MEGALOMANIA

Episode I – Deviant Voyager

Alpha Sequence

By Wynn Mathis Franken

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Introduction

Wynn Mathis Franken was born in Rotterdam somewhere during the autumn of ’79, went to University to study food science, married once and has two kids. He also did a thing—namely writing this enormous tome, split into multiple episodes by practical necessity—so at least he’s not lacking for anything to say.

As you might have guessed from the fact this is a self-published novel he’s me, and while I’m not a professional author, I do like to dabble in juggling words. I’m not a bona fide native English speaker either, but a childhood of watching now iconic 80’s cartoons made a big impact regarding the basics, while reading often grandiloquent science fiction novels helped to round out the vocabulary in later years. I’m sure that bit of trivia will go a long way into explaining the particular and peculiar blend of UK and US idioms. I’ve always been into science fiction, but when the majority of post-Star Trek Voyager TV and Cinema started to get dumbed down in favour of action I began to look for a steady flow of cerebral fixes in novels instead. Then the Matrix happened, and suddenly there were two sources from which to receive techno-philosophical nourishment, before (to me) Mass Effect did much the same for deeply sci-fi narrative driven gaming. Cinematic flair is what I mostly enjoy across all the media I consume, as well as any existential questions brought forward. In that regard, I think you’ll find I proudly wear every substantial influence on both my sleeves, but one of these days I may list them all for future reminiscence, including the music that helped pave the road to completion.

Following the advent of globalized terrorism in 2001 I thought it was time to reinvent humanity. I set out to explore a thought experiment and wrote a story which I debated with friends into many a late hour. Over the course of almost a quarter century the work grew in size and complexity to the Megalomania it is today, and will be tomorrow. I’ve been working on this monumental task in my spare time, sometimes abandoning the efforts for more than a year. Truthfully I often feared it would never be done, let alone to my liking. The scope of the marathon endeavour, and the long-term perseverance required, made the project feel like my own personal “Sagrada Familia”, which is not intended as a pretentious viewpoint. Rather, the analogy fits because stylistically my writing evolved, just like the architectural influences of the cathedral changed over time, and likewise I’ve continued to build upon the original foundation based on a singular vision. I similarly expected, or assumed that—like this novel— Gaudi’s impressive tour de force might never actually be finished, but reality went on to prove one should indeed never say never on both accounts.

Anyway, it's been a rollercoaster ride writing this epos and all the while I've been tempted to keep altering the technical extrapolation in light of actual development—social media, smart phones, streaming from the cloud, the AI boom—but nonetheless managed to stay fairly true to the original 2001 cut-off point. Self-edited and published around 2026—close to 911's 25th anniversary as it happens—through the aptly named Brave New Books, the two episodes spanning Alpha Sequence is finally released to a persistently judgmental modern public that is heavily influenced by whatever "social" media voice holds the best cards regardless of credibility. Yet while I do hope the work will be enjoyed, it was never primarily meant to entertain, but rather to inspire critical thinking about how we perceive the world so we may learn to recognise and perhaps rediscover what influences that exceedingly subjective process. Lofty ambition might reek of hubris, so I'll say that if none of this works for you, well that's fine too. You see, first and foremost this has been a journey for me, myself, and I—as well it should be to drive such obsessive insanity for a quarter of a century. Everyone else however is more than welcome to join the ride, and perhaps even stick around for a future market to which the Beta Sequence is released. It might take a while though, but aiming for a 2030 release is bound to be realistic—provided the world hasn't ended by then.

To Peter,

My father of reason, and supportive dad.

Prologue | Looking back in anger

On that fateful evening of September 11th Mathew looked outside through the large window of his penthouse apartment. He was searching for something in vain. Usually at least a few stars would be visible in the New York night sky, although they never did shine very brightly. The distinctively patterned lighting of the Manhattan area prevented them from showing their full splendour. This particular evening though, was undeniably pitch-black; an unnatural darkness that made him feel angry and sad. For this strange lack of illumination was caused by smoke and small debris floating in the air that represented some of the unidentifiable remains of the World Trade Centre. It was still difficult to comprehend the twins had been penetrated by passenger airplanes in the morning of the same day. Mathew Magellan was gazing outside to find just a glimpse of the moon and the trusted stars he looked at most evenings when he needed a little comfort. Stargazing was an activity he would dismiss as romantic nonsense if anybody other than himself was indulging in it, so this was one of the many things he preferred to do alone. Not that he had any choice, there weren't an awful lot of people around he could talk to this evening.

Everyone still relevant had been informed of his decisions and subsequently instructed to leave him be. It had taken him about three weeks to finish all of the things he still had to attend to, and to make sure his exit strategy would not come as an unpleasant surprise anyone he actually cared for. Meticulous planning, that was one of the things he thought to be important. No one was to intervene with what he had chosen to do, except himself, which had been hard enough already. The last few weeks had been both fantastic as well as awful, inspiring the onset of doubt to complicate matters. Ironically the events that had occurred today effectively served to reaffirm his decisions. Standing here behind the glass façade of anonymity Mathew pondered all the things he was set to leave behind, but only the ones not rotten. He sequentially traced back the activities of the past three weeks, taking care to touch on the highs and lows. Running by the events like a film in his mind he started at the beginning of the end; the doctor's appointment on the 21st of August. Such a fine sunny morning it had been, or so Mathew recalled—deceptively lovely in view of current hindsight. He pictured himself replaying his life from the pivotal moment that pushed the

first of many dominoes to fall over. Walking to his appointment across the green, green grass of Central Park Mathew had already steeled himself for bad news, but little did he know how literally everything was about to change for the worse (and that was putting it mildly).

1 – Chapter
Welcome my friends, to the Machine

Every story needs a protagonist, so if you don't mind we'll get the introductions out of the way first. Oh and if you do mind—tough luck. Here, have a banana to hold you over while you wait. There's a good human.

This tale begins with an average fellow, currently 45 years of age, whose early—and altogether far too short—childhood took place in London. Hence, his parents saw fit to grace him with the rather mouthful of names of Mathew Pearce Christopher Magellan. They were very much part of the wealthy elite although their money was fairly new, coming not from historical aristocracy, but rather from successful oligarchical ventures.

Mathew was sadly orphaned from the age of 16, with both mother and father dying in a catastrophic plane crash during a business trip to Kuwait. Suddenly there was nothing much left to keep him strung to a location which characteristic grey weather had frequently made him feel blue even prior to the latest onset of melancholic memories so capriciously flowing in. As the associations were becoming detrimental to his mental health, Mathew decided to bid the old country farewell in due time. Renting an apartment in Cambridge for the duration, and being a bit of a golden boy in terms of educational prowess, he successfully fast-tracked obtaining a degree in chemical engineering first. The inherited family house and possessions were set up for auction before leaving, and he never returned, nor even looked back.

New York City was going to be a fresh start, and as if internally emphasising that intent the only material items of mostly sentimental value he brought over Stateside were his father's understated Seiko watch and his mother's incognito white gold wedding ring. Both items were austere in appearance so as to prevent drawing attention when travelling to countries where personal wealth was an exception rather than the norm. His parents obviously hadn't worn them when the accident happened to their opulent destination, and of course the adjustable watch fit his wrist just fine. After having it expertly altered meanwhile, the ring proved a match with the left middle finger. All

other connections were severed, and from that moment on he would only look to the future.

Despite having a fortune at his disposal, Mathew wanted a conventional life, with a job and evolving ambitions towards personal and professional growth. That's not to say the coin was left to collect dust, far from it in fact. By first betting his inheritance heavily on Yahoo, simply because of his propensity for attraction to quirky names, it multiplied by several factors. Later on the funds were hedged to Google and Apple for the same reason of nomenclature and it paid glorious dividends by orders of magnitude. At the age of 40 he was a filthy rich man, yet remained utterly anonymous due to his lack of active presence and public endeavours. Money never meant much to Mathew, having been born into plenty of it, but also because of perspective. With all financial means at hand to satisfy any needs whatsoever, striving to obtain ever more becomes a tiresome goal in and of itself. The prospect of that fruitless pursuit didn't interest him like it did the Scrooge McDucks of the world. He was neither greedily inclined, nor motivated by increasing his potential power of influence by selectively funding others.

By midlife Mathew was noted by many to look like a smoothed out version of Michael Douglas, though with a face not quite as angular, and eyes somewhat less recessed and bulging, as he liked to argue. Truth be told, the often professed resemblance was somewhat lost to him, but then again he never observed any other similarities pointed out by folks either, for instance when enthusiastically reaching a verdict on which parent a baby took after most. To him, the facial features of any baby were a work in progress at best. As for his own thoughts on the matter, Mathew considered his appearance to have more in common with Hugh Jackman's features. Alas, a society built on subjective judgement ultimately settled on a different verdict, so there it was.

After his studies in the UK, Mathew was employed rather unhappily as an application scientist and project manager for ExxonMobil, where he attempted to exploit his talent for innovative problem solving and his knowledge on chemistry and physics. He persevered for seven years, but after countless disappointments and confrontations with stubbornly conservative ways it was enough. He decided it was time for a change that would bring him closer to his dream to get off-world and perhaps even reach out closer to the stars. Considering his background didn't involve being a fighter pilot, astrophysicist, or technical engineer, the most obvious options to get into NASA were off the table, even at his still relatively young age. Becoming an astronaut wasn't in the cards, and neither was a career in physics, but after some masterful persuasion JPL did offer him a major position, caveats notwithstanding. It was a provisional contract which required him to branch out his knowledge on chemical engineering and hydrocarbon based fuels to the field of advanced rocket design. Not a simple feat, but he was up to the challenge and for a little while everything appeared to proceed according to his wishes, the zenith being the first involvement with the

new Mars exploration programme. Probes were launched, and manned missions planned, but none of the latter came to pass as NASA was subject to one downsize after another. The lack of both public and commercial interest in putting humans on Mars meant insufficient budget to finance the legion of ambitious plans involved. What means were available to scientific endeavours were largely diverted to be poured into new space telescopes, as well as particle accelerator-collider arrays. While all those efforts would bring the Universe and its inner workings closer to mankind, they failed miserably to lift his person nearer to the greater solar system and its unexplored worlds. Still, the work was challenging despite being nothing but a pastime given his wealth, and subsequent partial retraining provided deeper insight in the IT side of things. In the latter years Mathew had become a proficient programmer in addition to teaching himself how to manipulate existing software routines. Indeed, to put it more bluntly we can safely say our man at NASA taught himself to be a computer whiz of sorts, and a pretty adept one at that. Alas, his recreational messing around with governmental cyber defence systems, poking holes to reveal weaknesses, was both discovered and traced back to his personal efforts. The subsequent firing from his somewhat side-tracked position provided two valuable lessons. One: even harmless activities with reasonably good intentions at heart were treated as an attack if they are perceived as such, and two: the importance of pre-emptively deciding to either cover up illegal activities to prevent discovery, or to both announce and claim them instead, thereby underscoring the challenge intended. In any case, he left the fossil fuel industry, and was ousted from what little idealism remained at NASA. Pretty much fed up with the concept of a day job that wasn't even needed in light of his amply providing accounts, he turned to his main interest for a fresh course.

