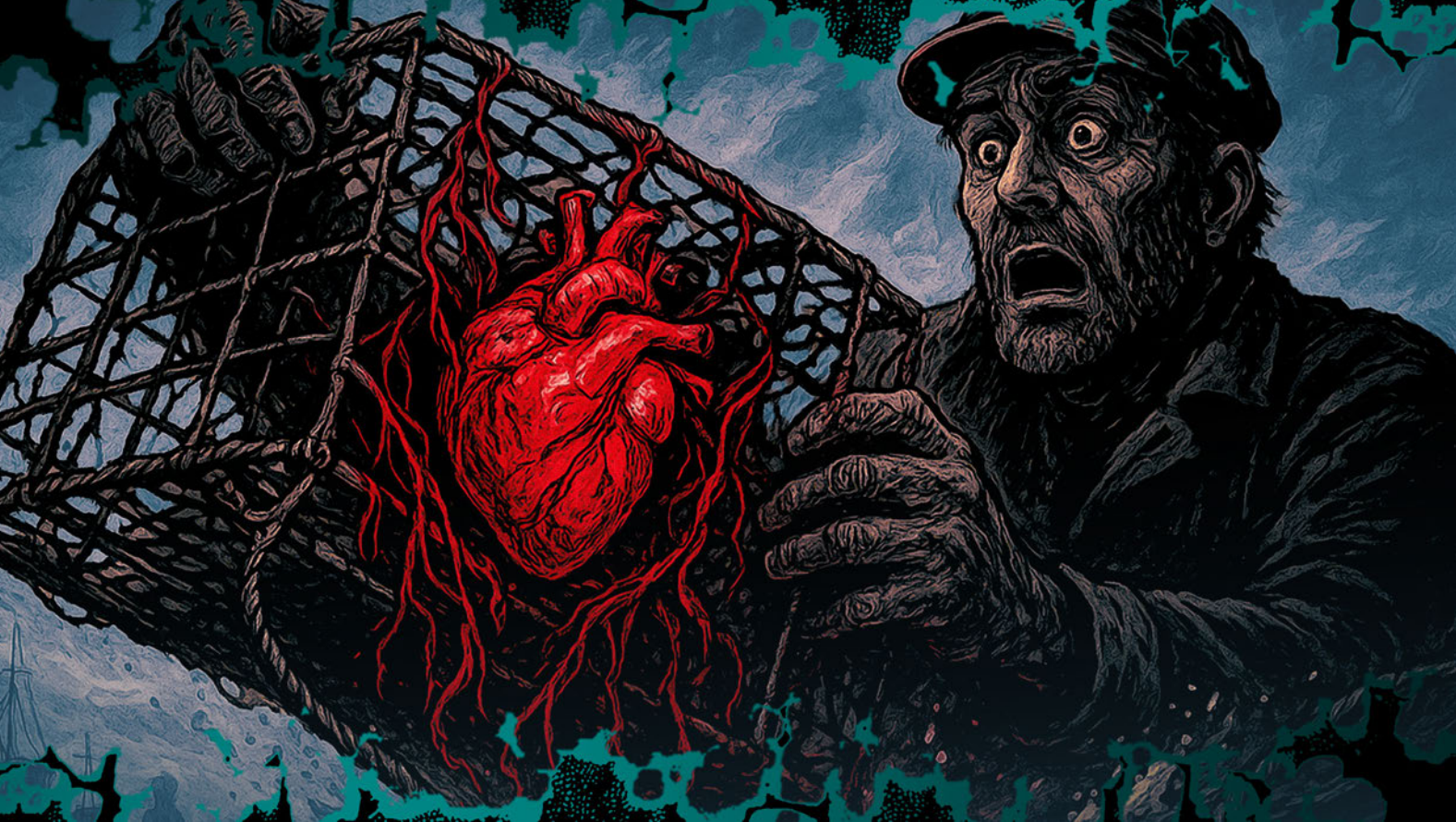




Ah, my dear watchers in the shadows, tonight you witnessed the delicious madness of Dr. Leo Alexander, who believed himself master of minds trapped in pharmaceutical twilight. You observed two catatonic patients lying under his clinical care, Rebecca and Thomas, while that mysterious third monitor pulsed with an impossible heartbeat that only he could see.

