

THE
NARRATOR

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FOREWORD

I've been thinking about this clock that measures time in a circle while I experience it, for the most part, in a straight line...and about the events of my life which tell me it is they and not me in control, while I go on agonizing over decisions: basically I've been thinking about disparities I'm confronted with every day in my experience of reality. I feel like this story was written by the diametrical forces of my *being*, but maybe it is equally true that external forces have written it and me both.

This story is about people's hearts and minds: every thought process explored, the plot and even the setting relate ultimately to some feeling(s), and I think it is this fact that makes it difficult for me to preface it with any kind of synopsis, for fear of misrepresenting it.

To me, 'The Narrator' is about attempts to make things better and acceptance; it is about the past and future, right and left, and the implications these perspectives give our choices, and more importantly, that elusive state of being that overcomes us unexpectedly, the feeling of completeness that comes from existing for any moment wholly in the present, free of past regrets and future anxieties; it is about seasons and cycles, life and death,

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waking and sleeping, suffering and joy, parallel consciousnesses and their respective memories; it is about the dimensions of consciousness, change and possibility, and what our dreams imply in us and our perceived reality; it is about a Godlike will, crippled and impotent in a four dimensional human consciousness, and yet beautiful and significant for the very fact of its weakness; it is about relationships and control, oneness and distinction, and ultimately, in my opinion, though it may communicate so indirectly or even ironically, it has sprung from and is concerned with certain aspects of love. I will leave it to the reader to take what they like from this story, to enjoy it simply for the characters and plot or to draw conclusions from the ideas put forth; for my part, it is an expression of feeling and has much more to do with questions and possibilities than answers.

It's difficult to express what hopes I entertain for and from readers of 'The Narrator' without explaining why I entertain them—but to do that would be self-defeating. I hope you come to understand in your own way, *why* it is that, above all, I want this story to affect you in the same it has affected me.

- EB

LOVE IS A PERFECT THING

I've been staring at the wall too long
And it's becoming all I see anywhere I go
Is that all? Is there no meaning?
I've been dreaming of myself
And longing for someone else
If all I see anywhere I go is hollow
Can I believe that love is a perfect thing?

Help me man! Won't you help me find some meaning?
Would you help me turn the light on?
Cause I've been living in the dark
Why don't we pretend that love
Is something to believe in?
And if we never find a reason
It's real because it's real to me

Someone thought bitterly it's just the art of recognition
And those who aren't must not deserve it
But I could never quite believe myself
How can someone think that
While they're still a helpless baby
And you're somewhere old and lonely
With your arms around your wasted arms
Oh no not me I can't be that guy
Love me don't leave me don't leave me to die!

Oh no not me I can't be that guy!
I don't like to think so I just like to believe
Love is it should be perfect a perfect thing!

“Beyond the four dimensions of time and space, further dimensions hold the answers we have sought since we began to understand our ‘selves’ and the relation of the self to reality. In the fifth dimension, events are determined by desires and ordered according to feelings; all of infinite time and space are perceived as a single entity, a thing which may be changed in shape, though not in principle or nature; there is nothing in the fifth dimension that was or will be, only that which IS—though this present tense reality may exist and does exist in wholly different forms. The key to reaching the fifth dimension is belief, for here to believe is to bring into being. This belief requires a disconnection with the rules of the fourth dimension, and so it can only be truly attained in an altered state of consciousness. In the fifth dimension, the ‘Chain of Events’ is open to change and, through synchronicity with the ‘narrator’, this change may be ordered in the fourth dimension by the Discerminor.”

-Dr. Gerard Mann, ‘Discermination’

CHAPTER 1

Adam

“As the narrator slides into fifth dimension consciousness I perceive the connectedness of the fifth dimension reality. It looks rather dull at first; the fullness of the picture destroys the clarity, and so it appears the same as its inverse—a void.”

-Dr. Gerard Mann, ‘Discernation’

When I am a child, my dreams fascinate, horrify and astound me; and always, they hide their implications from my conscious mind. It is said that a person’s soul is revealed in dreams, that one’s inner portrait is drawn, as it were, in these animations of the subconscious’ fears and desires. But I don’t know what kind of person I am, or why.

And here I am a man, and I don’t know what kind of person I am, or why. I am still confounded by my dreams, which often seem too real to be called such. They seem like forgotten memories, or maybe lost possibilities...different versions of my own life or someone else’s life that is

somehow connected to mine—not rotting in the past or shimmering in the future, but alive in these “dreams” and proceeding alongside my waking reality. And I feel that these parallel experiences hold the answers to certain questions in my heart and on my mind; I don’t know what my (or this other self’s) purpose is, but I keep searching for it.

Why, I wonder, is there such a discrepancy between my feelings and circumstances? Why do my incomprehensible dreams ring truer than my waking life? Where do the narrations come from?

The doctor assures me that my narrations are important, but I don’t understand their relevance to me; I can’t remember ever making a decision to become a narrator, and have observed anyway a negating trend—that any decisions I do feel responsible for at the time they are made, seem in retrospect not to have been mine at all. There is another force at work in my life: a subtle yet inescapable will, pushing and pulling me, spinning me around—tricking me into following its design. But the shape of this design and the purpose of this manipulation remain a mystery.

I never remember the narrations, though the doctor has read me snippets. They read almost like a dream, like the feelings are more important than the events tied to them. *But why are these events chosen?* I wonder. It’s one of those questions that no one can answer satisfactorily, because you need a greater perspective to comprehend the answer; I can see it sometimes, in the sunrise between sleeping and waking, when my subconscious feelings converge with conscious

thought; but the picture is only complete at that indefinite moment, darkening in one aspect as it lightens in another, and the lucent epiphanies manifested at the breaking of my mind fade along with my heart's light into opaque metaphors in the shadow of my turning.

Still, this feeling of knowing haunts me, burgeoning with time into an obsession and branching out as it grows. What is the significance of my life, and how does it relate to my dreams and narrations? Who or what determines the course, where does it lead, and why? How does a narration occur?

The doctor has explained some things to me, but even his more simplistic illustrations only make sense right before I go under or as I am coming out of a narration or a dream—where I am on some level, in some degree, experiencing it. And I think that it is something that cannot be fully comprehended apart from the experience. I don't understand the process through which I am transported to other contexts, to see through other people's eyes. He tells me that everything that ever happens is, and will always be, continually occurring in the four dimensions of time and space, and that by adding another dimension to my perception of reality I am able to transcend the previous ones.

But I understand the concept of narrating best apart from considerations of motivation and function: I am a kind of historian, observing rather vividly, certain chosen events and the internal and external reactions of the people affected. All of my experiences are translated into text by the

‘Transcriber’ and stored in confidential archives here at the Institute. Our work being still in its experimental phase, my narrations are hidden—for the time being—from the world.

There is a certain technique to narrating, at least in ‘going under’. I settle into the chair and wait as the doctor straps me in and attunes the Transcriber to my PI Chip, then, when all is ready, use my training to alter my conscious state. Some like to repeat a mantra; others use their imagination to create some sort of visual that helps them.

I think about God, and in my head perceive a great emptiness, a deafening silence.

Focusing on the void I disintegrate, then awake into it, no longer as a mental image but as a reality—as from a fleeting dream of life I am awaking to find that I am someone else—feeling an overwhelming sense of relief at the dissipation of my old anxieties juxtaposed against the gradual renewal of an even older set. And though I feel the change, somehow when it is complete I know that this is how I have always been. It’s a difficult feeling to explain (even to myself), but in the context it’s natural and makes perfect sense—I am changed completely only to find myself even more vividly the same. All the insights of this other self I know without thinking, but what I know I cannot know, precisely because I don’t think it.

Lines appear faintly all around me, stretching infinitely into the right and the left. These lines are Chains of Events.

My eyes are drawn to one of the chains, and as I stare, the distance between us shrinks; but my

eyes, in altering the depth of their perception so rapidly, cease to see the chain itself but see rather into it. Inside is an image of the universe, or at least the universe in my mind—darkness filled with tiny winking lights that float around and past me like so many fireflies in the depths of an infinite ocean—into and through which I move as I stare, towards a particular dot of light (that's the marker) that grows bigger as I move faster and faster, until it overpowers all my senses and all around is only white light, ringing in my eyes, so to speak.

And here the motion ceases, the light recedes, and the narration begins.

CHAPTER 2

Elena

"Nobody should have a number for a name."

-Aedee, in 'Discernation'

A HISTORY:

Recapitulation Of Aedee I-V and Madison I-II*

**All Transcriptions are taken in their original form from 'Discernation', by Dr. Gerard Mann. Some of the earlier narrations have been condensed and combined into broader and more informative 'Recapitulations'.*

Aedee is the 80th replica of Elena Joy Dinia, a narcissistic model celebrated in her day as 'God's most beautiful creation'.

The world is in turmoil over the practice of cloning. Although discrimination against clones is illegal, Aedee's psychological environment is customized to her particular needs, and this alone effectively segregates her from the true humans in many ways.

Her guardians are well off enough to afford

her every advantage, her admittance into the right private school to accommodate her needs, the most informed and open-minded tutors, and as a child, first-rate nannies. Unfortunately for them, the practice of purchasing and raising clones becomes politically incorrect shortly after her appearance in their home, and this makes their responsibilities distasteful, every contact with her an aggravation of this injury, every reluctant thought of her existence an uncomfortable reminder of something they desperately wish to forget. And though they do not say this in so many words, Aedee is aware of it from an early age, and of the impossibility of it ever being any different.

Legally, she is Elena Joy Dinia #80, in accordance with the wishes of the original. She does not interact with others her age outside of school, and even there, where the friction of her encounters sometimes sparks infant flames of friendship, she finds that there is too much wind and too little fuel for them to survive. Her guardians are well aware of the imprudence of forming an emotional bond with "80" (as they have a habit of calling her) and seem indeed grateful for this advice, given them by one of her psycho-analysts.

Although Aedee's existence is offensive to the greater part of the population, there are those who take pity on her kind, and she is even revered by others, though this reverence denies her deepest desires for human dignity and individuality by defining her entirely in relation to someone else: a reincarnation, an icon, a living work of art. Many of Elena's clones work in entertainment or are models themselves. A couple of them even

make fortunes in the porn industry.