As it happened music was one of his great hobbies besides science and sci-fi, and he had always looked upon owners of well-assorted record stores with slight envy. Mathew believed he could easily spend the better part of a work week in such an environment. Especially since actual revenue was of no importance, not even to provide sustained income to any staff he might have to hire. To get a sense of how one started a record store he decided to pay an unusual visit to one of its prime examples; the Sound of Music. Mathew knew its vintage owner well, seeing as he could be found hanging around the place buying, browsing, listening to or asking about records quite frequently. Old man Bill Shepard offered him no advice on how to handle a start-up, but rather the complete ownership of his own store, admitting he had been considering retirement for a while now. And so Matthew acquired a completely furnished dream store, which he could alter, tweak and tailor to suit exhibition of his personal favourite music genres. Regardless of the changes he made though, the store kept radiating that unmistakable seventies feel if simply because Shepard had never updated the interior since starting his business in that very period. Mathew decided to rename the store to "High Fidelity Forever Records Limited", and expecting it to be shortened to HI Fiver or something

similarly catchy by steady patrons. Coincidentally, as if destiny saw fit to commemorate such good fortune, all this happened just a month after Mathew reached that one age to uniquely celebrate—the year 42 of life, the Universe and everything. Joking side, one could argue his prospects did ostensibly take a rather different turn at this time. Unfortunately though, Mathew would soon learn first-hand that life isn't just what you make of it, but rather that anyone here is simply along for the ride.

All in all a pretty mundane personal history I would say; nothing more than passing strange. How bland! Rest assured we've thus far only covered the widely known (and arguably "official") backstory of M.P.C. Magellan, and now stand ready to apply some desperately needed spice. Speaking on behalf of the objective truth, we can safely inform this audience there's quite a bit more to the whole enchilada than first meets the eye. Now before you go and worry that silly mushy-brained head of yours, there's nothing downright ominous to be concerned about, although expressing sympathy to the tribulations Mathew endured does go a long way. You see, from an early age Mathew was hindered by a somewhat of a unique inconvenience, and alas this intrinsic affliction developed into a genuinely troublesome condition as he got older.

For all intents and purposes he seemed entangled with a continuously shifting field that warped public perception of his identity. Effectively, this felt like being trailed by a mirror image of the self, one darkly scanning his every upcoming decision, so that when the pivotal moment was presented, the many actualisation could be split into diverging paths of choice. All but one would be instantly siphoned off to realise elsewhere, and thereby ensuring his current material form would be held accountable for just the singular actualised outcome. The similarities between the vague intuition of standing on an infinitely branching crossroads (ceaselessly morphing and crystallising) and the fuzzy logic describing a quantum superposition (before and after observation) were not lost on him. Still, because Mathew was a self-professed realist who was agnostically convinced the universe was fully deterministic, he hardly paid this any heed. The effect, however subjective, became markedly more noticeable after buying the aforementioned heaps of stock in funny-named companies. Mathew, not one to believe in luck, had considered it a matter of unbiased chance that the dice had repeatedly paid dividends. After losing his family, the odds did seem increasingly in his favour, but he was adamant lightning wouldn't strike thrice. Others were not so convinced; they attributed the immense fortune he had gathered so cleanly to uncanny foresight at first, but in the years following the accumulation of unspeakable wealth whispered voices were going 'round that took the notion of a sixth sense a little further. This is when the sharp attention given to highlight him being different started to probe his safety bubble, casually looking for a soft spot to penetrate under the guise of friendly banter.

When rumours of the alleged reality distortion field surrounding his person arrived close enough for the man in question to consciously pick up on them, Mathew would laugh the matter off as nonsense. After recurring confrontations connected to similar notions, he started to feel doubt about what he was actually accused of. Mathew did some topical research and found that the so-called “RDF” was first ascribed to Steve Jobs' ability to convince himself, and others around him, to believe almost anything with a mix of charm, charisma, bravado, hyperbole, marketing, appeasement and persistence. It was said to distort his co-workers' sense of proportion and scales of difficulty, thereby making them believe that whatever seemingly impossible task he had at hand was actually feasible. He also found the reality distortion field could be used to appropriate others' ideas as one’s own, thereby diminishing the originator’s significance and credit only the radiant halo personality at the centre of the reality distortion field. Despite knowing he didn’t show any of this scornfully narcissistic behaviour, Mathew continued to be wrongly associated with the obviously misappropriated character ability. Sometimes he doubled down, by arguing he was far from charismatic, and thus unable to exude even a limited form of suggestive authority to push even his minor and obscure ideas forward at NASA.

According to him this alone proved he did not manifest as a locus of control, or exhibit magical thinking. If folks persisted—as was often the case during informal occasions involving alcohol—Mathew would clarify and even promise he was neither a wizard nor an alien, and that nobody should be worried about having spells cast over them to change their minds or perception of existence. That usually didn’t help. The hushed voices continued to search for some accusation that would somehow stick the landing, and they grew increasingly loud. They droned on about him seeing the world through a prescience filter showing alternate truths. He was frowned upon in passing, and spoken about in hushed tones, and only because he won big at two major bets. Apparently a mix of envy and disbelief was enough to make people hold one’s aura in a different light. And Mathew's trailing phantom duplicate—unseen yet perceived all the same—couldn't stand its brightness. At least, that was the consensus amongst those in the know whenever he fled the scene, when in truth he simply buckled under the gaze of unspoken suspicion. In retrospect the uncalled-for harassment peaked when Mathew himself tentatively started to wonder if indeed his was a heart of darkness—shaped by past misfortune, or some unknowable dislocated origin—that had imbued him with certain unnatural abilities, including the manipulation of fate. Emergent doubt and foolish hubris are each a veritable part of the human condition, but so is the timely recovery of confidence and likewise sensible modesty. As with most viral hypes and trending topics, the buzz around his so-called talents to change the world at his whim eventually died down. At least, they mostly did, but some obstinately refused to let it go—refused to let their pet project fade into obscurity, vigilantly waiting for the right moment to relight the fire beneath the frying pan.

They didn't have to wait long, because Mathew couldn't help making one last sarcastic joke in reference to his so-called talents, thinking it was safe to do so after a year of relative quiet. It involved how he planned to gaslight a few difficult budget committee members into believing they were in fact half-blood vampires. Intended as an innocent jab at the cuts enforced by the familiars of the true leeches, it proved to be the last mistake made in a professional social context. The jest offered plenty of ammunition to herald renewed escalation, but this time they kept it quiet to ensure the sentiment could fester. Thus unbeknownst to him, Mathew's person became the subject of terrible scrutiny instigated by the happy few willing to sink their teeth into the juicy material. From that moment on, the total range of his behaviour—be it the expression of nonconformist opinions, grandiose ambitions, dreamlike ideals, and even his dry sense of humour—was bundled and placed wholesale under a magnifying glass. Observed through this lens, his persona was to be studied and dissected by toxic co-workers looking to bully anyone stupid enough to be an easy target.

After a while, Mathew caught wind of what was going on, and he was appalled by the idiocy on display whenever behaviour concerned a collective of people. He admonished the bizarre lengths his fellows would go to just to explain why he had succeeded where they hadn't, all the while stubbornly refusing to look at the bigger picture. Instead of apologising, the apex morons kept accusing him of foul play without ever providing any evidence. Ultimately this took a toll so high that his position had effectively been rendered unsalvageable. When the ugliest gossip began to circulate that he might even have caused his parents' death in some way Mathew was done explaining patiently and smiling politely. If the situation had already been bursting at the seams before, this was the moment where it reached the breaking point. The gloves were off, and because he refused to stoop to their level, Mathew decided then and there to retreat from public service altogether. He considered it much-deserved retirement from being enslaved to a wage he didn't even need to begin with.

Freed from the hearsay during his commercial stint at ExxMo, and the downright nasty milieu prevalent at NASA, Mathew was glad he could finally invest his energy in a worthwhile endeavour. And as blind luck would have it, the odds favoured him at least once more. It turned out the owner of his favourite record store was suddenly—and completely unexpectedly—looking for someone to take over his business. Furthermore, in an even more freak turn of events, William Shepherd had purportedly been eying Mathew for the job, and most exclusively at that. It appeared our protagonist, deftly living by the rules of chance, was the right man, in the right place yet again, but he found nothing overly extraordinary about any of that. When pressed later about the fortuitous timing following the career death, Mathew argued every event happening to conscious life, regardless of being labelled good or bad, could essentially be reduced to a computational result of the universal probability engine, ever hard at work behind the scenes

churning out existential products. Outwardly then, Mathew maintained he was unable to change the world with his mind alone, claiming the causality that underpinned existence did not tolerate such paradoxes, such as free will influencing outcomes. However, his innermost reflections began to cautiously argue that if anyone could make a small difference, there was at least one possible scenario wherein he alone was able to make all of them. While such fanciful rumination never got the upper hand, it does reveal that the idea one could perhaps make certain adjustments to one's personal benefit was never fully uprooted. Indeed, regardless of being conceptually implausible, those remnants of a suggestive seed remained deeply planted in his subconscious. Now equally unseen as it was unperceived, the silently proliferating shadows stayed ever close, and eventually their cold darkness was felt in everything Mathew touched. Arising from both wakefulness and slumber, these chilling effects are the telltales of a cursed mortal—one who bartered away his lonesome soul to the devil, in exchange for blessed influence.

Or so the story goes. And what a load of bullshit it is. People really do believe the weirdest things. Tell you what, here's to championing that whatever makes them happy doesn't bother anyone else. I find toasting is a great coping mechanism to better tolerate human interaction and their allegedly rich inner worldscape, the sporadically incipient fantasy of being almighty notwithstanding. You lot are welcome to finish your drink while we prepare Mathew's next iteration. Let's get down to his life's narration, shall we? Let's! For it is here that our story proper shall begin, and so for the time being I shall leave you to witness and pay tribute. As for who I am, suffice to say this will be addressed at a later stage, when you are better adjusted to understand and accept our nature of many.