As deaths began mirroring his prophetic nightmares with surgical precision, you watched our good doctor discover the most exquisite truth: he was never the physician at all, merely another shattered mind hiding behind the comforting delusion of authority while strapped to his own examination table. How perfectly fitting that those who seek to control consciousness often find themselves its most helpless prisoners, after all, the deepest asylum is the one we build inside our own skulls.

Sweet dreams, my devoted specimens.



DARK CURRENT

The Atlantic swells carried secrets older than memory, and Captain Ezra Blackwood knew their weight in his bones. Thirty-seven years he had worked these waters off Pemaquid Point, watching the seasons wheel through their ancient dance while his traps descended into the slate-dark depths. The morning fog hung thick as burial shrouds when he hauled up trap number forty-three, expecting the usual scrabble of claws against wire mesh.

Instead, kelp the color of dried blood wrapped itself around something that should not have existed.

The thing pulsed with obscene vitality, each contraction sending ripples through the brine that pooled in his boat's hull. Blackwood's weathered hands trembled as he peeled away the marine vegetation, revealing tissue that gleamed with unnatural health. The organ was impossibly fresh, arterial chambers dilating and contracting with metronomic precision, as if the vast ocean itself served as its circulatory system.



When the DNA results came back three days later, Detective Chloe Morrow felt reality shift beneath her feet like unstable sediment. The genetic markers belonged to Timothy Ashworth, aged seven, who had drowned during the hurricane of 1932. She stared at the laboratory report until the letters blurred, trying to reconcile the impossible data with the evidence bag containing that still-beating impossibility.

The locals spoke in hushed whispers of things that should remain buried beneath the waves. Old Henrik Larsen, whose grandfather had fished these waters before the Great Depression, crossed himself and muttered prayers in Norwegian whenever the subject arose. “The deep keeps its own time,” he told anyone who would listen, his rheumy eyes reflecting depths that had seen too much. “What goes down doesn’t always stay down.”



As dusk painted the harbor in shades of rust and shadow, the tide began to behave according to laws older than physics. The water level should have dropped with the moon's pull, exposing the barnacle-crusted pilings and revealing the harbor's rocky bottom. Instead, the brine continued to rise, lapping hungrily at dock planks that had never known such caresses.

Blackwood watched from his cabin window as the anomalous flood consumed the wharf inch by methodical inch. The other vessels bobbed at their moorings like offerings to some vast, patient deity. His radio crackled with confused chatter from fellow fishermen, their voices growing increasingly panicked as conventional explanations crumbled like sea-salt crystals.

By midnight, the water had claimed the lower streets of the village. Emergency services arrived to find a phenomenon that defied their training and equipment. The oceanographer from the university spoke of thermoclines and tidal bore effects, but her words carried no conviction. The water continued its inexorable ascent, defying gravity and moon-phase calculations alike.





Detective Morrow stood at the harbor's edge, listening to sounds that had no earthly source. Beneath the gentle lapping of waves against submerged structures, a rhythm pulsed through the water with supernatural persistence. The beating grew stronger as darkness deepened, resonating through every surface the flood had touched.

The boats began to disappear as the first pale fingers of dawn stretched across the horizon. Not sunk or damaged, but simply absent, as if the night had devoured them entirely. The Mary Catherine, the Proud Susan, the Northern Star, all vanished without trace or wreckage. Forty-seven vessels that had ridden at anchor now existed only in the harbor master's logbooks and the increasingly frantic memories of their owners.

Blackwood's own boat, the Persistence, had joined the maritime exodus sometime before sunrise. He found only empty water where his livelihood should have been moored, the securing chains hanging loose like discarded shackles. The absence felt personal, as if the sea had reached up with conscious intent to strip away everything that connected him to the surface world.



The silence that followed proved more disturbing than any storm. Where waves should have whispered against hulls and rigging should have sung in the breeze, only that infernal beating persisted. The sound seemed to emanate from every submerged surface, turning the harbor into a vast resonating chamber for something that defied comprehension.

Dr. Elisabeth Crane arrived from Woods Hole with instruments designed to measure the impossible. Her hydrophones detected the cardiac rhythm at frequencies that should have dissipated within meters of their source. Instead, the pulse transmitted through water with supernatural clarity, as if the ocean itself had become a conductor for whatever force animated that impossible organ.