Aedee, like all of Elena's clones, is a strong-willed child, but early on her guardians express hope that the proper environment, and in particular, the proper schooling might cure her of this. The tutors and nannies have less than ideal success, but an even more bitter disappointment is the failure of school—Aedee collides determinedly with this structure, raising mutual contempt like contusions on the social skin, and inciting herself to further rebellions with these injuries.

This failure is never more grossly pronounced than when, at the age of eleven, Aedee decides to change her name, refusing to answer to "Elena" or to write that name on her assignments, and replacing it with a phonetic rendition of her number. Meeting to discuss this and various other acts of rebellion, her guardians and principal agree to refrain from suspending her or keeping her after school, as both parties concede that either of these measures "would be unfair." A couple teachers threaten to fail her, but faced with the prospect of entertaining the difficult clone for another year, they fold at the semester's end. Eventually Aedee, through willpower alone, succeeds in changing her name, and through consistent and even violent stubbornness on the issue conforms most of those with whom she has regular contact to this new standard.

Over time, Aedee grows from a strong-willed, rebellious child into an independent and pessimistic young woman. She gets used to her loneliness and actually grows to fear social interaction.

But this isolation is not destined to remain

unchallenged. It happens from time to time that Aedee develops a friendship with some person and soon after finds a reason to break it off altogether; this is typical of Elena's clones, and no one seems surprised that Aedee is unable to maintain lasting friendships. But Aedee is at first surprised. Even though she has grown accustomed to telling herself that she will always be a loner, there is a part of her that does not like to believe that, and this part is continually disappointed at the accuracy of her own prediction.

But a fresh surprise awaits her third year at the University—she is pursuing a higher education despite her distaste for institutions, simply to “avoid making a contribution to society” and because of a recently passed law offering full scholarships to clones, which she views as an avenue to financial independence—the surprise comes in the person, or rather in certain tendencies, and more specifically, in the attitude immediately adopted towards her, of Madison McGady. He is a year younger than Aedee, however, due to a degree of intelligence and a proclivity for overachievement, is in the same class.

They meet in Madison's most anticipated and Aedee's most dreaded hour of the day: Public Speaking. Aedee fulfills her most basic obligations by standing at the front of the classroom and reading aloud to the other students, while Madison earns top marks with animated speeches reminiscent of his father, a successful lawyer.

Naturally, Aedee forms an immediate bias against this enthusiastic entertainer, though in many ways she admires his speeches: never of

an appropriate tone in her estimation, she still can't help being drawn to his charisma; he really is quite funny, and she also can't disavow his genuinely rare talent—he can say something entirely contrary to her beliefs so sincerely and eloquently that for a moment she agrees, and even later when she has reminded herself of all the reasons why that can never be, there remains a hint of doubt in her heart, untainted by the resentment usually conjured in her at the mere thought of society's other persuaders: religious leaders, lawyers, politicians—foolish, heartless, power mongering demagogues, all of them. But in trying to explain this incongruity to herself, Aedee is often perplexed and can only think that maybe, despite his obvious infatuation with his ideas, Madison doesn't care as much as all those others about being believed but shares from an innate passion, from a feeling inside of him too strong to be kept in. So, when Professor Glik assigns the two of them a paired speech assignment, Aedee is unsure of how to act: whether to respond according to her outward or her inward bias.

Their professor goes out of his way to notify the two of them that “partners will not be graded individually,” evidently intending to guilt Aedee into upping her game, and Aedee takes this attempted manipulation as a cue, replying pointedly that perhaps she'll just sit this one out.

But Madison is confident in his powers of persuasion and more intrigued than put off by Aedee's stubborn reaction. Still, his first technique, using the grade dilemma as a ploy for

sympathy, is a dismal failure, and he is quickly forced to change tactics. He takes to sitting next to her in class and sharing his ideas for the speech as if she has already agreed, but more often than not, only succeeds in embarrassing one or both of them. For over a week, all Madison gets is silent disapproval from all sides.

Naturally, Madison is discouraged. He holds out hope longer than most would, but it is a contrived hope that only makes his failure harder to bear. But still he tries: he pursues her as a personal challenge, as a man who, finding a cliff impossible to scale, continues upwards, ignoring the increasing danger of the inevitable descent.

And in this way it happens that the thing he had counted upon comes about as a complete surprise, for it is just when, against his will, he has looked down and begun to doubt that a hand reaches down to lift him safely upwards and chastise his unbelief.

It is Aedee who unexpectedly concedes to “stand up there like an idiot while you make your speech,” but Madison grasps the words as the hand of God.

CHAPTER 3

The Chains of Consequence

“In four dimensions, events are ordered and shaped by time and circumstance, and a human’s perception of this ordering as an immutable relationship between cause and effect adds weight to the significance assigned to choices. Our quest for personal satisfaction, bearing this weight, labeled responsibility, is pitted against our social conscience, similarly weighted; and in the space between, like putty in their diametrical mold, our will is ordered and shaped.”

-Dr. Gerard Mann, ‘Discernation’

That night, after returning home late exhausted from the session, I dream that I am back under, staring into the void with which I have grown familiar.

I begin to make out the faint lines that grow and become Chains of Events. They materialize and I prepare to be led as usual into a section of Chain, but instead of this, a voice speaks in my head—not an audible voice but a voice by merit of its otherness from my own thoughts.

“What do you see?”

The Chain of Events.

“Look closer,” the voice commands.

I find that I can move of my own volition, that there’s some sort of surface under my feet—though the void is infinite, it seems that a dimension has been removed, and I am able to walk across it as on the face of a painting, warily approaching a nearby section of chain. *I don’t know what I’m looking for.*

“Why do you think you are unable to alter the course of the Chain of Events?”

I don’t know.

“There is something that holds the Chain in place. Open your eyes to the Chains of Consequence.”

Staring more carefully, I am surprised to find that the chain is not smooth as I had supposed but symmetrically scored, and my focusing eyes now perceive myriad microscopic chains wrapped transversely around every part of every link in the Chain of Events.

“You see,” the voice continues, “when you look at the Chain of Events, you see the Chains of Consequence in its shape. The course of the Chain of Events is held in place by the Chains of Consequence. It can only be altered if the Chains of

Consequence are broken...”

A claustrophobic feeling left over from the dream stays with me upon waking, haunting me for the remainder of that day. I can't break the Chains of Consequence, nor can I stop seeing them everywhere I go. I am forced into the act of living by an absurd feeling of responsibility for the inevitable, predictable, and immutable consequences of every action; my awareness of this ability to make choices that direct the course of my own life, rather than filling me with a sense of my own freedom of will, only weighs me down. For what I really want and would choose—were I truly free—is to never have to choose but rather float through the experience of life interestedly and contentedly.

But instead, this feeling of responsibility, these Chains of Consequence jerk me from my bed far too early in the morning, and all I can do is curse and shamble on, down the path I am forced to choose.

CHAPTER 4

Jody

“Manifested poignantly in the fourth dimension struggles of humanity, is the ambivalence of the ‘narrator’ (the fifth dimension will) and underneath this some ‘reason’—an ideal that can be realized in no other context. This ideal, known generically as ‘love’ but existent in countless forms, is a motive power that elevates one to a heightened state of consciousness and awakens one to as great suffering as it does joy. For this reason, any contact with it in the fourth dimension is not only beautiful but terrible, and somewhere on the spiral of experience, many will try as hard to disbelieve as they once tried to believe in it.”

-Dr. Gerard Mann, ‘Discernation’

But something tugs at the Chains. I feel it this morning, when arriving at the Institute I watch her exit: her beautiful, emotionless face passing closely by somehow manages to seem far away; she walks at a normal speed but in my eyes moves in slow motion or not at all, a picture of something but not the thing itself. We say hello, but to my mind it is not real—she is still a picture

of something else.

I never see Jody without experiencing that tug, but strongest of all, and most consistent of the feelings which attack me under her influence, is that of conscience. Not only do I feel guilt in her presence: the very thought of her can submit my confused mind to a kind of masochism, and in those times I cling to the painful feeling, unwilling and perhaps unable to trade it for any happiness.

But I can't trace these feelings to any logical source; we've hardly said more than that surreal "hello" in the brief course of our acquaintance. Anyway, I can't narrate now, can't possibly focus on anything other than that picture and that feeling.

So instead, I tell the doctor about my dream absentmindedly while he listens intently, as he always does. When my story, stretched by his many questions and my unmotivated answers, is through, he asks me as he often does, how I am doing. Am I happy? What do I believe in? And as always, I have no definite answers for him. I am happy sometimes, but I don't want to be happy. I don't want to believe in anything, but I believe in things anyway. I guess I believe in the Chains of Consequence, and anyway I must have already believed in them as the dream came from my own mind.

He can't be surprised at my answers, neither does he seem pleased or displeased: only interested, as he always seems to me.

That night, there is no Voice in my dreams...

Run!—through a dark forest; grey shadows dart in and out of sight all around—silent, ghost-wolves—*herding me*—throat-tightening, hyperventilating terror. They're going to... *have me!*...

Suddenly I'm running through a gloomy neighborhood. *I can run so fast!* I leap in bounds of twenty and thirty feet at a time, but somehow I know...I know that no matter how fast I travel or how far I go—*I will never escape*. Hopelessly I run and run, faster and faster, my body refusing to so easily acknowledge what has already been determined.

Finally, I find some inner strength and come to a halt, turning about slowly. The neighborhood is silent in the early morning, but seems not so much sleeping as waiting, static with the terrible energy of attention. The sun is still below the horizon and the world is asleep, but somehow my surroundings are clearly visible. I stand with my head tilted down and my eyes focused straight ahead for only a few moments before a large grey wolf materializes from some nearby shadows.

A breath catches in my throat and my eyes water; closer than I had expected—close enough for its smell, *the smell of death*, to stop my breathing altogether, to slow my heart, to paralyze my will—it calmly approaches with a half smile and a hanging tongue.