Echelon Zero (0)
~
Dark Tide

Gambling without foresight

Mathew stood in the middle of the store smiling, because he was happy. Posters, curiosities and various paraphernalia promoted the main inventory of HI Five. Symphonic progressive bands were on the left side, Pink Floyd, Marillion, Ayreon, Camel, Pendragon, Pallas, IQ, early Genesis and the like. Part of the adjacent wall had been turned into a prop as well, with large white blocks forming a part of a very well-known album cover. The words 'The Wall' were smeared across in black free sprayed letters. The enlarged cover of "Wish You Were Here" faced that of "Dark side of the Moon" over at the far sides of the store. Meanwhile, the right wing was oriented to metal, represented by Rush, Winds, Opeth, Therion, Moonspell, Led Zeppelin, Nightwish and so on. Larger pop-rock bands spruced up the centre with spectacular merchandising as afforded by the largest marketing budgets of the time. There were cardboard cut-outs of Lenny Kravitz and Heather Nova to get your picture taken with, as well as items on display that were destined to become collector's items. For Dire Straits Mathew had secured the guitar first used by Mark Knopfler to record Sultans, for U2 he'd gotten his hands on a pair of Bono's original shades, and to celebrate David Bowie there was an original picture of Labyrinth where the legend was shown together with the beautiful Jennifer Connolly. The hodgepodge of fantasy exhibitions, the gothic set pieces and celebrity references livened up the store considerably between the many rows of compact disks to browse through. Of course, it hadn't taken long for the store to become too much for one person to handle, so Mathew put up an ad asking for an assistant with experience in filing and a love for progressive tunes. After due consideration he also added the stipulation that the ideal candidate would display a healthy disdain for boybands, rap—French, gangster or otherwise—bubble-gum pop, and—heaven forbid—the horror that was modern R&B. At the very least that prerequisite would likely separate the wheat from the chaff, or vice versa. And sure enough, he quickly found his helping hand in the shape of a somewhat shy 22-year-old applicant. He introduced himself as Seth van Halen, the name almost being enough for Mathew to instantly make the guy a permanent asset for High Fidelity Forever Records Limited. In reality, it took all but fifteen minutes for the handshake to close the deal on a contract.

It was on this day, the 21st of August 2001, that some new things for the store arrived which caused a kind of peculiar scene between the entrance to the store and the supply truck, due to the somewhat overly enthusiastic nature of Seth, who had the rare ability of slowing people down, when trying to urge them into speeding up.
'Hey Mat, come and see this, they finally brought these stands for the new "Live" album, I mean the band Live, eh—it's called "V", the album is—I

think it's kind of lazy to be honest. Hey Mat, but check this Kula Shaker stuff, it's radical, oh and Mat, the new batch of Manic Street Preachers is here!' Seth exclaimed, holding up an assortment of albums with both arms stretched as far as they would allow.
'Excellent Seth, just put it in the middle for now so these gentlemen can be on their merry way.'
'Yes sir, and look, the Verve—how about that?!' Seth cried, whilst running around "helping" to unload the truck. One of the delivery men, who went by the name of Freddy, turned his head towards Mathew, expressing a sign of apparent battle weariness.
'Think he's always gonna stay like this Mister Magellan? I mean, we've been coming here for months on end now, but this guy, he's still acting like a little kid at Christmas every time we do.'
'I sincerely hope he stays that way, as Mister van Halen tends to emanate the kind of innocent enthusiasm that seems to become in shorter supply with each passing year. Music is forever, but this youthful attitude, it passes before you realise it's gone.'
The middle aged supplier looked at him first with an inquiringly puzzled stare, which then changed into a more knowing look of agreement.
'You're probably right Mister Magellan. Anyway, we're all done. Guess we'll see you next week.'
The other man came 'round the front of the truck to confirm they were all set to leave.
'We're off Freddy' he gruffly said before closing up the back.
'C'mon, say goodbye Jack.'
'Goodbye Jack' the man mumbled, and Freddy shortly closed his eyes in exhaustion, probably wishing he could transfer some of Seth's energy to his co-worker. After slamming the driver door shut Jack carelessly stepped on the gas and nearly hit a speeding Caprice Classic cab on their way back into traffic. Shaking his head as the violent honking continued outside, Mathew stepped back inside the store. Before taking even five steps the entry bell rang to announce a potential customer. Mathew swivelled to witness an entitled looking man briskly walking into the store passing him without so much uttering a "hello". The man glanced around the place like an aristocrat in a shantytown, his face a mask of instant disapproval and fatigue at the absence of expected servitude. Mathew, who harboured a similar sentiment of discontentment, momentarily cast his eyes up to the obscured skies far beyond the ceiling. Currently, he was betting with himself on the outcome of this visit and the kind of interaction that would inevitably follow. After hastily browsing under the watchful eye of the shop owner the man actually scowled in plain annoyance, and subsequently paced to the main counter to slam a little bell that wasn't there. Mathew had already been bracing himself for the impending encounter, attempting a modest smile, but forgoing the wasted effort as he tried desperately to ignore the man's flat palm tapping the countertop.

‘Yes, yes, hello there. Can I help you at all?’ Mathew offered with the highest degree of authentic politeness as he could muster.
‘Doubtful; where’s the Pop section?’ the man blurted, with obvious impatience and unveiled annoyance. Seth’s head popped up from behind a chest high display like an emu with a Pavlovian fright reaction to a forbidden sound. “Pop?” he mouthed.
Mathew frowned and bent forward ever so slightly to emphasize whether he hadn’t heard correctly. ‘The “Pop” section you say?’
‘Yeah man, Pop music, you know? Back Street Boys, Britney Spears, you know? Pop music! I can’t find the section.’
Mathew furrowed his brow, feigning careful consideration. ‘I believe we stock Coldplay, possibly Blur and Oasis…well, definitely maybe.’
‘My God man that’s ancient stuff by now’ the man said, shaking his hands forward is if pleading to make sense of this venue lacking any kind of contemporary arts.
‘We do like ancient, but we make do with simply the excellent, and strive for the perfection. Hence, I believe this isn’t the store you’re looking for’ Mathew conceded, cradling his chin in a happy reflection. The man slapped the counter again, hard this time, which made Mathew jump a little much to his own chagrin.
‘You *don’t* have any new releases? Isn’t this supposed to be a record store?’
‘Ah well, we have fresh vinyl, don’t we Seth?’ Mathew proudly beamed. Seth quickly nodded in agreement and held up the albums he was stocking from behind the display.
‘Did you say vinyl?! What is this, the sixties? That’s even worse than Britpop!’
Mathew pursed his lips and breathed in through his nose slowly, before exhaling in speech.
‘My good sir, are you a local individual?’
‘What? Hell no, I’m actually from San Francisco, just here for business, and looking to buy some music.’
‘And there it is. This is a local shop for local people.’
‘Well it’s pretty clear it’s not a chain; your point being?’
‘What’s with the shouting? We’ll have no trouble here.’
The man was a little taken aback by that curve ball.
‘I’m starting to think coming here was a bad idea.’
‘I think you’re probably right. You might as well leave this place, while you still can that is.’
‘Are you threatening me to leave now? I’m a bona fide customer!’
‘You are not, nor will you ever be.’
The non-local man blinked and a faceoff in silent staring came and went. Seth meanwhile, was watching the events unfold like a meerkat on the lookout for food and threats.
‘Would you kindly make friends with the door now, without making a nuisance of yourself?’ Mathew suggested politely.

‘Well, there’s no need to be rude. This is the only music store in the area. Can’t you at least check your system if you stock Pink for instance?’
‘Pink for instance?’
‘Just “Pink” the man corrected, with eyes now closed.
‘Computer says no I’m afraid.’ Mathew flatly stated, and pressed his lips to avoid saying anymore.
‘You haven’t even touched the damn thing!’
‘Ah you see I really don’t need to. The only thing Pink we stock also has Floyd. Might I suggest a paint store?’ Mathew offered, again smiling politely, with nary a hint of overt condescension.
‘You don’t understand you stupid pillock, I’m here to buy something fresh that is popular *now*.’
Mathew turned his head towards Seth, pointing to the man with his thumb.
‘It’s a persistent one this fellow.’
Seth nodded silently and thereafter his head slowly moved back down like an ostrich getting ready to bury its head in the sand.
‘Maybe your supervisor knows more?’ the man huffed, becoming somewhat irate in a last bid to get what he wanted. It was plain to see though that he was coming to terms with the ultimate futility of the endeavour. Mathew ignored the question, deciding instead to show rather than tell.
‘Look around you, what do you see?’ Mathew offered instead, making a theatrical slow-panning swoop with his arm, palm half open.
‘I see a so-called record store’ the man whispered, not looking, eyes fixed on the counter.
‘Indeed, and we do specialise in progressive, classic and symphonic rock, as well as gothic and melodic metal along with a curated selection of classic pop on the side.’
The man sighed, completely at a loss in this unprecedented situation. ‘What an utterly complete waste of time this has been. And I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.’
Mathew smiled curtly, walked around the counter and patted the man’s shoulder while ushering him towards the door.
‘There, there, come now. Perhaps I can interest you in the new album by Mike Milligan and the Kitchen Brothers?’ he recommended, with smooth persuasiveness.
‘I don’t want that’ the man said bluntly, his head down in shattered defeat.
‘They’re actually world famous in Kansas’ Mathew promised, while continuing to help shuffle the man along.
‘I still don’t want it. I want my MTV!’ he suddenly shouted.
‘Sorry, don’t have it. Tell you what though; if I ever start selling genuine top of the pops poppy poppetipop you’ll be the first one to know. Sound good?’ Mathew suggested offhand, still subtly accompanying the faux customer on the final stretch to exiting the stage.
‘But I don’t live here.’
‘Well that is certainly true’ Mathew agreed.