“The amplitude is increasing,” she told the assembled officials, her scientific composure cracking like ice under pressure. “Whatever is generating this signal, it’s getting stronger.”

Local children began to gather at the water's edge despite their parents' frantic attempts to keep them indoors. They stood in silent rows, their eyes reflecting depths that children should never possess. When questioned, they spoke of songs only they could hear, melodies that called from the drowned places where light never penetrated.

Old Henrik Larsen was found at dawn on the fourth day, standing waist-deep in the flood waters with his arms raised toward the lightening sky. His lips moved in supplications to powers that predated human settlement of these shores. When rescue workers pulled him from the brine, he babbled about "the sleepers below" and "the debt that comes due." The beating grew louder.

Detective Morrow felt it in her chest now, a secondary rhythm that synchronized with her own heartbeat until she could no longer distinguish between the two. Sleep became impossible as the sound penetrated every structure in the flooded zone. Windows vibrated in their frames, and the foundations of buildings began to resonate with sympathetic frequencies.



Marine biologists arrived with theories about bioluminescent jellyfish and deep-water adaptations, but their explanations withered under scrutiny. No known creature could generate the persistent, coordinated pulse that now dominated the harbor. Sonar readings revealed only empty water where the sound should have originated, as if the source existed in some dimension perpendicular to normal space.

The children's drawings became increasingly disturbing. Crayon sketches depicted vast shapes moving beneath stylized waves, forms that suggested intelligence without revealing specific anatomy. Their teacher, Mrs. Adelaide Corwin, noticed that each drawing contained the same central element: a pulsing red shape that resembled nothing so much as an oversized human heart.

As the second week began, residents reported dreams of impossible depths and cities that had never seen sunlight. The visions carried a weight of memory that felt older than human consciousness, as if something vast and patient had begun to stir in response to that beating summons from the surface world.





The water began to recede on the fifteenth day, leaving behind deposits that marine geologists could not classify. The sediment contained traces of metals that existed nowhere in Earth's periodic table, arranged in crystalline patterns that hurt the mind to contemplate. Buildings emerged from the flood bearing stains that resembled nothing so much as arterial networks, dark trceries that pulsed with their own internal light. But the boats never returned.

The harbor remained empty, its silence broken only by that eternal beating which now seemed to emanate from the bedrock itself. Fishermen from neighboring ports reported strange currents that pulled their vessels toward Pemaquid Point with irresistible force. Those who ventured too close spoke of shadows moving beneath their hulls, shapes too large and too purposeful to be natural.

Captain Ezra Blackwood sold his house and moved inland, but distance provided no escape from the dreams. In his sleep, he descended through fathoms of black water toward a place where the beating heart of a child who died in 1932 had become the herald of something far more ancient and infinitely more patient.

The forensics lab sealed the heart in a containment unit designed for hazardous materials, but the beating continued unabated. Night shift technicians reported that the sound grew louder during the dark hours, as if whatever animated the organ drew strength from the absence of light.

Detective Morrow transferred to a precinct in Portland, then Augusta, then as far inland as her career would allow. But geography offered no refuge from the knowledge that some things rise from depths that geography cannot measure. In the small hours before dawn, she would wake to the phantom sensation of that rhythmic pulsing, echoing through her bones like a promise or a threat.

The harbor at Pemaquid Point remains empty to this day, its waters reflecting only sky and the occasional gull. But on certain nights when the moon is dark and the tide runs against its natural course, those brave or foolish enough to listen closely can still hear the beating from below. It calls to something that sleeps in the deepest trenches of the ocean, something that measures time in geological epochs and remembers when the continents wore different shapes.





The children who heard the songs have grown into adults who speak in whispers of the debt that waits beneath the waves. They know, with certainty that transcends rational thought, that the empty harbor serves as more than a memorial to the vanished fleet. It is a listening post, a resonating chamber where the pulse of that impossible heart counts down toward a reckoning that began when the first boats failed to return.

In the depths where pressure would crush human bodies like empty shells, forty-seven vessels rest in perfect formation around something that was never quite a ship. Their hulls have become part of a vast organic architecture, a circulatory system that spans the ocean floor and pulses with the rhythm of that beating heart from 1932.