Something glints on the horizon, and I twist to the left just in time to catch the first ray of sunlight streaking through the still morning air, but a movement in my peripheral jerks my head back. The wolf gives a shiver, and I notice only the

slightest change—with only the slightest change, the wolf becomes a woman, naked and obviously satisfied with her new skin. Jody steps forward, terrifyingly beautiful; her eyes pass judgment, her soft skin digs into me. The wolf does not seek to kill me, I realize, looking fearfully at Jody's eyes, but what is worse, *to bring me to life*.

At that moment I awake suddenly, sitting up and greedily inhaling the chilly air of my room, which—along with my chest—had stopped for Jody, and having once regained control of my breathing, reflecting ironically that I must have passed out in the dream.

It is the time of morning, just before the birds awake, when the world is suspiciously quiet, and I can't help wondering if everyone else has snuck off sometime in the night. I lie still for a while, trying to gain my bearings before slipping out of bed and dressing quietly. I arrive at the Institute early and sneak into the 'Discerning Room', on the lookout for beautiful wolves, waiting for the doctor to arrive and reassure me.

CHAPTER 5

Light, All Light

“I look for experiences of enduring significance—foundational feelings upon which thoughts are built into convictions. These are not always easy to recover, as most such experiences are either forgotten or become distorted by the effects of conscious biases over time, and once identified, it becomes necessary to exhume them from deep in the subconscious. These experiences are ‘markers’ that can be used by the Discernitor to map out the course of a subject’s life in the form of a character ‘portrait’. One thing these ‘portraits’ indicate is that every person’s life undergoes similar cycles based upon these types of experiences, from idealism to cynicism and back in a number of steps; however, the perceived circle is actually an upward spiral, for no one returns from a complete cycle without substantial damage and growth, and even when the memories of these damaging events have been severed from the consciousness, their effects linger and shape the character of the person.”

-Dr. Gerard Mann, ‘Discernment’

Transcription #13—Adam I

Noticing the momentary tremor that passes swiftly over Aedee's smooth and otherwise stoic figure as she mutters "hello," Madison produces a coat which he has brought for just such an occasion after observing her apparent discomfort at their last meeting. As he hands it to her, their eyes meet for a full second. Aedee is the first to break off, blushing and looking down, then quietly mumbling, "-uh, thanks," but receiving no immediate response, adding with assumed disinterest, "So I decided it was pointless for us to keep meeting if I didn't contribute at all, so here's some stuff I worked on."

"Nice." Madison glances at the work, pauses and then leans in closer. "Why aren't you called Elena like...I mean...I'm sorry that was..."

But Aedee decides to answer, perhaps in rebellion against or in denial of any feeling of shame. "I just got sick of being labeled something that I wasn't. People would call me Elena, but to them all I am is a number. Anyway, I'd rather be called that, and at least this way it's my choice."

"So you did that? I mean, you renamed yourself?"

"I guess so...in a way, although if I was someone else I'd probably rather have a real name. No one wants to be labeled...to think of themselves as..."

She pauses self-consciously.

“Well, I’m impressed. You’re a real badass!” Madison shakes his head and smiles hoping to lighten the mood, but Aedee looks back without smiling as a rainbow of emotions moves subtly over her face—the shades and colors of a conflict which cannot be contrived and therefore suggests a sort of transcendence to her expression—as though her soul itself were staring through her eyes, hypnotized by the glare of the question and unconsciously clenching the microscopic muscles of her face.

The stubborn frankness of her explanation—her courage as a child and now in revealing to him her carefully hidden scar and exposing a fragility which magnifies by contrast her incredible strength of will, which he perceives, knowing that she cannot appreciate these things as he can, that no one else does, and feeling a sense of awe at the realization—penetrates his virgin heart. In that moment Aedee’s eyes seem to reflect his own deeper feelings, but on her face, so unaccustomed to such expressions of commiseration, they appear infinitely nobler, and Madison is able to see himself that way—the way she sees him in that moment—and strange to say, it is this glimpse of himself that makes him feel certain in that moment that he loves her, that he has always and will always continue to do so. Then Aedee looks away blushing, and he reluctantly lowers his gaze to her work.

“Well, let’s see what you did.” He doesn’t give it his full attention at first, being overly conscious of the significance of the previous moment. But as he reads, the character of her ideas captures him

in spite of his inattention to its details, and he is amazed at her sense of style, economy of language, and above all the likeness of her tone to his idea of her, recognizing that stubborn honesty, that idiosyncrasy, which he loves.

“Wow, good job. That’s amazing. You’re really smart, did you know that?”

“Yes.”

“I’m learning all sorts of new things about you today. You’re a badass and a smartass.”

“And you’re an *ass*-ass.” Aedee looks at Madison with contrived sternness, but after a few seconds, she has to turn away to avoid reciprocating his self-satisfied smile.

Exiting Professor Glik’s classroom with a smile in his eyes that sporadically spills over the rest of his face, Madison holds the door for Aedee, waving to her retreating figure. “See you tomorrow!”

“See you around.”

He walks briskly and purposefully across campus, then abruptly stops, breathes in deeply and with the exhale sets free a wide smile he had for some reason been struggling to suppress. He shakes his head slowly; everything seems new to him right now, as if he hasn’t been familiar with this campus since childhood but is seeing it for the first time; the way the sweeping branches of certain trees are al-

ternately streaming and bouncing like a girl's long hair when she tilts her head in mock hostility; the way certain particles in the air suspend the last rays of the sun's light as it sets, seeming to stop time for the sheer pleasure of prolonging a beautiful moment...it is all so precious.

He feels overwhelmingly at peace with the world, with all of existence, and is suddenly certain that any pain or confusion that he or someone else may face in a troubled life is worthwhile if only for the sake of moments like this.

What is it that everyone else sees that I don't? This question has been bothering him of late; most of his friends and family disapprove of his spending time with "that clone," despite the fact that many have expressed sympathy for her in some way and have, anyway, too great a sense of propriety to confront him directly about their concerns. But in their body language and the unnatural silences which usually accompany any mention of their growing friendship, he clearly understands that he really ought to be ashamed of it.

And when he's honest with himself, he recognizes that he is ashamed: ashamed of his association with "that clone" and even more ashamed of this abject feeling about something which ought to be so pure, so simple. But now, fresh from this encounter with love, that shame which so frequently hovers overhead, dissuading him from talking or even thinking about the future of his relationship with Aedee, seems not only unfounded but utterly ridiculous.

They fear because they don't understand, Madison thinks, feeling sure that he knows better

and wishing he could hold onto this certainty; for later, he knows that doubt will come, residual from that of those others whose views he generally respects, those who in the past he has unquestioningly followed. *What is it that they fear? What do they see that I don't?* But Madison cannot understand the fear that the idea of a human clone conjures in those other people because he does not feel it himself, and like most feelings, the understanding is inseparable from the experience.

LIGHT, ALL LIGHT

Everyone thinks they know about her
 But you know that everybody's wrong
 Everybody thinks that she's crazy
 What do they know?

She's your lady
 Your star at night
 She is light all light!
 She's a ghost so far from all this

How did you come to think you love her?
 Everyone wants to know what's going on
 And everybody thinks that you're crazy
 But what do they know?

Why do you love her?
 They don't see it
 You don't mind
 You just believe it

She's your Aedee
 Your star at night
 She is light all light!
 She's a ghost so far from all this

CHAPTER 6

The Park

During the debriefing I struggle to subdue my pounding heart and hold down the corners of my mouth, which keep creeping stubbornly up; I am distracted by my feelings and keep having to ask the doctor to repeat his questions. It doesn't matter though; the doctor's face seems to subtly mirror and in fact anticipate all of my responses—as though my answers are only a sort of proof to an equation he has already written down—and I feel as though I'm talking to myself, as I have a habit of doing: that our conversation is like someone alone, thinking aloud.

Back at home, my mind is obsessed, dwelling on the feeling that washes in waves over me in wake of the narration, the specifics of which, as always, I can't remember. I am reminded of a part of me that I had forgotten, and I feel an intense desire to forget my present self and go back...

I find my self—a pre-adolescent boy—in an enormous abandoned park towards the end of afternoon. In the center of the park is a large pedestal, inscribed on each side with the word *Faith*. This strange monument draws me, compelling me to climb upon it and from there to

survey the fantastic scenery.

In this park, there are no people, no thoughts, and no confusion: only infinite beauty. Gargantuan redwoods give way to stretches of grassy plains on my right. I can make out bands of wild horses on these plains, and the joy with which they run in their freedom brings tears to my innocent eyes.

Placid lakes stretch to my left, and beyond that a tall slender waterfall sends clouds of mist on the breeze to kiss my face lightly. I can see the ocean in the distance ahead.

I turn right to see behind me but almost fall over, as my feet are disobliged to move with the rest of me. Looking down, I give a start. *My feet! Where are they?!* Then, experiencing the bizarre sensation that the scenery around me is rising, I make the connection, feeling simultaneously relieved not to have lost my feet and terrified at the comprehension that I'm actually sinking into the pedestal!

I have heard it said about quicksand that struggling will only hasten the process, so I remain still, and sink slowly and stiffly, like a toy soldier forgotten in a child's mud hole. I glance over my shoulder once on the way down, finding behind me a redwood forest leading to the foothills of a large, snow-peaked mountain. Something about this scenery terrifies me, and I quickly twist back. It particularly disturbs me that there is no pathway through the forest.

The fear, as though deriving its power directly from this physical source, disappears from my mind once my eyes have turned from the icy remoteness of the mountain and the profane

randomness of the forest and refocused on the ethereal scenery to my front. Instead of feeling terror as I descend further into the wet cement, I am overcome by nostalgia. There it goes: the picture of the world that I have loved passionately for its innocent beauty is falling upwards into an irretrievable dream as I sink into darkness.

I try to capture the picture in my mind so that it might remain after my head has sunk beneath the foundation. Imposing cloud pillars towering almost to the heights of the atmosphere are transcended only by wispy cirrus ghosts that, despite their distance, seem within reach when singled out by my focusing eyes, while infant cumulous puffs drift and shape shift just above me, adding depth and texture and a sense of time, of every dimension, and a transitive sort of significance to the picture. The sun sends its rays reflecting off the clouds, the lake and the ocean, and it is captured by mist rising from the waterfall and translucent dust clouds raised by the horses, imbuing the park with feathery light...