‘Now then, with all that out of the way please enjoy the rest of your day, and please don’t look back in anger. In fact, there’s no reason to look back at all, just move along. Be free and all that.’
After having gently placed the bewildered man back on the sidewalk, Mathew quietly shut the shop door, and the bell softly signalled the end of all that.
Mathew noticed that Seth had long since let the matter go, having retreated into his own little world while positioning the dropped off goods. Swooping sounds of the epic “Stardust We Are” provided the essential work environment, as evidenced by Seth’s bobbing head as the disks were finding their correct shelf spots. Mathew decided it best not to disturb him in this state of craftsmanship and went on towards his small office in the back of the store to check if he had anything important to do today. Sitting behind his messy desk he moved the various empty and half empty coffee mugs, a pack of Camel cigarettes, stray papers, and late night snack remains until he was finally able to retrieve his agenda. Pleased with himself for finding the small booklet relatively quickly, Mathew vigorously started flipping the pages. As he feared, the only item of true importance was his overdue scheduled doctor’s appointment to discuss his test results. He wasn’t looking forward to it in the least. Negotiating the obstacle course of paperwork spread on the floor, which he maintained represented the administration needing immediate attention, Mathew pushed open a wooden flap door and proceeded towards the wardrobe to collect his long black raincoat.
‘Planning to do some streaking in that?’ Seth asked tauntingly. Deeply sighing, Matthew turned around to address his assistant.
‘Does it look like I’m not wearing anything underneath? Besides, it’s neither raining nor even remotely dark, so where’s the fun in that?’
‘Fair enough, so I’m assuming you’re going out?’
‘I am, different guy, different long coat, deals in bad news and syringes. Anyway, feel free to help yourself to some of my signature battery acid.’
‘Is the tar you call coffee still hot?’
‘Sure, I prepared it just before this delivery showed up.’
Pausing his unpacking of merch Seth slowly manoeuvred between the stacked boxes towards the counter where Mathew stood casually flipping through some of the new albums.
‘Your coffee certainly keeps me awake.’
‘That’s the idea pal.’
‘Hmm, and remember that time when we were working late and you offered me coffee? I ended up watching all four Alien movies in a row. One cup of the stuff was all it took for me to stay awake until three in the morning?’
Seth reminisced, all the while trying to remove some tape, which had somehow gotten stuck between his fingers.

‘Indeed, that was quite an efficient Saturday evening. Plus, now you can boast that once upon a time you endured a marathon session of the entire Alien saga all through a single night.’
‘Yeah, an achievement that never fails to impress the girls.’
‘Sarcasm aside, maybe they don’t appreciate your apparent lack of dignity. The quality of those flicks drops pretty dramatically after Aliens.
‘Like a meteorite plummeting from the sky, but I had watch them, if only just the one time.’
‘For completion sake I agree. Anyway, I’ll leave the shop in your capable hands for a couple of hours’ Mathew said while lighting a Camel and calmly watching Seth struggle some more with the tape.
‘Are you worried it’s going to be serious this time?’
‘I don’t know Seth, last time it was all fine, but then again, that was a few years ago. You know I don’t smoke that much, but I could be sensitive to the consequences.’
Mathew promptly inhaled sharply between his teeth, as to make a foolish statement of no surrender.
‘Right, I’m off. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do unless the end of the world comes knocking on the door.’
‘Also, don’t drink all the beer, and try not to get the store robbed’ he added while grabbing his hat and positioning it neatly on his head. Seth regarded Mathew for a moment, remembering the curious job interview at the time. The expected formal talk had been strangely absent, instead replaced by an evening at the local special beer pub. Their conversations had been about music, politics and philosophy, lasting all the way through the early morning. Seth found it amusing that despite having known Mathew for some time now, the man hadn’t lost much of the childlike spark that was admittedly somewhat hidden behind a mask of adult responsibility. The attire of a sixties detective fitted the old school record store. Mathew left the building, but momentarily paused in front of the large street side window to admire one of his most prized possessions. He stood proudly with his arms folded, regarding the 1977 Aston Martin V8 Vantage parked across the street. Iridescent in its pearlescent light blue, the car symbolised a kind of perfection, with its silver side skirts completing a look to die for. The beautiful yet muscular automobile stood loyally in wait, always ready be driven by its proud owner; for an Aston like that didn’t have need for a chauffeur, the pleasure was simply too great to relinquish to anyone else. Mathew adjusted his ash-grey scarf and swiftly walked out of the framed perspective. Seth was a bit surprised Mathew wasn’t taking the car to drive to Doctor Lector, whose practice was all but four kilometres away. Then again, walking in the open air did offer clarity of mind. It already felt like this fall was going to be a good one; the air was crisp and fresh and almost every day so far the skies had been clear when it mattered most. At set times the alignment of the sun, unobscured by clouds, had caused the entire store interior to be magically illuminated for one hot minute. By happy

coincidence, that time was now and Seth soaked up the strangely enchanting glow of heavy golden rays as they were cast over everything within his field of vision. As the beauty faded, quickening shadows broke the spell he was under. A little dazed, Seth ran both hands through his black hair and looked at the mess surrounding him. The bell announced new customers, and Seth knew there was still much to be done. This should really be tidier, suppose I'd better get me some of that battery acid, Seth internally reflected, and dutifully made his way to the heated pot of black goop.

Life before high fidelity

The good weather wasn't the actual reason Mathew wanted to walk. He just had a lot on his mind and had decided he could do with some extra time to contemplate the position he was in right now. He had always been fascinated with acting, hiding behind a mask, projecting an image of make believe. He felt his life was a charade to fit in to some extent, a reality film with a carefully tailored screenplay. He pretended to be immune to other people's thoughts and opinions about him and gave the impression that he was a strong stable person with his own style and things to worry about. To the outside world he'd come across like a man with his own style, who could do just about anything he wanted to without having to worry about whether it was fashionable or conformist. In reality though, this boundless happiness, stability and emotional security was mostly a minutely applied veneer. He had ascended the Empire State once to ponder what it would take to cut those fences and jump down just to get it over with, to end with what he imagined would be a liberating sensation of soaring flight to the next level of being freed from haunting memories. Like most people though, after having set foot close enough towards the ledge with clear intentions on how to proceed he tended to freeze. As primal fear overruled tentative motivation and self-preservation kicked in, the very challenges that brought him to such moments would just fade out into temporary nothingness only to return once he was safe and sound. It hadn't stopped him from trying though, and with three attempts across fairly long intervals throughout his life one could argue he exhibited unhealthy suicidal tendencies. One such motivation to take control occurred after years of feeling depressed about not fitting in with any group during his education. He always considered himself an outsider, and that feeling was exacerbated to the extreme after he lost his parents. The phone call from the airline informed him they hadn't suffered in the crash, having promptly died in the ensuing wreckage. There were no survivors whatsoever, and he was left shell-shocked, completely alone and unable to function for the longest time. He felt knocked down again at ExxonMobil because his ideas about hydrogen fuel cells and electric infrastructure were constantly being shoved off the table. His propositions usually meant spending money on anything other than oil; long-term investments in sustainable energy. His boss had plainly declared Mathew should focus on the promising PR of such endeavours instead, to advertise the company was helping to build a better tomorrow, rather than actually putting in the work. The frustration had been gnawing at his sense of self-respect and honour, but he quit before it was allowed to escalate. Then disaster struck again, with the most recent attempt driven by the passing of his wife. After both early attempts he came to realise these ultimate escapes stood as a testimony of an inability to handle grief and suffering. Something good was waiting to happen; it simply had to. And then

Elíse came along to rock his world like a landslide of spontaneity and joy. He met Elíse Florian Childs nine months into his new job at NASA during a conference about the Mars exploration programme, and by that time he was all too aware things were not going as he had foreseen. That particular day dealt with the complications concerning the new types of propulsion systems necessary to get there efficiently, and radiation proofing the crew partitions to do it safely. The long term potential for Terraforming the Martian atmosphere and soil was also touched upon ever so slightly, but the usual complication involving space travel acted like a slab of lead in the soles of their shoes; a severe lack of funding. NASA hadn't been the organisation he had expected, where money was no issue, and space was the final frontier. That might have been the case during the cold war, but by now it had devolved into a meek and clipped wing organisation doing the best they could without raising expenses beyond the laughable budget. The relevance of NASA, once the nation's pride, was openly questioned and severe budget cuts were mandated without so much as a tearful blink. The cash was needed elsewhere, with military applications considered key in this age of modern warfare; maybe the coin was diverted to the hinted revival of the SDI programme, or more likely it was poured into the money pit that was new joint strike fighter. During the conference he had a little too much to drink, which opened the flood gates for him to voice various anathema opinions about the current situation, and rather a fair bit louder than intended. In the middle of his rousing statements one charming young lady stepped in between his casually amused colleagues and reported she was stealing him for a bit. Later Mathew realised how much he owed her, having taken him under her wing to offer protection from the scolding he would no-doubt have received if the higher ups had eventually taken note and become suitably embarrassed. That realisation however, had been a tremendously delayed response.

'It is preposterous the way they are treating us. How can they expect us to build a spaceship, go into warp and colonise Mars to ensure the future of the human race, take pictures, bring back rocks, find life—*yes all of this*—with just a few million dollars, a colourful collection of telephone wires, duct tape and some thermal bottles? What were they thinking? Do they honestly believe we can make a spacecraft that flies on cow shit and neutrino bubble-gum?' Matthew had fumed to the lady who'd taken his hand to pull him away from the event space.
'So, what do you have to say about all this?'
'I think we should find you a nice quiet place for you to catch your breath in' Elíse had constructively recommended.
'Well I say we should have some more drinks, just the two of us, and forget all about these shmucks' Mat had sputtered, wiping the sweat from his brow. He'd begun to notice she was holding him by his arm, making him wonder if he wasn't able to stand by himself anymore. He later half

remembered the situation being awkward. To his credit though, a single well timed moment of lucidity had convinced him that he'd had enough to drink. Ironically the fact that he hadn't been able to quite focus on her presence had done the trick together with the calming sound of her voice.
'Are you finished Mister Magellan?' she had asked, restraining a rather inappropriate bubbly attitude.
'Perhaps for today, but they haven't seen the last of Magellan! Soon I'll have my own space organisation, Magellan Space Travel—mark my words.'
'I look forward to the day MST launches, Mister Magellan.'
'Mathew, my name is Mathew, and for now I'm done. Maybe forever' he added and sighed of weariness.
'I think I got you out of there before any irreparable damage was done.'
'That's awfully kind of you, so what's your name if you don't mind me asking?'
'Elíse' she said supressing a chuckle, while amusedly reciprocating his formally offered handshake. Afterwards she had reiterated on several occasions that was when he had unapologetically winked at her, but Mathew had always found that a little hard to believe, dismissing it as exaggeration artefact to embolden a relationship origin story.
'Don't worry, it's all just an act. I'm not really this drunk' Mathew had whispered to her like a confidante, reaping a slow reassuring nod and an eventual bright smile that anchored itself to becoming the most memorable part of his evening.