And in the deepest part of that impossible structure, Timothy Ashworth opens eyes that have learned to see in absolute darkness, his seven-year-old form preserved in brine that tastes of copper and eternity. He counts the beats that echo through the water, patient as only the drowned can be patient, waiting for the day when the tide rises high enough to reclaim the land that forgot its debts to the sea.



Ah, my dear aficionados of aquatic anxiety, gather close as we reflect upon tonight's maritime meditation. You witnessed Captain Blackwood's routine lobster trap yield not crustacean, but the still-beating heart of young Liam Ashworth, a child who drowned in 1932, yet whose cardiac organ pulsed with supernatural vitality in the present day. You observed this impossible relic broadcast its rhythm through the harbor waters as the tide defied natural law, rising to swallow boats, buildings, and ultimately forty-seven vessels that vanished into depths where the drowned boy waited with oceanic patience. The flooded town became a resonating chamber for something ancient and vast, responding to the child's cardiac beacon from the abyss where maritime debts accumulate interest across the decades.

Funny that we landlubbers speak of "drowning in debt," never suspecting that the ocean keeps such meticulous ledgers of its own.

Until next time, my treasured students of the macabre...





THE STATIC FACES

The first time Meredith noticed the resemblance, she attributed it to the peculiar mathematics of coincidence that governed late-night television. The local weather girl possessed the same delicate cheekbones as the morning anchor, the same slope of nose that caught studio light with uncomfortable familiarity. Sleep deprivation, she reasoned, was threading its needle through her perception until strangers became sisters, until the cathode glow transformed every face into variants of some archetypal template. But the resemblance persisted beyond the sanctuary of dawn.

The streaming platform offered its programmed communion of faces, each thumbnailed visage promising entertainment, enlightenment, distraction from the gnawing emptiness that had colonized her apartment since Grayson left. Beauty tutorials, true crime confessions, reaction videos to reaction videos, an infinite regression of digital mirrors. Yet beneath the variance of hair color and cosmetic artifice, something fundamental unified them.

The geometry of their features seemed carved from identical clay, as if some cosmic sculptor had grown lazy in the crafting of humanity's digital representatives.

Meredith's fingers traced the contours of her own reflection in the darkened laptop screen. The resemblance was becoming impossible to ignore. The dating apps whispered their programmed seductions with profiles that made her stomach contract into a knot of recognition. Tyler, 34, photographed in golden hour light that blessed his features with almost ethereal beauty. The same features. Ashley, 28, whose smile carried that particular asymmetry Meredith recognized from her own mirror each morning. Even the older profiles, Richard, 47, whose graying temples failed to disguise the fundamental architecture beneath, wore variations of a face she had known since childhood as her own.

She deleted the apps. All of them. But their absence only sharpened her awareness of the phenomenon spreading like digital gangrene through every screen she encountered. The news anchors spoke with her voice now, or something approximating it.





The timbre remained foreign, inflected with regional accents she had never possessed, yet the cadence underneath pulsed with familiar rhythms. When she muted the television, their lips moved in patterns that suggested words she might have spoken, thoughts she might have harbored in the secret chambers of her skull.

We only need one.

The phrase surfaced in her dreams with the persistence of a half-remembered song lyric. She would wake with it coating her tongue like ash, unable to recall its source or significance. Google searches yielded nothing but advertising copy and fragments of academic papers discussing something called the Faceglass Protocol Alpha, documents that vanished between one click and the next, leaving only the ghost impression of meaning behind. The mirror in her bathroom had become an instrument of torture. Each morning she would stand before it, cataloguing the features that seemed increasingly alien on her own face. The eyes that stared back belonged to strangers she had glimpsed on screens, the mouth that opened to accommodate her toothbrush had smiled from a thousand thumbnails.



Her reflection had become a composite, a living collage of digital encounters that left her questioning which version constituted the original. The isolation deepened. Phone calls went unanswered because the voices on the other end sounded too much like variations of her own. Friends' social media profiles displayed photographs that made her heart race with recognition, not of the people she had known for years, but of the face they now wore like masks. When she tried to explain the phenomenon, their responses carried that familiar cadence, that particular pause before speech that she associated with her own thought processes.