Presently, I am in school, listening as my teacher lectures on the dangers of the pedestal. Apparently, the proper technique is to stand on the corners where the cement is dry.

“Try spreading your legs and placing one foot on either corner—like this. May I have a volunteer?”

A student marches to the front of the classroom in answer, but before I can see his face, the scenery changes back, and I am once more sinking into

the pedestal, under peach and gold clouds.

Looking around, I find the entire classroom standing attentively to my left. My teacher is using my plight as an example to the other students, pointing out the consequences of not standing on the edges. He asks the volunteer student to approach the concrete platform and demonstrate the proper technique for the others. My head is almost underneath the pedestal as the young man steps upon the foundation. The words “please help me” claw their way from my throat just before my mouth fills with wet cement; then, glancing up at the student, my eyes widen with surprise. The student, whose eyes are locked upon mine, mirroring their astonishment, is me...

Passing from the dream into consciousness, at the point where the insights of both are briefly close enough for a charge to pass between, I witness such a spark, an epiphany. I have nearby a writing utensil and paper, quaint but effective, kept for these occasions, and I do my best to put down the thoughts that come furiously, shaking my hand as I write.

“I think I will always feel guilty, if for no other reason than my secret knowledge that there are certain things about myself that I simply don’t want to know. I lack the courage to face these truths. I am a coward. How can I live knowing that I am such a coward? How can I live understanding that I am nothing like the version of myself which I aspire to and which I project over the real version in an attempt to convince myself otherwise? I don’t want to know who I really am,

yet the secret knowledge of my character never leaves my conscience alone. Why do I feel guilty for who I never had any choice but to be? How can I not feel guilty?"

But the epiphany, which shone brightly in my mind while I wrote, has died out like a firefly in my jar of words, and reading it back to myself now fully awake, I'm no longer sure of its relevance to my dream. I'm still pondering this when I arrive at the Institute and prepare for the next narration, which is postponed because of the longer than expected discussion of my dream with the doctor who requests, as he always does of the things I write, to keep the letter for further review.

CHAPTER 7

Someone Else

A HISTORY:

Recapitulation of Jody I-IV

Aedee has a habit of standing in front of the mirror naked and contorting her body into unnatural and gruesome forms. A shocking and almost inconceivable thing for anyone who has seen her in any other context, it is nevertheless a gratifying obsession of hers, comparable to the morbid satisfaction of picking a scab. She likes to wear absurd and tasteless clothing combinations, and with occasional moody exceptions, keeps her wardrobe out of fashion. She often says to herself “I hate you,” while smiling prettily.

Of her limited pastimes, Aedee’s favorite is reading, but her tastes are very particular, and she hates far more books than she loves. Any perceived idealism in the author usually places the entire book and all of that author’s work in her hate category, for instead of relating to or living vicariously through the characters, she likes to imagine their creator—what in them inspired the characters, plots, and subtexts—and from these observations create her own idea of a person; and

any perceived self-delusion or conceit, any failure to transcend the characters and their ideas, any weakness of this kind is intolerable to her. And she cannot love a book without loving the author. This is a point of contention between Madison and her: she despises many of his favorite books, some even that she hasn't read but against which she is biased by merit of her aversion for the author, genre, title or cover.

But this disinclination does not stem from a lack of imagination. Rather it is her own nature that she fights against, that she hates first and foremost. Recognizing in the romantic aspects of art her own vain tendencies, and hating this vanity in herself for the way it ultimately wounds her personal pride in her deep and sacred convictions, she cannot help but hate it in everyone and everything.

But in her dreams, every repressed desire comes to life. In her dreams, Aedee experiences in extreme concentration the feelings of friendship and love. She is known! She is—her heart pauses at the edge of sensation to gather itself for the exhilarating leap—she is LOVED! She jumps joyfully, her long hair momentarily swept back before the inevitable collision of waking: waking to reality, to the remembrance of her self. *She* is not known; *she* is not loved; these things were not meant for her, but someone else.

But she does have a concept of the kind of person for which things like friendship and love are meant, a sort of ideal self, different from the ideals of most people, not necessarily in theory but in her strictness in developing these qualities

to their full and logical conclusions in every circumstance. This ideal must reject the shallow conceptions of beauty and love that bastardize what is most honorable: courage, faithfulness, and in short, every standard that she continually finds wanting in everyone.

Many lonely hours are spent contemplating this ideal. She imagines that this “someone else” is very ugly. *She MUST be!* This version of her is emaciated, with chunks of hair falling out and crossed eyes. This version of her is the most uniquely hideous person in existence.

Sometimes thinking about this, Aedee considers changing her appearance drastically, calling to mind pornographic images of her own body—older models—which certain of her peers used frequently to torment her with, and resolving to become different—to show them. She knows she could do it, though her guardians might attempt to “protect” her. But one of the things that she hates herself for the most is her lack of courage to go through with it. She’s tried some things, but the farthest it’s ever gone has been cutting.

Most cutters try to hide their wounds so that others won’t see. Aedee does just the opposite. She engraves crude messages in acronyms on the inside of her left forearm, using a mirror to write backwards. She has three scars and three backwards messages.

Others do not understand the scars, what the messages mean or her motivation for writing them, but it is precisely this misunderstanding that incites such behavior in Aedee. She likes to

think of how they perceive her—how they must think that she's lobbying for attention. She likes to fuel the fire that burns inside her with such intoxicating power. She likes to stand before the mirror naked, with her left arm extended to reveal the piteous scars, and read them.

SOMEONE ELSE

All day long I think of how I
Wish that I could be myself
I dare not think of something else
I wish that I could be myself

I cry until my tears run dry
They quench the fire inside my eyes
And when that fire inside is squelched
I find that I am someone else

And I feel nothing
And I hear silence

All day long I think of how I
Wish that I was someone else
I only want to be myself when
Me is being someone else

But I feel nothing
And I hear silence

CHAPTER 8

A Visit

I live a pretty disconnected life. It's not just that I feel somehow cut off from myself or some parallel psyche, but here at the Institute I'm dissociated from my family and everything familiar, both physically and mentally, for I also don't remember much of my past: how things are before I move here and become a narrator or even what kind of person I am in that other life. I do feel it as an influence upon my actions (I suppose you could call it my "character") and there are moments when I remember my self fully and unmistakably. But just as in my narrations, the knowledge comes as a feeling which never fully translates into thought, and so there is no way for me to remember it when it's gone.

Apart from my copious alone time, there are regular meetings with the doctor and a few rather strange encounters with Jody, who is the only other person I know who does the same work as me—though we never discuss narrating and prefer to dance around all issues of consequence, possibly because our lives are almost entirely focused on such serious things.

The first time Jody comes to visit me, she wears shorts with a long sleeve, semi-formal top,

an almost amusing outfit except for the way it fits her and the nature of our relationship, that is to say, all of my secret feelings, my dreams and the almost mystical power she has over me. I'm not a believer in love, as it were, but being around her makes me wonder if that even matters. The feeling that overcomes me when I open the door of my flat—to find her standing with forced assurance slightly closer than societal standards recommend and an almost angry look on her face—crowds most of my beliefs right out of my head. I feel like I have been swiftly and soundly beaten at something by someone who far outmatches me: breathless, helpless, and a little humiliated. She says she would like us to be friends. I agree. I ask her inside.

We talk for a while, not about anything important, but our conversation resonates with indistinguishable yet powerful undertones; every word and expression is a puzzle piece to some mystery, some picture of her which is important to me for some reason.

There is something severe about Jody, evident even in our shallow conversation: a certainty of her convictions, a strength of will that despises its antithesis. When Jody makes a statement, even something small, I have the sense that it is really meant, that it has been considered from many different angles and probably revised from its original incarnation; and if I really listen to the words and think about them, whether or not I entirely agree, I see truth in them—at the very least a truth about her—she paints with every phrase and expression a picture of her mind

and heart and, out of some sort of artistic pride, is unequivocally averse to painting a falsehood, covering a blemish out of vanity or depicting anything other than her true, uncensored feelings. And I think it is this quality of hers that inspires such awe in me, and fear—I have very little of that kind of strength: a jumble of uncertainty and indecision, and I'm wondering all the time if this is evident to her.

But though she can't possibly fail to observe this disorder in me, for I also have too much pride to hide it completely and likely couldn't if I tried, I get the feeling as we talk that she has no wish to scrutinize me, that she takes little satisfaction in her strength but that it rather works against her most of the time. I can imagine her microscope pointing its scrupulous lens ever inward. *Yes, she is a self-flagellator.* Still, I can't help liking her for it—it's not artless negativity, nor are her standards unreasonable. She just sees everything closer.

Jody, like me, is a loner in this environment; neither of us has any friends to speak of; neither of us wants to talk about the past—maybe she doesn't remember hers either. But we talk about dreams, though I of course, leave out certain details; and we talk about art, in its various forms—Jody loves to read, though consequent of her severe nature, her list of "good" books is remarkably short—and we talk about what we love and hate respectively—Jody prefers sunset and I sunrise, but we agree that high noon and midnight are equally terrible; Jody loves the desert and claims to fear the forest and would never willingly climb a mountain; we

both love the ocean, but Jody says it's not meant for swimming or sailing but as a boundary for the land.

And though everything she says and the words, gestures and expressions she uses to say it seem all the while like puzzle pieces to her mystery, I become increasingly distracted during the course of the visit, by the more immediate mystery of why her words and expressions matter so much to me. *Is it loneliness? Why do I feel so urgent?*

Fortunately, there comes a pause in both words and expressions, as inevitably happens, and as her eyes take a vacation in my living room, my mind is able to think in broader terms than moments, gestures, words and expressions, and so I am suddenly struck with the name of the quality about her which I had until now been unable to place. Probably our limited contact along with my nervousness in her presence has kept me from looking at her carefully before, but in that moment it is quite clear that she is *familiar* to me.

The memory seems to be on the tip of my brain, like a dream which one has forgotten a second before, but as with the dream, concentrating only serves to wake me up more fully and sever more completely my ties to the consciousness in touch with the memory. And immediately thereafter, the conversation begins again, or rather the epilogue to the conversation: something about, sorry to stop by so out of the blue, no—not at all it was great to chat really please stop by any time, you know I live not far from here, Oh yes I'll have to visit sometime, that would be great

well—see you around.