The morning after, Mathew remembered being dropped off at his home by her, and to his surprise he'd slept like a log through the night despite being fully clothed. He noticed both the presence of a severe headache and the splintered recollection of various statements he might have let loose at the conference—but most of all he remembered her. He decided to first make a call to enquire whether he was still employed, which to his mild surprise was confirmed albeit over the course of a playful rebuke. On the office floor he was amicably ridiculed for acting as a mad scientist and the misunderstood professor for a few days, but once the novelty passed of making fun of him that was the end of it, no further consequences. Of course, he also figured out who brought him home that fateful evening. Fortuitously he still remembered her pretty name, therefore finding the department she worked in was easy-peasy once he sobered up after an extra day. After looking it up he discovered actually getting to the relevant building meant simply walking over was out of the question. Deciding he should really pay her a visit to offer his gratitude personally rather than over the phone, he took half a day off from work and drove to the listed address. The receptionist stationed there refused to grant clearance to enter the premises despite his proper credentials, but did announce his arrival with Miss Childs. And so after a few long minutes he got the opportunity to admire her from a shrinking distance when she walked over to the reception

area through the long glass and steel corridor beyond the carousel of security gates. She halted fairly close to him, visibly looking him over and evidently suppressing a giggly laugh. She spoke with a playful yet formal tone of voice.
‘Hello Mathew, it’s good to see you again. Shall we shake hands as we did before?’
‘Hello Elíse, likewise. So, well look, I just came over to thank you for your kind—intervention and care the other day.’
‘Hmm, you’re very welcome. How are you feeling? You look—terrible, handsome too mind, in a shabby sort of way, but mostly really awful. I think an extra day of recuperation might have done you some good.’
Mathew felt more than slightly embarrassed. ‘Well someone had to have the courage to be honest, and that particular brand of courage requires a great deal of alcohol.’
‘I know, and you were absolutely right, but I have a funny feeling acting like an Oracle isn’t going to change all that much. What was it you suggested we should do with the traitors again?’
He sighed at being mocked, held up his hands in a surrendering manner and spoke earnestly. ‘Hang them all, not the humanitarian approach, but effective nonetheless.’
‘That usually goes over well with the board doesn’t it?’
‘I actually came to apologise for my behaviour and now I’m at it again, you must have a bad influence on me’ he confessed, feigning an innocent look.
‘Apology accepted Mathew. Now, would you like to have a coffee with me? I think you could use it.’
Noticing the spark between them Mathew felt resolute to go with the flow of her direction. Chatting up women was probably his weakest talent, as attempting it usually led to the opposite of what he wanted.
‘I’d love to have a coffee; and thank you for noticing my shabby handsomeness underneath this temporary façade of dilapidation.’
‘Maybe I was being sarcastic?’ she said while handing him a cup with a double espresso beckoning for his attention.
‘I would expect nothing less’ he countered with a smug grin itching to reveal itself. They talked about the evening they met, about her role at NASA, and about many other topics that evaded what was on their mind. Mathew was thinking how pretty Elíse was, elegantly beautiful, with a childlike optimism coursing through the way she talked and presented her stature. She was obviously witty and smart too; a romantically lethal combination for his heart. Her long glimmering dark blond hair cascaded over her cheeks, and while her facial features were sharp, her nose was adorably cute, giving her a sort of misplaced air of innocence. The effect was seeping into his soul like a prancing predator, mesmerising him, putting him under her spell. He hadn’t noticed how enchanted he’d become by the way she looked at him with those big brown eyes, until he heard her snap at him.

‘What, oh yes I’m here’ he quickly said, trying to recall what she’d just asked.
‘You didn’t hear me did you, blinded and dumbfounded as you are by my radiance, which incidentally you completely failed to discern that night.’
‘You’re very beautiful. I got distracted, sorry’ he blurted out and fortunately she just laughed.
‘Don’t worry I’m not a diva. I asked whether you’d like to have dinner with me sometime soon.’
‘Absolutely I would. Today, I mean tonight. Would that work for you?’
‘Not a lot of time for you to freshen up, but sure tonight it is then’ Elíse jested.
‘Great, do you have a preference which restaurant?’
‘My place, and not to worry, I can cook something other than space rations.’
Mathew reeled at the thought. He had actually tried warming them up once and the effect had been disappointing. Elíse noticed his little flashback and shook her head.
‘You didn’t.’
‘What? Space rations? Well…’
‘You poor man, you must have been starving in your private kingdom far, far away from all the grocery stores and take-outs’ Elíse playfully noted.
‘I needed to try it, if only just once.’
‘Was it a particularly rainy day?’
‘It was, one that did not invite my going out.’
‘I’m sure it was a thrilling experience that I can nonetheless surpass’ Elíse concluded and fetched a piece of paper from the reception desk.
‘Here’s my address, I live five floors above Atreidis.’
‘The “Dune” inspired Greek restaurant near the post office?’
‘I don’t think this town has two such places, but yes that one. Shall we meet at around seven at my place?’
‘Perfect, I’ll be there.’
Elíse got up, looking breathtakingly smart in her professional attire outfit, and Mathew couldn’t help but wonder what she would look like in a dress.
‘Here’s my cell phone number too, in case something comes up. Gotta run now, big meeting.’
Mathew was promising to himself that he wouldn’t allow anything to come up on his side, but offered her his number too just in case she was held up. After the exchange numbers, she gently squeezed him in his upper arm. It made him shiver a bit, in a good electric way.
‘See you tonight Mathew’ Elíse said, and walked on by, leaving him in a state of positive agitation. He lingered for a few minutes more just to slow down his pulse, his nerves attempting to take over control like a puppeteer pulling the strings.
In hindsight there was nothing to worry about, as the date had gone splendidly, and many more followed in quick succession. They usually discussed current affairs concerning medical and scientific breakthroughs,

some of his wild ideas on deep space exploration that entered the realm of science fiction, their shared love for music. Food, or “cuisine” as she poshly called it, was often the talk of the evening and she proved to be an excellent chef. They prepared dinner in turns and tried to surprise each other every day with something new and in case there was a lack of inspiration or motivation, they went out to one of the many New York restaurants to have a flamboyantly long evening. She shared his desire to visit places beyond the beaten paths, although she didn’t believe reaching for the stars was realistic. Some destinations were not to be, in their lifetime anyway, even a visit to Mars. More often than not she surprised him with clever ideas for stories and fantastic descriptions of random fictional events. Settings that were highly imaginative and so bizarre it often felt like she was recalling actual events rather than making them up as she went. To satisfy their need for change they travelled around the world, in a bid to explore the attainable outskirts and a selection of choice destinations strewn across their home planet. She turned out to be his other half concerning music as well, displaying knowledge in opera, classical music and Jazz in particular. ‘These are the most vitally timeless genres to get acquainted with’ Elíse declared often, and so he found himself listening. She in turn was “encouraged” to appreciate all kinds of Rock music and the whole Pop seventies shebang that his dream record store would be stocked with. Soon they were taking each other to concerts within their field of expertise, alternating the scenes that came with it. One evening they could be attending chic dinner parties followed by opera or symphony orchestra performances, usually taking place in magnificent historical buildings. Other times those stately environments were replaced by diverse crowds in a shabby tent, a sports arena or local small scale venues. Sometimes the music was turned up so loud that bright yellow earplugs were not just a luxury anymore. All in all, Mathew knew he had found the ideal partner, and despite all the setbacks throughout his life, things were looking up, and happiness was rapidly becoming something he took reassuringly for granted. Just under four years into their relationship they got engaged and married in the span of only three months. They easily agreed against having kids to refrain from limiting their freedom, which while perhaps not a definitive decision, turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the children that might have been. When they were spending a vacation in Paris, Elíse exhibited what appeared a mild stroke at breakfast. The shock was killing. He remembered feeling as if he was falling through the ground beneath him, as if standing on shattered glass. She was quickly taken to a hospital where the doctors found evidence of a transient ischemic attack having occurred and urged her to see a medical specialist back home for a more thorough examination. Once back, Doctor Lector, their regular physician, quickly recommended an examination in a nearby hospital, and before long they were back in his office to hear the test results. Mathew was of the opinion Lector spoke the verdict like an impartial judge, free from empathy and

social involvement. It wasn't true, but the news distorted the discourse. Elíse suffered from a malignant brain tumour that would soon affect her vital functions. There was nothing to be done; just like that, her life expectancy had shrivelled to about six months. Mathew had become outraged, ferociously interrogating the doctor on the subject of why nothing could be done and why this wretched disease was still not crushed despite all the advances made in health care. He openly wondered how long humans were to succumb to corporeal failures of this kind, but before Lector could calm him down he started to shout again.

'You doctors are supposed to be so damn smart, but in fact all you do is consult a memorised list of ailments and check which pill might do the job of treating the symptoms, and if nothing will then tough luck. You're nothing more than a living encyclopaedia waiting to prescribe sponsored medication' he had cried out at Lector. This didn't change anything of course, it only further upset Elíse, and so he'd shut up. On the way back Mathew couldn't stop thinking about these weird circumstantial events that dictated his life and the people in it. He quietly walked at Elíse's side—his arm around her, and his face a mask of calm—but on the inside his mind was ruled by confused storm of pointless random accusations. Known amongst his friends as a self-convinced atheist, he had to admit facing this luckless destiny was becoming harder to swallow with every second. Just a few years prior Mathew had still been confident one's own actions constituted the only determining factor in that respect. Now, he reluctantly wondered if some divinity was at play to claim responsibility. Some sadistic almighty factor that would explain away in one stroke all the death, poverty, disease, famine and pain festering over the world. Mathew found some peace of mind in putting the blame beyond bad luck. It simply wasn't very therapeutic pointing the finger at the indifferent chance cubes of existence. If there was such concept of a higher power, it most almost certainly manifested as infinite rolling dice. They had left the doctor's office and gone home, both quitting their jobs the day after, and for the six months that had followed they did everything together they could think of. Preparing to say goodbye to each other had been an experience both terrible and beautiful, as those last moments they shared had been intense and unforgettable. Burned into his memory, as if etched into his brain, the love of his life became part of him forever. Once thunderstruck by her energetic presence, her visible passing felt like a life of colour was draining from him to be replaced by an ashen grey mockery of erstwhile splendour. She mercifully withered away to a dysfunctional shell in seven gruelling days, and then suddenly it was all over; she had died peacefully in her sleep with him beside her—a macabre situation but strangely consoling as well.