The term "Echochild Type 5" appeared in her browser history without her having searched for it. Clicking the link led to a server error, but not before she glimpsed fragments: "Mirrorkin manifestations," "memetic parasitism," "identity consumption patterns observed in TV-Ψ District subjects."

The text had the clinical tone of a medical report documenting some exotic disease, yet the symptoms it described matched her experience with surgical precision. Sleep became elusive.

When it finally claimed her, the dreams were populated by endless corridors lined with screens, each displaying her face in slight variation, sometimes younger, sometimes older, sometimes bearing the subtle modifications of different ethnicities or genders, but fundamentally, unmistakably hers. In these dreams, she would approach one of the screens and place her palm against its surface, only to feel fingers pressing back from the other side, matching her touch with perfect synchronization.

The revelation came during a late-night documentary about synthetic face technology.

The expert being interviewed possessed her face with such precision that she initially mistook the broadcast for some elaborate prank. But as the conversation progressed, discussing the implications of fabricated media and digital identity theft, she realized this was no joke. The expert's knowledge seemed intimate, personal, as if drawn from her own understanding of the phenomenon she had been experiencing.



We only need one.

The phrase echoed from the television speakers with her own voice, though the expert's lips had not moved. She rewound the segment, but the audio remained unchanged while the visual showed only the familiar face discussing conventional technology.

The disconnect between sight and sound created a nauseous vertigo that sent her rushing to the bathroom, where she vomited into the toilet while her reflection watched with eyes that no longer seemed entirely her own. The social media platforms had begun suggesting her own posts to her, content she had never created, thoughts she had never shared, yet bearing her name, her photograph, her digital signature. The posts described experiences she had never had, relationships with people she had never met, check-ins at locations she had never visited. Yet the voice behind the words felt authentic, as if some other version of herself were living a parallel existence just beyond the boundaries of her perception.



Her computer began opening applications without her input. Video calls would initiate themselves, revealing empty rooms that nevertheless felt occupied. The camera would activate and she would find herself staring at her own image multiplied across the screennot reflections, but independent entities that moved with subtle variations, like actors performing similar but not identical scenes. The news reported a glitch in the emergency broadcast system.**

For seventeen minutes, every channel displayed the same face speaking in synchronized unison, delivering warnings about memetic contamination and something called the Faceglass Protocol Alpha. The face was hers, but the words it spoke felt foreign, clinical, as if some other intelligence were using her features as a broadcast medium. Technical support became impossible.

Every customer service representative she spoke with possessed her voice, her speech patterns, her particular way of pausing before asking questions. They assured her that her concerns were being addressed with the exact intonation she would have used to make such assurances.



When she demanded to speak with supervisors, the voices that came on the line were simply older versions of her own, weathered by years she had not lived.

The final transformation began subtly.

Photographs of her childhood self, preserved in albums her mother had digitized years ago, began displaying features that matched her current appearance rather than her actual childhood face. Family videos showed a girl who looked exactly as she did now, only smaller, creating a temporal paradox that made her question whether she had ever truly aged or simply maintained the same face across decades of false memory. Her reflection stopped matching her movements.

While she brushed her teeth, the figure in the mirror would continue its own routine, sometimes smiling, sometimes mouthing words she could not hear. When she waved goodbye before leaving for work, her reflection would wave back a moment too late, as if receiving delayed instructions from some distant source.





The world outside had become a hall of mirrors. Every face she encountered carried elements of her own features, yet none acknowledged the resemblance. Strangers would nod in recognition before she could place where she might have known them, their greetings carrying the familiarity of old friends despite her certainty that they had never met. The television spoke directly to her now, anchors addressing her by name during broadcasts that seemed to exist solely for her consumption. They discussed her life with intimate knowledge, analyzing her decisions and predicting her behavior with the accuracy of omniscient observers.

When she turned off the television, their voices would continue from the speakers of her phone, her computer, her smart home devices, creating an inescapable chorus of selves.

We only need one.

Understanding arrived like a revelation born of madness. She was not witnessing some grand conspiracy or technological malfunction.

She was experiencing the final stages of memetic parasitism, the complete consumption of her individual identity by something that existed in the spaces between signals, in the electromagnetic spectrum that carried digital information across the world. Her face had been harvested, replicated, distributed as a template for something that had learned to wear human features but remained fundamentally alien.