When she leaves, some long dormant loneliness awakens and whispers to me of things lost in childhood, things impossibly out of reach to my present self, long dead and until now forgotten, memories of feelings without their context, and of that guilt which never entirely leaves but only recedes to a dull ache for periods of time.

So I take one of the pills which the doctor has given me for when I have trouble sleeping...

CHAPTER 9

Car With the Windows Up

It is nighttime in the park, but I seem to have gained a catlike ability to see in the dark and can make out most of the details that make it so beautiful in the daylight. The night, however, brings a different context, and the same things in its ghostly light take on a foreboding and frightening expression.

I am standing between the pathless forest and the pedestal called 'Faith', scanning the woods with my eyes. In little time, the object of my search is revealed. Not far off, on the outskirts of the woods, I make out two vehicles resting side by side. They are cars, classic models of the early twentieth century, somewhat beaten up and looking out of place in the tall grass at the edge of the forest. One car in particular is in an absolutely pitiful, and I assume un-drivable condition. The tires are flat, the roof dented, and it doesn't look like there ever was paint on the body.

I've been walking forward unconsciously to get a better look at the cars, when a sudden realization startles me and stops me in my tracks. What I suddenly notice and experience some fright at not having noticed before, are the *people* in the cars:

a young man in one, and a young woman in the more beaten up vehicle. They are staring at each other through tightly shut windows.

I have the impression that I am witnessing in that one moment (for they are frozen in a single moment of time) an entire story: a story with all of the events taken out to leave only a collage of naked feelings, no less strong for lack of context, but if anything, stronger for lack of division in focus, of the confusion that comes from believing simultaneously in the significance of feelings and of events themselves. Longing, fear, shame, love and hatred battle in the space between their staring eyes.

Her car is un-drivable, but there are no seatbelts in his car, and his eyes are unfocused. I don't know how he sees her or whether he plans to drive through the pathless forest at night without ever looking away from her blurry face.

CAR WITH THE WINDOWS UP

Hey you I see you there in your car with the windows up
No wind can blow in your hair in your car with the windows up
Hey loner sitting there in a car with the windows up
Hey maybe we can share a car with the windows up

You never roll the windows down
You shut the whole world out
But we won't be lonely with each other honey

If you want to go I'll take you anywhere you want
And if you want to leave I'll drive you anywhere at all
But I can't set one foot outside the car

Hey you I see you there in your car with the windows up
No wind can blow in your hair in your car with the windows up

Hey what's your hesitation why are you so scared of letting go?

I really don't mind hangin' round
Cause I know you're worth waiting for

And if you want to go I'll take you anywhere you want
And if you want to leave I'll drive you anywhere at all
And we won't be lonely when there's two of us
Oh I really wish you would try
But you're lonely and you're tired
You've been held down your entire life
If you'd only consent to say I need you!
If you'd only consent I'd give you all you ever wanted

And if you want to go I'll take you anywhere you want
And if you want to leave I'll drive you anywhere at all
And if you come to me I'll give everything I've got
But I can't set one foot outside the car for you

The two remain in their moment, but I turn at some unspoken command towards the pedestal behind me.

Upon the pedestal is a statue of the innocent young me in its forgotten toy soldier stance, partially sunken in, with wide eyes focused on the sky above. Looking at the statue, an intense feeling of pressure starts in my stomach and boils into my chest, tightening my throat and finally exploding upwards, as something long sealed-up and forgotten pours out over my face and hands to rain upon the earth—concessions of one who has tried and tried at something only to fail and lose it forever.

And then I awake. I feel a strange sensation on my left side, so I roll over, freeing my left arm from under my body. It won't move of its own accord, and my mind doesn't immediately make

the connection that the arm has ‘fallen asleep’ due to a constriction of the blood flow, so it is a shocking feeling for me when I reach over and feel the hand, and it is like a foreign object...like feeling someone else’s hand.

A thrilling sensation overcomes me as I feel the hand and consider its otherness, its respective and significant existence, *THIS—this is what your hand feels like!* This is it, the first time I’ve ever felt my own hand. And somehow in that moment, it is clear to me that the sensation of my own numb hand and the dream—and all of my dreams and narrations—are just the same.

And I am convinced that the next time I am able to tap into the huge reservoir of comprehension available to my subconscious mind, I will once more understand in a clear and obvious way why that is. But just as in my first dream of the park, the connection is no longer apparent.

CHAPTER 10

The Maze

“To be a human is to be between dimensions, a transitive consciousness, possessing a ‘narrator’—the Godlike will of the fifth dimension—but lacking the means in the fourth dimension to consciously choose one’s reality. For in the fourth dimension, the human is a pawn of circumstance (external reality), while in the fifth dimension, external reality exists only as a reaction to and context for the desires of the narrator. A great deal of suffering is the consequence of this innate conflict, for the will does not want to simply accept the terms of the reality in which it finds itself stuck, while the bounded consciousness similarly and diametrically shirks responsibility for any decisions made.”

-Dr. Gerard Mann, ‘Discernation’

Anyway, even though I don’t understand the dream and its connection to my hand, I am awake and thinking now. I’m thinking about the moment in which the young man and woman in the cars are frozen. I guess all events, all of the moments in all of reality—even imagined ones—are preserved forever and cannot be changed.

The Chain of Events extends in both direc-

tions infinitely, and if I cannot change the links to the left of my position—the past—I also cannot change those links in the other direction—the future—because the Chain is stretched out so neatly, and each event is held in tension between the links to its right and left; and that force that bends the Chain slightly is imperceptible to my fragmented self, which can only exist in one link at a time, and which—in its smallness—perceives the Chain and the surface of earth to be flat, and which—even if it could comprehend the force that curves the Chain—is too small and fragmented to wield any significant fraction of such a force upon its reality.

Somewhere in that Chain, Napoleon is marching on Moscow, and somewhere else Tolstoy is writing about Napoleon marching on Moscow, and even if what he writes shapes the perceptions or attitudes of people to the right of that event, even so, the event—the link—cannot be changed; moreover, the event is partly responsible for the creation of the story, part of a host of forces responsible for shaping such an author and such an environment to determine every written word.

That's the way of the Chain—every action causes a reaction, and every reaction is also an action, and every action is really a reaction—and so everything is held fast by everything else. Somewhere in the Chain, someone is tortured, and even if to the right of that link that person forgets about the pain—even then, somewhere in that Chain...it *is*. It cannot be erased. Somewhere I am awake, and somewhere else I am dreaming.

Somewhere in that Chain, on distant planets in parallel universes, beings far more advanced than I are experiencing joy and suffering. Somewhere I am long dead.

And here I am, living, but this life is not my own; there is no way for me to erase any of the links; I have no ultimate power, no ultimate choice; there is no significance in my respective existence; I have no sovereignty over even my own will. So why do I feel like I do? Why is there guilt? Why do I cling to my pride, my egoism, and refuse to understand that it is absurd vanity? Why must I endure the pain of knowing when I don't believe? Why must I feel pain at all?

Ah yes, pain is necessary for joy, to give happiness value, just as ugliness is necessary for beauty and slow for fast. Because everything is relative: there is no ultimate beauty, ultimate significance or ultimate fast... isn't there some theory about the speed of light being ultimate—that anything else to go that fast would turn into light? And maybe that is the ultimate destiny of everything: to be light. Just as it supposedly was in the beginning. But when all is light, do I suppose my light will be able to say to itself, looking at all the other light which is traveling at the same speed, "Finally, I am fast!"?

Where was I? Oh yeah, ultimate meaning. Even now, as I theorize that it is a lie, I believe in it. That's why I find it simultaneously reasonable and absurd that joy must be bought with suffering and that guilt exists for choices I never got to make. Every deep feeling denies the Chains of

physical laws, just as those laws deny the sovereignty of the spirit. That's why I keep searching, even though sometimes I feel like a rat in a maze searching for poison in place of cheese. I'm doing everything I can to figure out this maze—for what? "Attention everybody, I have figured out the meaning of life...no, I've decided not to share my findings...why not? Well, you've got a point there...ok, the answer is..." Then maybe I'll pause, and then if I can arrange it, I'll fall over dead, for the irony. But isn't that better than just sitting in the maze obstinately?

Ok, it probably is, but even if I concede this I can't escape this feeling that no amount of knowledge can provide a way around the pain of living, and so all of this thinking is a meaningless diversion. Or maybe the point is to experience the feelings of living more poignantly. And if this is the only point, then I must love life very much. But I'm not convinced that this sort of sensibility is any kind of benefit. It seems rather that someone might be the fungus under a damp rock and want to go on living for a hundred years, and someone else...well, just look at all those rich, famous people that kill themselves.

I guess I don't know which type I am. But right now...for now, maybe I'm not ready to sit obstinately in the maze. I think the doctor counts on this; he has ways of keeping me going. Like the narrations—I don't even know why we're doing them, but I do them anyway, and they give me something to live for.

Still, I wonder if it's my decision...I have something called a PI chip in my brain; the doctor

put it there; it's for the recording of my narrations, but it can also be used to stimulate and record dreams. Sometimes I dream instead of going out, but sometimes it's not good—the dreams are too vivid, and they reveal more than I want to know. Still, I often think it's better to dream life—even if your pain feels real, you eventually wake up.

Sometimes I try to escape some of the pain of life by telling myself that I'm about to wake up from it and find that it was only a dream, but like those dreams which bleed into your waking life, I know that even if this life is only a dream, it is true; it is the kind of dream which would certainly haunt me upon waking...

CHAPTER 11

The Chain Moves

“Reality is constantly changing of some volition: history—past and future—reacting to the whims of the fifth dimensional consciousness. And for those of us who want to change our reality for the better, the narrator is the key to that volition.”

-Dr. Gerard Mann, ‘Discernment’

I arrive at the Institute quite suddenly, without any recollection of having made a trip; then in the next moment, I find myself in the chair, hooked up to the transcriber and delving into the deeper levels of my subconscious, waiting for the Chains to appear.