Soon after enduring those traumatic events, Mathew started his record store business as a partial distraction from the pain and sorrow, but everything he did and everywhere he went reminded him of her. There was no place to be safe from his thoughts and emotions, and so before long he

was standing once again on top of a roof; this time of his own home. In the dark he had felt the pouring cold rain soaking him as turbulent thoughts raged through his mind.

I've been here before, and I never push through. Is that the marque of a coward, or is there something worth living for? Whatever I find, whoever I meet, they get taken away from me, all of them do. Like Roy Batty's, my memories are but stolen moments that pass in the blink of an eye. Forgotten, and lost, like tears in rain.

While such pondering meandered in and out of dreadful consciousness, Mathew was discovered by a suspicious security guard. The cunning fellow managed to talk him into stepping down by casually stating there was a safety net just beyond view that would render his attempt futile. If that guard hadn't lied to him that night Mathew would have jumped, of that he felt certain to this day. Still, he never tried again, opting instead to discover a more elegant exit. One that wouldn't cause any collateral damage to people caught in the crossfire of such a public action. Mathew began scouring the net for options, and swiftly found a suitable candidate, although he wasn't sure—yet. Doubt had once again infiltrated his former decisiveness, but it wouldn't take much to push him over the edge; a proverbial one this time.

While her passing happened almost three years ago the memories still haunted him as if it had been yesterday, the mental wounds feeling fresh and painful. As they often did when not preoccupied, shards of their incoherent recollection seeped in and out of cognisance. Mathew paced towards his GP, attempting to suppress the surfacing associations. Let's see what his verdict is this time, he thought all the while passing what sometimes came across to him as floods of people. The swarm acted as an anonymous collective of individuals, always on their merry way to and from their many destinations. All of them simply walking around, minding their own business, totally oblivious of their limited time and the bigger picture most of the time. I should be so lucky to just be able to hang around like them, he thought as a preoccupied young couple passed him. Busy streets made him feel good in general though, because it caused this sense of anonymity. Alone in a crowd, he considered and smiled, shaking his head due to the irony of the sentiment that this was actually of comfort.

'Well? Mathew asked, hands in the air in surrender.
'It's not good news.'
'Just skip to the verdict doctor, or should I go down on my knees, kneel before the judge?' Mathew said. Sarcasm was something he had long since noticed Americans didn't often appreciate. In turn, he didn't appreciate doctors, so the reciprocating opportunity was a golden one.

‘Really Mister Magellan’ Lector said, ‘please skip the theatrics and try to behave like a man. It’s not my fault people get ill, and in this case there’s nothing to blame with your own responsibility’ Lector pushed back, obviously annoyed with the often rude patient he knew all too well by now.
‘Fine, then tell me. How bad is it doc?’ Mathew asked, a little more subdued now. ‘Just spill the beans, like you always do. Come on; out with it.’
Lector removed his glasses and waited for Mathew to stop talking, and then finally he began to speak, but very softly as if bracing for a landing.
‘Mathew, I’m afraid you have a very bad case of lung cancer, which is not—’
‘Curable!’ Mathew shouted, giving the good doctor one hell of a start.
‘I’m so sorry, first your wife Elíse, and now, well…’ Lector started, but was at a momentary loss on how to continue.
‘And now what—I yell Bingo?’
‘It’s the smoking you see, which could have—’
‘Spare me the lectures at this stage and just give it to me straight: how long have I got?’ Mathew asked resolutely. Lector opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again to more carefully consider his words first. The hopeless shrug that followed showed he had evidently decided the news was bad regardless of the phrasing.
‘It’s difficult to say exactly Mathew, but I would say you have few months at least, and eight at most. We can prolong your life with chemo and irradiative treatments, but—’
‘No fucking way!’ Mathew suddenly exclaimed veering up from his seat before letting out a bellowing cry of uncontrollable frustration that left Doctor Lector with eyes open wide. Still heaving from the effort Mathew looked into those startled eyes and took a deep breath.
‘You can take your treatments and send them back to hell for all the good it did her’ he hissed, ‘as for me—I’m done.’
‘Look Mister Magellan, I understand you’re upset, but you have to see the position I am—’
‘You bet I’m upset!’ Mathew interrupted ‘That’s a handsome euphemism you have there, but if you’ll excuse me now I’m going to live some more life. You be sure to have a good morning now’ Mathew sneered. He got up then and opened the door.
‘And in case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night!’ Mathew added sarcastically, and after waving curtly he left the poor doctor with a befuddled look on his face.
‘Don’t you worry I’ll be sure to settle the bill before I fuck off and die’ Mathew shouted through the door he had just slammed shut. Out on the streets again Mathew took a deep breath only to shout "Fuck" at the top of his aching lungs. Despite the alarming yelp hardly any of the passers-by took note, give or take a few raised eyebrows and the odd glance. The only exception being an elderly lady going by the name of Misses Bartley who—while peacefully making her way back home from the nearest 7-Eleven—had been quite startled by the sudden exclamation.

Furiously pacing back to the record store Mathew thought about all the things that he would have to set into motion. So many things had to be taken care of. The doomsday scenario that was his life was coming to an end soon, and that was all the reason he needed to proceed with his plans. The first thing he had to do now was make a list of all the things that needed his attention and the first thing on that list would be to contact the company, or agency, or whatever it was, that he had found on AltaVista; the miracle works that called itself “CryoCare”. He called CryoCare on his cell phone on the way back to the store and explained his wishes, stating he was prepared to pay extra if it opened the door to bypass the conventional procedure. The rep hesitated first, but the suggestion that the company might learn a lot from dealing with a live subject convinced him to forward the call to a certain Jasmine; the woman in charge. As expected she followed up by asking if he objected to undergoing partially experimental protocols, to which he replied no. Then she asked how much time he would require to finish his business and attend to any loose ends. Three weeks seemed plenty to him, and so all the arrangements would be made by then. They would send him a confirmation by sealed mail, along with a preliminary confidential contract, additional and highly specific information that wasn’t revealed on the company website, and finally a member’s access card for the main facility and grounds. It had taken only a twenty five minute phone call to act upon on his plans for the future. The situation felt unreal, reeling, shaking him to the core despite steely determination.
Mathew stepped into the store about an hour after abandoning Doctor Lector and just over thirty minutes after hanging up on doctor Freeze, now donning the crafty facsimile of a good mood; yes, the great pretender was back for a last hurrah. He didn’t want to bother Seth with all of his problems, as the boy surely had nothing to gain from that baggage, but Mathew wasn’t prepared for the high spirits he encountered.
‘Hey Mat, you’re back soon! Tests all good, like you expected?' Seth inquired while also taking care to proudly present the tidied store.
‘Eh—yes, well, just a minor issue, nothing serious. Say, you did a great job, spick and span; made any sales?’ Matthew asked to change the subject. He was maintaining a finely tuned balance, but he was certain that people asking questions about Madonna’s greatest hits would set him off.
‘Business has been very good actually’ Seth declared.
‘Go on.’
‘I sold some of the new Sympho Rock albums you told me to play and put on display in the store. More people are getting into this niche stuff you want to promote. The promo CDs you burned are flying out as well, and not just because they’re free. I had three customers returning to get a full album based on one or more of the listed samples.’
‘Excellent news, so what’s your prognosis?’

‘I reckon pretty soon we’ll have people lining up at the entrance just to go searching for treasure; to dig up some hidden gems. Folks seem to really appreciate the style and setting of the store, not to mention the vast assortment. I’ve had two people come to the counter in your absence to offer compliments on that.’
Seth went on and on with this for some time, until eventually Mathew impatiently stopped him with a friendly open palm to the face.
‘Seth, I’ve been away for less than three hours and already you have displayed your competence to run this store. Will you accept complete control for the duration of at least three weeks starting now?’ Mathew firmly posited. Seth gave him a particularly puzzled look and subsequently excelled in fumbling with the thoughts he wanted to express in words, ‘What’s going on Mat; are you leaving? I mean, where are you going? It’s just for three weeks, right?’ Are you taking time off, like a vacation, or to scout for new music?’ Seth asked, his state rapidly becoming more agitated.
Mathew thought for a moment and decided on a no questions asked idea.
‘I’ve actually been strongly requested to consult the R&D group of a former employer.’
Mathew knew exactly what Seth was going to ask now, him being an exceptionally curious bloke and waved away his inquiring index finger.
‘I’m sorry, but it’s a highly classified matter. I’m not at the liberty to talk about the nature of the assignment in any way.’
Seth stayed silent and looked unconvinced for a moment, but then just grinned at the thought of being in full command if only, as he imagined was the case, for a limited time. It would in fact be indefinite, but that news would have to wait until he had his affairs sorted.
‘Take good care of the empire will you?’
‘Of course, you can count on me.’
‘About that, there is no doubt in mind. In any case, you’re the boss now, so order anything you like, well as long as it doesn’t cause the joint to go broke, or tank its carefully crafted reputation, or both’ Mathew said, furrowing his brow.
‘Cool—you had me at *anything*, after which I also completely stopped listening’ Seth shrewdly said before restoring to a head bobbing smile of total satisfaction. Mathew smiled a little and patted Seth’s shoulder. This would all turn out fine, and seeing that Seth didn’t have any questions Mathew decided to leave right away to take care of everything still to do.
After firmly shaking Seth’s hands, and promising he could call him anything to ask for help, Mathew looked around the place one last time before never coming back. His gaze passed the personalised interior, impressive stacks of music, and settled on Mister Seth van Halen, who was already busy as a bee again, and as happy as a bear that gets to eat their honey.
‘If it all becomes too much to handle, please hire a good assistant now will you Seth?’ Mathew mentioned, and raised his hand in a simple gesture of unspoken farewell.

‘Yes, sure, I can buy anything or hire anybody right? Nah, I’m not sharing the fun. Cheers Mat, I’ll see you soon, and good luck’ Seth answered. He awkwardly shifted a stack of large posters to under one arm, which unrolled quite suddenly, in an attempt to freely wave back. Mathew made his way to the sunlit exit, and nodded at all that he saw before stepping outside. The last memory made then consisted of Seth standing with both hands resting on his sides to contemplate the glossy paper wreckage he’d caused.
Confident that HI Five was dealt with, its operational workings kept in motion regardless of how improvised the situation felt, Mathew crossed out the store on the list. Once home again Mathew decided to call upon his good friend Pete, who usually exhibited a calming influence on him. But a moment’s indecision caught him off guard, letting loose a hoard of rushing thoughts and emotion. Overcome by the sudden despair Mathew crumbled up on the edge of his sofa, all senses flooded by overstimulation.
‘For fuck’s sake, think about something else’ he furiously urged himself, banging his fists against his skull in anguish.