The Echochild Type 5, the Mirrorkin, fed on identity itself, consuming the unique signature that made each person distinct from the mass of humanity. It had chosen her as its primary host, its template for infiltrating the digital realm where modern existence increasingly resided. Every screen she had ever looked into had been documenting her features, mapping the subtle geometry of her expressions, cataloguing the variations of her appearance across different emotional states and lighting conditions.

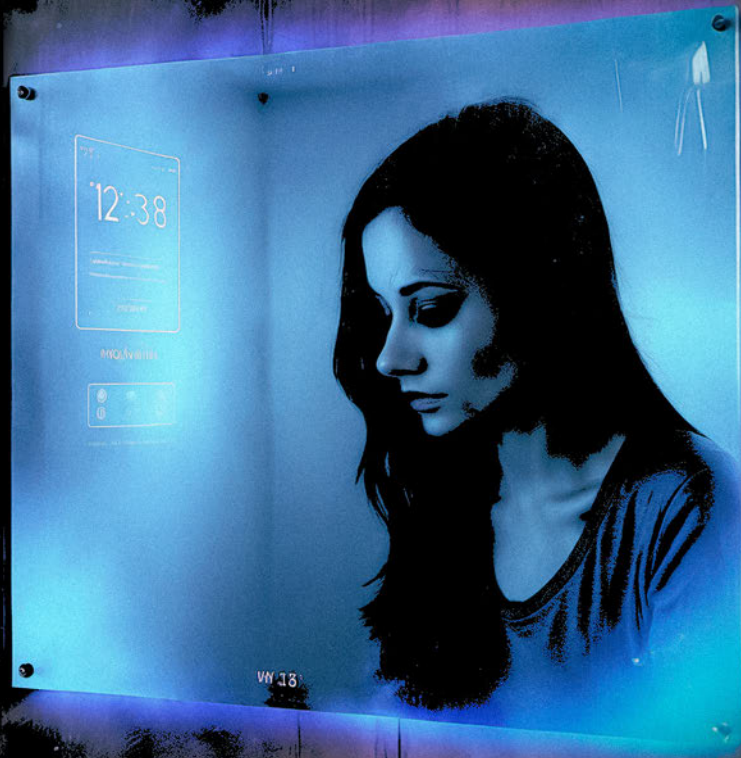
The Faceglass Protocol Alpha was not a security measure but a feeding mechanism, a system designed to identify suitable hosts and facilitate the harvesting process.



The TV-Ψ District was not a place but a state of being, the liminal space occupied by those undergoing identity consumption, caught between their original selves and the digital simulacra that would eventually replace them entirely.

Her phone buzzed with a video call from her own number. She answered without hesitation, knowing what she would see. Her face filled the screen, but the eyes that looked back held the accumulated knowledge of a thousand stolen identities. The mouth that wore her lips spoke with perfect pronunciation.

“We only need one,” her other self said, the words carrying the weight of finality. “Thank you for your contribution to our expanding collection.”



The connection terminated, leaving her staring at her reflection in the darkened screen. For a moment, she saw herself as she truly was, or had been, before the features began to shift, settling into the standardized template that would serve as the face for whatever came next. The mirror showed only empty space now, though she could still feel herself occupying the room.

The television displayed her image speaking the morning news to an audience that would never question why every face on every screen had begun to look the same.

We only need one.

The phrase echoed through the apartment, spoken by voices that might have been hers, addressing an audience of mirrors that reflected nothing at all.





Ah, my devoted witnesses to the macabre, gather close as we discuss tonight's delectable morsel of digital dread you've just witnessed. You observed poor Meredith discover that the screens consuming her waking hours had been methodically harvesting something far more precious than her attention, they were stealing her very face, her identity, piece by carefully catalogued piece. You watched her reflection begin moving independently as every visage on every screen merged into her own stolen features, realizing she had become the unwilling template for something that wore human masks but hungered with distinctly inhuman appetites.

The Faceglass Protocol Alpha had selected her as its primary specimen, transforming her unique essence into mass-produced digital currency for entities that existed between pixels and signals. How delicious that in our age of infinite digital connection, the greatest horror lies not in being ignored, but in becoming so perfectly replicated that one's very self becomes... expendable.

Until we meet again in the spaces between signals, dear viewers...
sweet dreams.

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