Momentarily the Chain of Events appears before me, and I wait to be drawn into a section. But instead, a familiar voice speaks in my mind.

Look closely at the Chain.

I comply, staring at the Chain intently for a while and feeling stupid because I don’t know what to look for.

Do you notice anything new?

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see it...can’t you just tell me what I’m supposed to be looking for?”

Move closer to the Chain.

I comply, walking across the void towards the chain as before. When nothing unusual stands out, I move closer still until it’s right in front of me, inspecting it dubiously.

Look along the Chain horizontally, and tell me what you see.

I press my cheek against the chain and look across it as if I’m sizing up a dowel. “The Chain stretches on infinitely.”

Look farther. Open up your eyes.

I realize that I’ve been squinting and do my best to relax my cheeks and open my eyes all the way. Suddenly the picture changes, like a hologram reacting to the defocusing of my over-wide eyes. I see the further layers of patterns—the dimensions of change and possibility—and I understand. “It moves!”

Waking from the dream, I experience a surge of energy and the will to action. Could the feeling left over from the dream be telling the truth? Can the Events change? I rush to the Institute, intent on a discussion of this idea with the doctor prior to the day’s scheduled narration.

CHAPTER 12

The Speech

"I am particularly excited about the possibility of a synchronous narration with my subjects, for the fact of their diametrical positions on the spiral of experience. Their picture may be shown in much greater aspect than any of the previous narrations, not just because of the number and direction of points of view, but also interpretatively, by the juxtaposition of their subjective perspectives. How will their perceptions differ? Will they be reconciled? It is an unprecedented test of validity, not simply of the accuracy of their narrations but of the objectivity of their respective realities."

-From 'A Discernor's Journal'
Compiled notes of Dr. Gerard Mann

Transcription #15—Jody/Adam I

Aedee is having second thoughts about giving the speech: *second thoughts, third thoughts, fourth, fifth*—she's momentarily distracted by the realization that she's no longer worrying, but counting in her head, but as soon as she recognizes this, it's

back to worrying.

Though she won't admit it to herself, she's more nervous for Madison than for herself, afraid that she'll let down or embarrass him. The idea of him seeming foolish is far more terrible to her than any self-humiliation, and even though she doesn't think this in so many words, it is manifested in her shaking hands, her shallow breathing, and her inability to look directly at his eyes or to stop thinking about what she would see if she did.

But Madison does not understand Aedee's fear. He's aware, having noticed her physical tells, that she is afraid to give the speech, but he cannot comprehend her reasons and all of the dimensions of her feelings, as one with sight cannot comprehend the dreams of the blind. Over and over, he attempts to make eye contact with her to reassure himself and is somewhat disconcerted by her refusal to meet his gaze.

Aedee's face is a mask of defiance, even more so than usual. She looks as though her eyes might catch fire at any moment and burn whomever they land upon.

Madison appears confident as always, but a careful observer might notice that he's fidgeting with his hands and his right foot is jerking from side to side with relative violence. If they look for any prolonged period of time, they will see him surreptitiously glance in Aedee's direction and will perhaps notice a barely perceptible movement in his left eyebrow.

Finally, it is time for them to walk stiffly to the front of the room, and Aedee is trying to decide whether it is a blessing or a curse. *It's both*, she

decides, gaining no relief from the conclusion. Aedee trails Madison, leaving an awkward gap between them. They form an ironic duo, preparing to present their speech together with so much space between them. The classroom is completely silent, attentive to an unprecedented degree, and Aedee sees in their eyes and their silent attention a predatory craving for some kind of scene. But she has committed to this fearful display, and she knows that backing out now is not an option. And so, like cornered prey, she prepares to make her stand.

The opener is comical, but not in the intended way. Madison's idea was to begin with some clever dialogue to break the ice, though Aedee is regretting her reluctant agreement now. The dialogue is well written and funny on its own. Both participants even do a reasonably good job at delivery—the vocal inflection is just right, and their note cards are more like props than speech aids, as they've both had the speech memorized for over a week.

But all of this is overshadowed and indeed made ridiculous by the rigid expression on Aedee's face. Even as she's reciting tongue-in-cheek lines with flawless inflection like, "It's common knowledge, Madison, that the young Adolf Hitler was a delightful child," she maintains, with unintentional sincerity, her defiant cornered animal expression.

But Madison is too busy performing to notice the expression on Aedee's face. Hearing her perfectly inflected lines and noticing the audience's enthusiastic response, he is greatly encour-

aged, growing in confidence and excitement that translates into further animation as the laughter increases.

Aedee is aware from the beginning that the students are laughing at her, and even of the reasons for it, but she is powerless against the momentum of the sequence: her response to this kind of treatment is automatic, and she can't help getting more and more angry and appearing more and more severe. But this is exactly what is wanted. It brings further waves of laughter which incite the oblivious Madison to further enthusiasm.

There is a breaking point for Aedee—her pride and anger form a brittle outer defense, prone to shattering completely. But the point is not what one might expect: a self-satisfied sneer from someone in the front row, or even a wave of laughter that crashes over and pulls her under. Rather, the breaking point is reached by her first real glimpse of Madison.

She has turned her head to look at him out of an instinct of which she is intentionally unaware, not to beseech him for help, but out of concern; it is the first time she has allowed herself to look at his face in the entire period. Immediately, she discerns that he doesn't realize what is happening—that he is misinterpreting the laughter as encouragement, and his naive enthusiasm is making a fool of him—and this has a more powerful effect on Aedee than all of the jeering directed towards her. She momentarily forgets the speech, and her anger is overcome by a wave of panic, as looking from Madison to the classroom of students and back to Madison again, a shocking thought comes into her

head. *They are laughing at him!*

It is her cue to speak, and at first she makes a feeble attempt. The line, however, sticks in her throat, and after a few hollow raspy words she stops mid-sentence and stands shaking and struggling desperately to keep from bursting into tears. She can't put her feelings into words, but an image of poor Babbina Mirnikov, laughing and grinning stupidly while shouting, "*I like to eat my Poppa's pepperonis!*" keeps forcing its way into her head, and every time it does, she has to fight harder not to cry.

So she stands at the front of the classroom, hating herself and feeling utterly alone until Madison, startled by the earsplitting silence at Aedee's side of the room, turns his head and looks at her, likewise for the first *real* time.

He is dumbfounded by the sight of her, so badly shaken, and cannot imagine any reason for her condition.

All of his faculties, normally so reliable, are suspended by the shock of the moment, and he only manages to stare at Aedee with concern scribbled unintelligently on his face. It seems an eternity that his mind is frozen like this, but presently it all comes clearly into his head at once, voiced only as a dismayed expression in his mind, *Oh*. But from this word he understands everything—everything he had been trying to ignore since he had met Aedee: the seed of resentment his friends and acquaintances had for their relationship and its unnaturalness had been watered by his neglect of them and rejection of their loving advice and collective concern, and from this had sprouted and

grown a great dissociation, unconscious hatred in all of their hearts, while he thought only of her. And now was the reaping, and there was no way around it, only he was a fool for not having seen it before.

Aedee remains mute and motionless as the awkward silence grows; the eagerness fades from the faces of those students who had wanted this scene only minutes ago, but the damage is already done: nothing they do or refrain from doing at this point can provide Aedee with a dignified escape route.

There is a moment like a deep quiet pool in the middle of a swift river. She looks out at the students without seeing, suspended in the moment while a choice is presented her—*will you give in or keep fighting?* And at the same time, as if in answer to that question, she becomes aware of some strength that seems to spring from deep inside. She latches onto this strength and draws from its well.

All of this happens in that one excruciatingly long moment, and though the change is subtle—her struggle, and at some moment even before she moves to speak—an upheaval in her soul is observable. Then she slowly and determinedly wipes her eyes and takes a deep breath, and the transformation is complete.

There is no fire in these new eyes that open as the air is let out of her. They are aimed slightly down and to the right, unfocused, as though inwardly turned under half-closed lids. Her chin has lowered as well, and her jaw is no longer tense but absently slack, leaving her once tight lips

slightly parted and relaxed. She looks suddenly very small and fragile, but at the same time, strong, with a strength that is only seen in moments of external weakness, and triumphant, from a victory that can only be won by losing. In short, what is exposed by this stripping of the outer shell of her pride is incredible courage, born of a deeper sort of pride.

And then, abandoning her note card props, she begins exactly where she left off. Her voice is shaky and quiet but not entirely devoid of its former expressiveness. She keeps her eyes down, but looking at them Madison recognizes an expression characteristic of and peculiar to her, a sort of heedless resolve, a forgetfulness of her surroundings and of her own face and body which bares all of her complex emotions simultaneously, to be seen by any observant stranger.

But to one who knows her, the expression is almost indecent; for in looking upon it you seem to be partaking in an act of intimacy, with her unaware, that will irrevocably change the nature of your relations upon her recovery.

Being in this semi-conscious state, Aedee is not immediately aware that there is a change in the atmosphere of the room, likely brought about by the other students' incidental glimpses into her expression, that the same eager attention is now being applied differently towards her, and every phrase she utters is now received as a triumph, not because it has been said well but because it has been said at all.

Madison's face tells a tale of its own: a metamorphosis from the enthusiastic pre-excruciating

moment phase to a brief period of shell-shocked concern during and for a while after the moment, and finally to a simple look of confused wonderment which slowly departs his face as an unconscious half smile creeps into its place: a subtler facsimile of a new father witnessing the birth of his first child.

Upon finishing the speech, Aedee finally perceives the transformation in the applause of the students and realizes, without fully understanding why, *that the feelings of my classmates have reversed. And whether or not they deserve it, I can't help feeling intensely grateful to them for the applause, even as a part of me hates myself for this, for the weakness in my nature that it exposes. I guess it's nothing unusual, liking feeling loved, but I know that this neediness comes from Elena, and so it is horrible to me. But walking back to my seat after the speech, I only partly succeed in suppressing a smile, and I have to turn my face away from Madison, from his eyes that I can feel, watching and waiting as always: eagerly, expectantly, triumphantly, timidly. I can even guess at his expression, and thinking about it is both wonderful and awful—awful for the very fact of how wonderful it is to me, for once again, this is what I hate the most about me. When I give into that feeling, I can feel myself becoming HER.*

But all the strength of my will is helpless against this feeling, and so I am unforgivably happy. That's something I've learned: emotions always win. If you want to get yourself to do something, you have to motivate yourself emotionally.