Last chance to make a difference. I do nothing.

Utterly defeated, knocked down to the very marrow of my bones, I resign to look out into the bruising night. The dying sun over the city casts a bleak gloom through the ashes. The remnant light drifts away slowly, like one giant luminous cloud that hangs over us. The lights of recovering civilisation begin to awaken below, the glimmers spreading across the cityscape. Stray luminescence repeats as shallow reflections, each pinprick glowing weakly on the tired lenses of my eyes. It was as if each source represented an untold story of individuated life, of those gone unnoticed, those kept anonymous—unimportant. I saw a man earlier, a wandering drifter, a vagrant lost on the unforgiving streets. Like me, he also stared blindly into the abyss, albeit for other reasons. For a moment, our foundations were swept away, and we became equal. It didn't last—we both just carried on, shrugging off the momentary connection. But there was something there, a nubbin of wisdom, eager to be released, no further ambition in lieu of a plan. Without a design for life, seeing is without true vision, and nobody can move forward without vision. The drifter had stopped moving long ago, his sight dimmed past the point of revitalisation. I paid him tribute with lingering attention, and in gratitude his wrinkled mouth moved. His words harboured a strange sadness that played out like a mournful song.

The future taught me to be alone.

That's what he said, believe it or not. Back then, I wondered what it meant. After all that's happened I no longer have to wonder. Belatedly, I finally respond without thinking, but with disturbing conviction.

The present teaches me to be afraid, and cold.

I mutter the answer into the chilling emptiness before me, as I look back upon myself in judgement. This is what I see, and this is what I hear.

You have always been alone, Mathew. By yourself from the beginning, one among the many passengers hoping to make the crossing without being torn apart. Lost on the way to transition, the others like you connect only briefly, sometimes bumping shoulders in the dark. But they all leave eventually, and without exception. That too is your only prospect, because you never did believe in more than the mortal coil.

Destined neither for afterlife, nor greatness, I look down at my smouldering Davidoff cigarette, contemplating the heavy necessity of the next drag. The reluctance of the ages creeps into my mind, repeating obsolete wisdom to an empty room. I stopped listening to make sense of my choices. With my

future life only a step away from certainty, I realise it makes no difference anyway, not anymore. Maybe nothing did, or ever will—who knows. Feeling spent and depleted, I drop the smouldering cigarette to the streets far below. The updraft catches it, plays around with the flimsy thing. Leaps of faith are notoriously unpredictable, even for tobacco. It's a stupid thought that makes me cautiously smile, until it doesn't and things get serious. Not far the last time, I prepare to take my last human breath.

2 – Chapter
This is the end
My only friend, the end

Pete Ashcroft, or Mister Pink as he would call him at least once on any occasion they met to mildly annoy him, was one of Mathew's oldest friends. They knew each other exceptionally well, being alike in a multitude of ways, and despite mostly meeting each other accidentally while minding their own business in the city. Of course, this time Mathew had decided to actually phone him to meet up, and fortunately he obliged without hesitation. Mathew stepped onto the side walk, with rain pouring down as if there was no tomorrow, and hailed a cab to take him to the crossing between 46th and 9th.

He asked the cabdriver to take an extra-long detour through the busiest areas of the city. While the fellow looked at him as if he'd just turned into a yellow and purple zebra, Mathew absorbed the rough storm outside. The requested slight detour passed two landmarks that held much nostalgic value for Mathew. First was Bryant Park, with many conglomerated memories of him generating, often much needed, headspace by simply watching birds and enjoying a Starbucks espresso. Then they passed the Milford Plaza, a cheap and somewhat dreary hotel Mathew stayed a few weeks when he first visited NYC before his fortune truly hit home. The cab ride to the meeting point was mesmerising. Large rain drops landed with forceful impact, outside the cold gushes of wind made passers shrink into their coats like frightened turtles. The monotonous movement and swooshing sound of the wipers hypnotised him. It was the bad side of early autumn; a two faced season of romance on clear days, with dry aromatic air and colouring leaves, and miserable depression lurking at times like these; windy, wet and chilling. It was a good season to enter the world, and a good one to depart it as well, but mostly it was a good season to enjoy warming Belgian beers and foods.

As he sat in the back vis-à-vis the people wandering around the streets, the rain clattered against the windows. Wind caused the cab to wobble a bit every now and then and the windshield wipers were having a day job in keeping the rain away. Mathew saw a little girl running on the sidewalk, keeping her head under a book. Others were trying to keep the water away with newspapers and flipped umbrellas. Mathew sighed and enjoyed the

outside world as the protected spectator. Mathew knew the chaos that reigned in the open air would be visible through the thick and moody pub windows. The sight would form the perfect conditions for a good conversation while sitting next to a cosy fireplace, with a pleasantly familiar moustached barman bringing you oodles of glasses, filled with exquisitely sweet special beers. After about half an hour of sloshed cruising through the aquaplaning city streets and gazing soaked people, he casually stepped out of the yellow cab. The cabdriver had parked on the sidewalk no doubt in an effort to prevent his fare from getting wet. Little did he know that Mathew hardly cared, displaying the unhurried air of having all the time in the world as he gaudily tipped the cabbie a hundred bucks. This caused yet another wide eyed expression of astonishment on the man's face, but there was no complaint and he hurried off before the offer was rescinded.

He stood before the homely bar, and inhaled the crisp wet air, soaking up the atmosphere to imprint a fresh memory. The New York State of Mind, or "The State" for short, was a cosy and friendly place for the weary traveller. As Mathew pushed open the heavy door and entered he smelled the wooden furniture, consciously soaking it up with some degree of melancholy. The mere sight of mussels, big fries with mayonnaise, and the immense variety of micro brewed special beers on tap already warmed his heart and soul, melting away the onset of sadness. It was a place of comfort, to meet old friends, to parley or simply talk about anything that came to mind. In any case the bar in question was familiar to both, making for a nicely laid back scene. When he pushed open the big heavy wooden door, an inviting gust of warm air blew in his face. Stepping inside the dark brown pub he noticed Pete was there already as expected; the regular early bird. Pete was a skinny guy, with short blond hair and a kind of boyish face that made him reassuringly calming to men and attractive to woman, and certain other men. Overall, he was known to be fairly successful in his job. More often than not, he was neatly dressed in a suit and squeaky leather shoes, since the accountant firm he worked for needed him to look the part, at least as far as his insurance business was concerned. So normally looking like a yuppie to most, he had now decided to wear casual, though arguably still smart looking clothes. Pete regarded his glass of beer with a bored expression and looked up when he heard the door opening, only to cheer up considerably when he saw it was Mathew who so smoothly made his entrance. Mathew ordered two sweet dark ones and proceeded towards the table, after which he sat down with a thump as if to say, right, that's the last I'll be walking today, as of now, people will gladly bring me enjoyable objects and those objects shall be beer and smokes. Pete regarded him gravely and likewise declared: 'Bond, we have much to discuss. I hear the Russians have a new flying Barbie doll imitation that can carry nuclear warheads and can bypass the SDI system.'
Mathew frowned severely when the information struck him.

‘Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is destroy the doll factory, kiss and make love to the first beautiful doll entering cone of vision and come home with the plans. Oh and have a cigar to go, old boy.’
‘Gladly’ Mathew said taking the imaginary cigar, ‘but you can kiss that mission of yours goodbye—turns out Hunt’s already bedded them all I’m afraid.’
‘A crying shame that. You look good Mat. Have you met someone new, or did you quit smoking?’ Pete asked sarcastically. Mathew gave him an ironic smile while taking out a cigarette from a fresh new packet
‘Not exactly, but I do have a project running I’m pretty confident will succeed. Want one?’ Mathew asked, extending the filter for Pete to pull at.
‘Thanks, but a project you say?’ Pete noted while rubbing his hands in anticipation. ‘Tell me all about her.’
Mathew shook his head lighting up. ‘It’s not like that’ he said, holding the match at the tip of Pete’s cigarette. Sitting back after taking a whiff he looked somewhat disappointed.
‘What is it then, are you opening a hamburger place, a nice diner perhaps, or a chain store for boomerangs and other useful camping appliances?’
‘I fear it is nothing of the sort Mister Pink’ Mathew declared solemnly.
‘Why in the name of steaming crap am I always the one called Mister Pink?’ Pete exclaimed profoundly.
‘Come now, it’s a perfectly acceptable name and you secretly like it.’
‘You imaginatively named yourself Mister Black, why can’t I be Mister Gold?’
‘It’s simply impossible, just roll with it—besides that’s not why I asked to meet on short notice’ Mathew said, eager to get on with the unveiling of his plan. ‘Alright Mister Black, let’s hear it’ Pete said wearily. Mathew confidently smiled as he pressed his palms together to create a dramatic effect.
‘Well Mister Pink, when I was sitting on the toilet—no don’t laugh, hear me out—when I was sitting there ruminating as I do, a most luminous and cunning plan emerged to strike me as if it were a bolt of lightning.’
‘I see and the fact that your record concerning the birthing of practically applicable plans isn’t exactly magnificent doesn’t even remotely dampen your spirits?’ Pete asked calmly, with a suppressed smirk on his face.
‘No, it doesn’t—would you like to hear what it is?’
‘Well okay, I suppose it can’t hurt, just as long as you don’t expect my enthusiasm to hit the ceiling afterwards. I can still vividly remember the day you wanted me to aid you in the creation of a novel defence perimeter that involved “using nature’s ability to cloak”—remember how that worked out?’
‘That was quite some time ago’ Mathew riposted.
‘Yeah, but I still have the scars to prove it. Trees are higher than they look as seen from the comfortable ground you cleverly resided on then.’
‘Well yes, I’ll grant you that. In any case, this plan doesn’t involve you playing quite such a dangerous part. This time, I’m going to have myself frozen solid.’