CHAPTER 13

Awakenings

"In this first synchronous, multiple subject narration, the most incredible phenomena occurred, things I hadn't thought possible. First, Adam started to wake as I was occupied with Jody, and my psyche involuntarily came up with him, so that I regained consciousness inside his body. This is something I hadn't considered—the possibility of parallel perception in a conscious and presumably fourth dimension bounded mind. The implications of my ability to retain my ego in an at least partially conscious mind are staggering. It could be evidence of the fifth dimensions' transcendence over the fourth—no matter how ultimate the laws of the fourth seem, they only exist according to the will of the fifth. Of course, the implications for him must be taken seriously; it is very possible that the inter-dimensional spillover and/or the incongruities caused by the manipulation of his memories are causing a kind of psychosis. Only slightly less interesting was what happened to the other subject: Jody continued the narration without me but switched seamlessly to a first person point of view. This could mean that her psyche was able to exist in different states, both the fifth and fourth dimensions, simultane-

ously and translate from one to the other...or it could mean that my psyche split between the two of them but for some reason did not maintain a distinct identity and was absorbed briefly into their respective egos."

*-From 'A Discernor's Journal'
Compiled notes of Dr. Gerard Mann*

I am happy, and I don't want to diminish this feeling by waking up; I lie still with my eyes closed, thinking about it. I wish my life could pause here, that I might exist in a painting of my feelings at this moment, that my hopes would never be crushed, that life would always feel new and invigorating. But times like these are few and far between for me; if I could string all of them together, from the whole of my life, there couldn't possibly be more than a few months of happiness.

Can those few months hold all the meaning of my existence? Is there a way to delete everything else and live those moments consecutively? And if there is, will they still seem as wonderful and significant, or will they, like the speed of light, come ultimately to a zero? Does every dimension have its own form of death? Does everything end in a flat line? No, it simply can't be! My spirit must live forever, with or without a concept of what that means.

With this thought, my eyes open. At first, I don't understand what has happened; there is something strange about the room—that much I sense immediately—and I can't remember who I

am. I lay still, trying to think of my name and failing, while looking around the dull gray room.

The walls to my right and left don't seem right, but it takes me a minute to remember that there are supposed to be doors on either side... and there shouldn't be one in front of me. Then I look down at my body: two smooth, firm arms are held in place by rigid, though comfortably padded restraints, built into the chair. My whole body, looking altogether too young and fit, is similarly restrained at such points as to suspend the possibility of any significant movement.

I cannot stay here (though now that I understand what has happened—what seems to have happened, though it shouldn't be possible—it certainly is intriguing). For one thing, I would never get out of this chair, and for another, there's Jody; she might still be under, and without my consciousness as an anchor she will be lost in the fifth dimension.

And so, without the time to consider all of the questions that might be answered if I stayed longer, and making a mental note to figure out how and why Adam awoke preemptively, I navigate back to my self...

I am torn upon waking, between contented bliss and dread. There is some truth very close to the surface of my mind that screams of danger, warning me to run far and fast, not to buy into the blissful feeling, for the price is too high. But I cannot move myself to slow the momentum of my happiness: its inertia overpowers, for the time, the friction of my fear.

I wish my life could pause here, that I might

exist in a painting of my feelings at this moment, that my hopes would never be crushed, that life would always feel new and invigorating—but as I'm thinking these thoughts, another kind of fear compounds the friction on my happiness—the words are familiar—perhaps I've thought these things in exactly the same way before, or maybe I've dreamt of someone saying that to me. *Can it be a memory of the narration?*

Behind me, I hear the sound of a door opening and quietly, hurriedly closing, and then the doctor is releasing my restraints, moving unusually fast and not bothering to ask me his usual polite questions. I want to ask him where he has been...and something else that I can't remember, but there is a wall between the thought and my present consciousness, such a thin wall, but an impenetrable one, and he gives me no time to question him, foregoing the usual debriefing and hurrying through the door to the rear of the chair without first ushering me from the Discerning room.

This is maybe the most shocking thing of all, for the door is strictly forbidden to me, and he has never so much as cracked it in my presence. But as he rushes back into the room, the room where he must have been during my narration—and maybe that's where he always goes—I had assumed that he stayed nearby when I went under, as he is normally at my side when I awake—anyway, I catch a glimpse of the room on the other side of the door as he hurriedly enters it—just a sliver, but enough to see that it is a room and not a closet...a room eerily familiar, eerily similar to this one.

But despite my inner conflict and the numerous questions dragging on my happiness, that feeling of bliss refuses to be stopped entirely, and all of my confusion is relabeled in the context—curiosity. I leave with a feeling of patient excitement, planning to return tomorrow for another narration, another piece of the puzzle, and as an afterthought, I decide to ask the doctor for a copy of the transcription.

CHAPTER 14

Real

“In a narration, the ‘narrator’ designates focus based upon the importance of all the various stimuli to the subject. These stimuli are ranked inversely, or at least counter intuitively, to the way stimuli are ranked in the fourth dimension: instead of the subject making choices and experiencing feelings as a reaction to outside, objective stimuli (paramount physical reality), any focus upon the physical reality of these ‘memories’ is chosen to explain the emotions of the subject, which are considered paramount by the narrator. This is not to say that the setting is inconsistent or in any way unreal, only that the focus is largely emotional. The physical setting is shown as an accent to these feelings, and it changes subtly as the feelings change (no stimulus is ever felt the same way twice). As a result, the things that compose the ‘physical’ context of the narration are often not assigned a definite form, and other times their form is understood symbolically. For this reason, a narration often feels and reads like little more than an incredibly coherent and detailed dream...”

“The narrator cannot navigate into and out of the fifth dimension alone, and there can be no communication between dimensions without the synchronization of respective consciousnesses in both the fourth and the fifth dimensions. To navigate out of any dimension, it

is necessary that one stop believing in the rules of its reality, and so the narrator needs a conscious mind in the fourth dimension to remind it of the constraints of time and place, and wake it up. Also, the events of the narrations must be experienced by a fourth dimension bounded consciousness to be ordered into a comprehensible four dimensional sequence. For these purposes, the Discernitor synchronizes his fourth dimension bounded mind with the narrator, using their PI chips. His experience of the events chosen by the narrator is 'transcribed' in the form of a 'narration'.

-Dr. Gerard Mann, 'Discernation'

Transcription #14—Adam II

He is standing with his back to me and his face to an empty table. The table is green or used to be; now much of its paint is peeled off or barely hanging on. Though it is dark outside, and my surroundings are barely visible, the tiniest details of the table and the hooded figure stand out clearly. I can see the fog from his breath as I silently approach, circling around so as to meet him head on. He looks older than I remember, not necessarily in years but in expression: like much of his paint is peeled off or barely hanging on.

He doesn't see me, or perhaps cannot, but is rather intent on staring at the worn out table between us. Curiosity stirs in me at this oddity, and I have the idea to try looking at the table from his side, to see if I might then perceive the object of his attention, so I circle back around, until we are standing side by side with similarly focused gazes.

From this angle, I perceive a light projected from Madison's gaze onto the table. It moves as though alive, consolidating into human shapes. Presently, Aedee is speaking...

"Maybe, when it comes down to it, I am nothing more than some sort of cheap imitation of a person...a bunch of atoms and molecules that have been forced together for no reason, other than narcissism and...I don't know...cruelty! Maybe I'm not even real! I don't know..." Her shoulders slump. "But I won't accept it!" she says with sudden resolve. "I won't accept these cruel rules!" Her voice is growing stronger, but tears swelling with the crescendo sabotage its effect, and so she seems very weak. Madison impulsively reaches out and puts his arms around her, and she collapses into him, stifling a number of raucous sobs in his shirt.

After some time of this, Aedee pulls away and turns a little to the left. Her head is slightly down, and she avoids eye contact. She takes a few breaths and composes herself and then, in a shaky unnatural voice croaks, "Maybe all I am is a number...but nobody!" The word chokes her, and she pauses once again, gathering all of her remaining strength to finish the statement with a strangled whisper. "Nobody should have a number for a name."

And it seems as though the words carry the full burden of her paradoxical existence: the shame and the helpless frustration, the bitterness of a life denied. And having exhaled the feelings with the words, she is able to look up at Madison...at his

eyes and he at hers.

She is beautiful in every way in that moment, clear of the dark sentiments that so often cloud her expressions, and Madison feels that he is witnessing her soul through her transparent eyes. *She is completely real*, he thinks, *unmistakably human*.

CHAPTER 15

The Frame

My walk to the Institute is tarnished this morning by a remembrance of something that I had been unconsciously putting off. I had, in my bliss, forgotten at our previous meeting, my resolution to ask the doctor for a copy of the transcription, but the reasons for this resolution and their incumbent friction have finally slowed my happiness, and so I've remembered and am thinking about it.

It was fear of disappointment and some other troubling sentiment—I felt like...like my thoughts were being read to me by someone else—it was déjà vu, yes, but not in the archaic sense of having experienced the same thing at a different time, but rather a sense of multiple perspectives on the same experience at the same time.

And now my ignorance has gone with my bliss, and my denial is quickly turning sour in my stomach. It must be a pleasant narration, but still... *what will it show me?*

But I discover upon my arrival that the decision has been made for me. The doctor seems to know something of my resolution, though...*I hadn't asked him, had I?* And although this does nothing to diminish that feeling of apprehension, I am

relieved that it is his decision, *his responsibility*.

“I want to try something. I want you to read a narration before we put you under.”

“Ok, yeah, I had been wanting to look over that unusual one from a few days ago...I had certain questions when I woke, but I couldn’t remember them.”

He smiles. “Well, I guess that makes two of us. Only I, of course, have a definite object in mind.” Indicating a transcription, he continues, “You can sit in the chair; as soon as you’ve read this we’re going to put you under. I want to engage your conscious will, so really try to put yourself into this reading.”

Transcription #10—Jody V

They are at the park; the sun has already set, leaving only its anemic red ghost to haunt the edges of a distant mountain and some low lying clouds. Madison is straddling the bench to face Aedee, and she, with her right foot on the bench and her body hunched over the protruding knee, is almost facing him on the same side of the table.

Madison is speaking heatedly, “They don’t know what they’re saying, and you’re purposely misunderstanding them. Don’t let it get to you. They don’t mean what you think, and anyway, they don’t even know you!” But his words part around her like water over a jagged rock.

Finally, Aedee has heard enough. “But they’re right! Who am I, and what are you trying to accomplish by hanging around me?!”

Madison moves to reply, but Aedee silences him with a frenzied command. “No! Would you just listen for a second?!”

She pauses, and looks away for just a moment, but that moment is a power struggle of such consequence that when she returns her eyes to him it is as someone else, no longer desperate and uncertain but distant and strong. She had been speaking with tremendous agitation, allowing her emotion free rein over voice and body, but now she sets her right foot down on the far side of the bench, straightens her posture and turns towards him deliberately, speaking in a low, measured tone that grinds like broken glass.

“I don’t want your charity. I don’t need your friendship. Right now the only thing I want and need is for you to leave me alone.”

Madison is motionless, apart from the noticeable clenching of his jaw. There is a long silence, and Aedee is on the verge of leaving, but then Madison finds his voice. “I—I can’t do that.”

Aedee looks at Madison incredulously, but seeing after several moments no change in the stubborn set of his expression, she shatters the brittle silence, cursing loudly. “You...idiot! This isn’t one of your books—you can’t just say the right thing and make everything work out how you want it to! You want to decide what happens

next? Ok, then you're to blame, do you hear me? Whatever happens...you have only yourself to blame!"

Slowly, emphatically, she rises from the table and steps one leg at a time to the far side of the seat. He makes no attempt to stop her as she turns her back and hurries away.

The fool! Now he's done it! Aedee thinks, not even sure what "it" means, only certain that something has been...irrevocably decided. Now he's done it! He can't just be reasonable. He can't simply live and let live. So he wants to attach his fate to mine? We'll see if he doesn't regret THAT decision!

A maniacal desire has awoken in her to hurt Madison. To...*show him! So you think that your "love" is perfect enough to cover everything? So you want to save me?! Did you ever stop to think that maybe I don't WANT to be saved?!*

She is walking hurriedly but without obvious direction, lost in thought, and her body spasms from time to time in unconscious reaction to some violent feeling, adding the suggestion of mental derangement to her mien.

Suddenly, she stops and looks down at her left arm, reading the messages scarred into its soft skin. The wounds are a familiar sight, and looking at them now provides her, ironically, with a sense of peace. *Yes, hate...hate is familiar. Hate is understandable.*

A decision presents itself while she is looking at the scars, and it seems to her that she must have known it the entire time, that this is what had been

“irrevocably decided.” With a renewed sense of purpose, she resumes walking in roughly the same direction as before with determined strides.

“To be” Aedee’s mind is racing in time with her furious feet, and for some reason it wanders to an excerpt from a recent class reading assignment. “...or not to be...” the question is ironic. For me, “to be” IS “not to be” and to be continuously aware of the fact. And what does “nobler of the mind” mean anyway? Who is noble? No, not him! He is only torturing me! Can’t he understand that? Can’t he see that all of his altruism is only forcing me to look at what I can never have? Didn’t he know that all of those others who seemed to change their minds about me would... hate me again within the week? And I don’t blame them! Hate is the only rational emotion! I hate the world for its cruelty! I hate Madison for his false optimism...because I—No! That is all foolishness! How stupid for me to want something that is completely irrational!

In this manner she continues, walking briskly and purposefully without breaking off the wild inner dialogue. Though she has a definite object in mind, the thing which has been “irrevocably decided,” the thought remains unstated, as though it may only be fully formulated and, as it were, ‘spoken’ at the very last instant.

Finally, she slows in front of a large house, the exterior of which is meticulously kept, so that even in the darkness its elegance is unmistakable. Aedee stops at its walkway and feeling a tinge of hatred, regards the well kept house.

Momentarily she moves forward, approach-

ing a colossal but ornate depiction of a tree carved into equally imposing double doors.

Reaching for the right doorknob, which like the left is in the shape and position of a falling leaf and which is staggered from its counterpart so as not to detract from the realism of the portrayal, Aedee once more experiences the feeling of hatred, noting with disgust how the terrible door moves effortlessly and without a hint of creak. *How ironic that it is so easy to enter, but so difficult to escape, so beautiful on the outside but dead on the inside*, she thinks, tiptoeing in.

The interior of the house is excessively dark and quiet.

Aedee moves hastily and quietly, without looking around or bothering to turn on any lights. She turns left down a hallway, then left again into a bathroom without ever lifting her eyes, walking like a blind person who has memorized the correct number of steps.

Closing the bathroom door behind her, she strips down, as is her ritual, and looks at her body. Forsaking, or perhaps forgetting her habit of contorting herself, she regards the reflection listlessly and sighs, thinking, *No, that's not the right thing*; then without bothering to cover herself, she proceeds back out the door and down the long hall in the direction from which she came.

On the way back, however, she stops in front of a moderately sized drawing room at the base of the hallway. Her body stiffens, and she pauses for a long time before entering the room; by now she is shaking, though whether from cold or adrenaline she doesn't know.

In the center of the room, facing the hallway from its place on the wall is a large portrait flanked on either side by two smaller pictures. It is this painting that seems to have hypnotized Aedee; her anger swells up and is momentarily overwhelming, so that all coherent thoughts are blotted out, and she is able only to feel.

The face in the frame is blurred initially, like her thoughts, but it grows clearer as her faculties return. When it is finally recognizable, when she can think about it, a different feeling attacks her and threatens to overwhelm her anger. It is fear, not the shallow clawing of terror but some deeply rooted, aching despair, personified within the frame. Still, she holds its gaze, refusing to give in.

For a long time, Aedee stands in the drawing room and stares at the portrait, forgetting all else. *You!* The first word explodes in a fiery fusion after the tense inarticulateness of her swirling emotions. *It's you! It was never meant to be anyone else, but you never understood that! You...you couldn't help yourself, could you?* She is looking at what appears to be a picture of herself, but now, as she speaks in her mind to someone else, the portrait seems to change as well; there is no observable alteration, but its identity changes in her mind nevertheless.

THE FRAME

Silently a figure in the gray a curiosity
A shade of what a person was regards me and it's mocking me
From its place nailed high against the wall

Even now this solitary image that looks so very much like me
 Is so much more
 I hate it with a passion that is real (Oh yes I feel it!)
 Deep inside me I am burning

You came upon the world
 You splattered me across the angered masses
 You buried me beneath this lifeless frame
 Plugged your ears and walked away taking my soul with you

You came upon the wall
 You locked me in and sent yourself to guard me
 You took the only thing that anyone can have
 And set it out of reach
 Assembling a wall between myself and me
 Yeah I am a disappointing version of an idol for a heartless time
 A scarred and faded image of the arrogance you left behind
 I'll bury me because of you if only to be free
 I want you dead I want you dead!
 You never understood

You came upon the world
 You splattered me across the angered masses
 You buried me beneath this lifeless frame
 Plugged your ears and walked away taking my soul with you
 You came upon the wall
 You locked me in and sent yourself to guard me
 They told me it was I inside this frame
 And now I see I might as well be
 All they see is you

After this emotional torrent, there is a brief reprieve as Aedee regards the picture coldly. *Well, it's been done. No one can change that. But I'll be damned!* At this thought, she smiles, and tears well in her eyes. *I'll be DAMNED if I accept it! I'll be damned if I become your legacy!* And without hesitating, she walks over to the picture, never breaking eye contact with the figure in the frame.

Standing on tiptoe and grabbing hold of the frame with both hands, she manages to lift it up and off of its nails. Then, with a sudden, severe composure, she removes the canvas from its frame, first prying off the six clips that serve to mount it inside and then extricating it, carefully but swiftly—with practiced precision.

She tosses the canvas aside carelessly, as if to punctuate her contempt for the depicted person, then stands and carries the empty frame ceremoniously back in the direction from which she most recently came: a sharp left into the hall, and then another more ginger left, maneuvering the bulky frame into the bathroom.

She leaves the bathroom door open and walks directly to the tub, upon which she sets the large frame horizontally. It is wider than the tub, and one side of it extends over the lip awkwardly.

All of a sudden, she sees it—what it all had been leading to. *It's really quite amazing that I didn't understand before, she thinks, but that's what I needed: to act out of emotion, without really facing the reality of it until the last moment.* She reaches into a drawer to her right and withdraws a razor without lowering her eyes.

And gazing at her body for the last time, Aedee smiles. No, her death would not have a perfect exterior like the house or the figure in the mirror. It would be an unavoidable, messy eyesore. *That's the only way to cross it all out, she thinks, drawing a deep red line vertically through the scars on her left forearm and another over the flawless skin of her right. Blood is the only thing that can cover...a multitude of sins.*

She tosses the blade into the sink and looks down at the red stain spreading over once perfect arms to fall from once perfect hands and spatter once perfect legs, then, without changing the tilt of her head, she lifts her eyes to the spectacle in the mirror. *That's it! That's the truth.*

Turning to the right, she takes a step towards the bathtub but slips and falls to her knees, grasping the edge of the tub for support and smearing blood onto the over-hanging frame. It is a hard, painful fall, but she subdues her cry to a sharp exhale, grits her teeth and then rises determinedly, stepping over and into the bathtub and lowering herself down within the frame.

Only now, when her fate is sealed and the terrible plan has been carried out, does Aedee remember Madison. Her eyes brighten. *If only I hadn't blamed him for it!* She scans the bathroom, but the nearest writing utensil is the blade in the sink, and she is too dizzy to stand and retrieve it. One pathetic attempt is enough to verify this before slumping down in the tub.

Watching the blood run down into the drain, she imagines all the sins of the world running down with it. Presently her open eyes cease to see the room and the blood. She is no longer struggling as she slides down and curls up under the frame, like some morbid piece of art. In her mind, she is leaping with swept back hair.