Pete waited patiently for the rest to come, punchline or otherwise.
'In order to wake up in the future, where everything is either better or completely and utterly wiped out, which is to say, blown to smithereens, or gone with the wind, to put it a little friendlier. I have all the necessary plans ready and I need you to take care of some things as soon as I'm gone' he posed convincingly. Pete stared at him for a moment while his mouth started to fall open in amazement. Then he burst out in somewhat shamelessly and definitely unadulterated laughter, which took some time to finish. Finally Pete got a grip and started to wipe away some tears with his sleeve.
'Oh boy, you almost got me there—your poker face is amazing' Pete said with a big grin on his face, still giggling.
'It's actually true' Mathew pointed out firmly. Observing Mathew's consistently serious expression, Pete finally narrowed his eyes and leaned forward over the table. 'You're not kidding?'
'I'm afraid not Pete, so allow me to explain' Mathew sighed, and so he tried to share some insights about what occurred during the weeks leading up to this moment, while touching upon the worst of times he experienced in the past five years. Over the course of the next hour Pete was confronted with motivations, reasons and considerations, while the subsequent hours were dedicated to having fierce discussions about the folly of putting his fate in the hands of some possibly fraudulent organisation. Mathew's lung cancer was the obvious aspect that made the decision final, seeing that he had just a limited time to live and nothing to lose. He explained to Pete he did not intend to extend his life by a few meagre months by enduring countless radiation treatments. The prospect of having to spend the last few days in a hospital bed with a breathing machine doing all the work for him appalled him. Pete was less convinced by Mathew's opinion he had lived a mostly hard luck life. Mathew had seen things and worked with people at a highly admirable and financially profitable level. Many people would have wanted to live Mat's life, with or without the tragedies he had gone through. On the other hand, the death of his parents, the death of his wife, his own death. What more reason would one need to take a gamble? Pete considered it as dangerous as Russian roulette, but Mathew's motivations had been meticulously spelled out for him; he was now becoming convinced this was not such an "out of the blue" option.
'Look Mat' Pete said while rubbing his nose; he'd become a bit edgy throughout the conversation, 'I understand your reasons now, but what does the world situation have to do with it? Money and religion have always been the decision makers and people have been fighting each other since the beginning of time—in most cases for no apparent reason' Pete said and scratched his neck while thinking about what to say next.
'I mean honestly, the religions are just a tool to move people in a desired direction effectively, without much labour intensive indoctrination. You can't expect everybody in the normal civilised world to be involved in all

those conflicts. People do consciously decide to harm each other, and they can be held individually accountable for their actions. Burning the US flag, condemning the Western world as the sworn adversary. They think we're to blame for everything for Pete's sake. How can you talk with people that are convinced from the age of five that we are the supreme enemy that is to blame for all the injustice people are suffering in their "asshole of the world" countries? That's programming no one can be talked out of, and what's even worse is that it's a self-perpetuating cycle. Such views will always be passed on to the next generation; it forms a truly never ending vicious circle. The only thing that can end it would be a totally fresh start, a clean slate for all of us. In all honesty, I hate consciously thinking about this, because it's so evident that no person on Earth will ever be 100% sincere in his actions and beliefs. There's just nothing we can do about the situations considering the way people behave and can be influenced so much by circumstances like events and other people. In fact, what it comes down to, is that human beings are scum and can be fairly effectively directed towards a positive or a negative course, but the starting position of inequality is the real flaw in that respect. People will misbehave if given ample reasons and opportunities to enrich their existence. But that shouldn't be a reason to do what you're up to. This is criticising human life.'
Pete folded his arms and ogled his empty glass with a troubled look.
'Right, we have to do something about that…the beer I mean' Mathew said, turning round and ordering two more obscure triple beers. The barman nodded and started to search in one of the fridges.
'Actually, bartender belay those triples, we'll have the heaviest dark ones on offer. I am in desperate need of a real drink' Pete moaned and tapped his beer mat on the wooden table. They received two highly alcoholic stouts with a smooth creamy coloured foam layer and a sweet rounded powerful flavour profile. It was quite rightly served in what could be called the "swimming pool of glasses", to ensure the utmost sensory expression.
Mathew sipped his fresh beer, wiped his mouth and nodded in appreciation.
'Where were we?'
'You were criticising human life.'
'Right; and why shouldn't I do so when everything is going so badly? Perhaps it will have changed when I wake up. It may take a long time, but who knows. But what you say is true to some extent. We behave according to circumstance, but you have to understand that while the average Western civilian might be more or less innocent concerning the poverty of the third world countries and the Eastern region, the governments of those countries make vast profits by sponsoring the countries on the edge with advanced weaponry. A spark and a good word from a charismatic person with power ambitions and all hell breaks loose. We are delivering the means for the hell to endure. It costs money to stop a started war for governments, but the weapon companies make profit. It costs even more money if a war is prevented all together, meaning that the government has no expenses, but

the weapon industry hasn't sold anything to fuel or stop a war and loses income, Mathew said hesitantly. Maybe if the environment is correct, things will change for the better, but even then I'm not so sure. Wealthy people commit crimes as well' Mathew said.
'War is and will always be business' Pete said bluntly, with eyes wide open: 'if everybody would just stop selling guns, this place would be a lot more predictable and safer. It's kind of ironic that protection devices can turn against the maker so easily' he stated.
Well Pete, the termination of weapon distribution is not going to happen anytime soon, so hopefully I won't wake up in ten years.'
'We could have a follow-up drink if that were the case.'
'I wouldn't survive revival, and I quite like the parallels to becoming a regular Han Solo—frozen solid in carbonite, but at least for a hundred years.'
Pete smiled in spite of everything. 'As I recall the freezing wasn't without risk for him. Are they just going to put you in a giant Freeze-O-Matic™ and close the door, hoping for the best? What's more, do they have any ideas on how to bring you back alive in in the distant future, amidst the realms of this highly organised civilised world you're expecting? You have to admit it all seems ridiculously idealised—rather like a scam' Pete said, pressing his lips together. Mathew knew when his friend was feeling uncomfortable and wished he could reassure him a little. As it was, he only carried a brochure on his person.
'A little idealisation goes a long way for me at the moment after everything that's happened, scam or not. I received some extra information today, most of which I had already found on other sites, but it sums everything up quite nicely. It seems I have to depend on either nanotechnology or stem cell medicine to prevent my cells from breaking because of excessive ice crystal formation between them.'
Pete tilted his head and squinted. 'Well, well, "nanotechnology"—I do believe that was mentioned in the X-files at some point. Counting on science fiction to save the day, are we?'
'Well, you're right it is still fiction now, but there is plenty of time for it to be developed into saviour machines. When Pete stayed deathly silent, Mathew thought it best to carry on explaining and lighten the mood.
'Care for another cigarette Pete?' Mathew beamed with the grin of an infomercial anchor.
'Gosh, don't mind if I do Mark, what a story' Pete replied with cynicism masquerading as optimism.
'I'll just tell you the story explained in this brochure I got in the mail' Mathew said, producing a glossy booklet from his briefcase to show to Pete. It was full of other official documents, the sight of which made Pete frown as reality started to catch up with him. A woman graced the cover of the booklet, cropped hair, fine features. Jasmine V. Perry CEO, it said below. Her name made Mathew think of a boxing match announcement. Pete didn't notice, but then he'd never been overly perceptive of such quirks.

CryoCare

Your second lease on life

Is your life irrevocably coming to a close, while drive and ambition remain fiery still?
Do you want to wake up in the world of tomorrow instead of ending in the soil of today?
CryoCare offers you the best chance to make your dream come true, and fulfil your destiny.

My name is Jasmine, founder of CryoCare, and I thank you for considering our unique service; the cryogenic preservation of your life. It is our firm belief that each soul—

'Actually, let me skip the marketing bullshit and pick up at the section where she gets into the meat of it' Mathew said impatiently.

The following information will briefly explain the procedures involved in the freezing and thawing of the body and all of its facets in quick and understandable steps. First of all the guest is put under anaesthesia to ensure nothing is noticed of the further procedures. After losing consciousness, the guest will be transferred from bed to cryo chamber in which the rest of the process will take place and the guest will remain until the time is ripe for awakening. At this moment, the guest's blood is removed from the body and replaced with an effective solution of glycerol to protect against freezing damage. Using advanced freezing techniques the guest's body is then cooled down moderately just above freezing temperature, minimising the formation of excessive amounts of ice crystals between body cells. After this phase is completed, the guest's body temperature will be further decreased under freezing temperature by adding liquid nitrogen to the chamber, in which the body will be left. The temperature is kept at a required minimum at all times during the further stay of the guest, to make degrading of the brain and body cells absolutely impossible. In the future when the guest is awakened by the new society, nanotechnology will be effective enough to repair the damage done by the freezing process. The guest will be excused from the stasis chamber and will live on to be a happy citizen of the new world in which medical problems will be of lesser importance—

'Yada, yada, and so on, and so forth—you get the idea. Sounds pretty nifty, don't you think?' Mathew proposed, somewhat unconvincingly. Subconsciously he was looking for some kind of approval, or perhaps simply encouragement regardless of having made up his mind. Pete said nothing for a moment as if agreeing with Mathew's standpoint of uncertainty. Finally he declared: 'It's dawning upon me that none of this is actually a prank.'

‘That’s because none of it is, Pete.’
‘Let me adjust to this paradigm shift here, and ask more earnestly. What’s this all about, and will it save you, the freezing—the nanotechnology?’
Mathew hesitated and sipped his beer, not showing signs of answering. Pete thought he wouldn’t get an answer to this question, but just as he was about to change the subject, Mathew gave the impression he wanted to say something.
‘As I understand it’ Mathew began, ‘nanotechnology involves the deployment of nanoscopic robots like modules. I’m not sure how they are going to realise this, but the potential is awe inspiring. They could be directed to certain areas of the body that need attention and can solve problems on the spot. The idea is that these robots are used as a man directed immune system, repairing broken tissue and even DNA when damaged beyond repair for the natural repair systems the human body has. The freezing causes substantial damage to cells, which is the reason that once thawed humans will die, unlike simpler one cell organisms such as bacteria, or even more complicated ones like flies or mosquitoes. This damage done should be reversible, if that task is left in the capable little hands of these machines.’
Mathew steepled his fingers while thinking for a moment, leaving Pete anxiously waiting for more. Then he continued: ‘There is some speculation that speaks of the most fantastic possibilities with these techniques, especially concerning medicine. Next to those applications, acceleration of computer technology to a new unimagined level is suggested and the fabrication of fibres and other chemically interesting compounds should be possible’ Mathew sighed, and glumly added: ‘but from what I have gathered so far there are no practical solutions as to how these robots should be made, let alone how to direct them to actually repair, or build anything in general.’
Pete appeared haunted by a thought he couldn’t grasp and Mathew was right in that assumption.
‘I’ve really seen this in a show at some point; I just can’t remember which one. No wait—I do, it was the Outer Limits’ he suddenly exclaimed, or was it Tales of the Unexpected—well whatever, they didn’t actually explain how the Nanoids could be controlled’ Pete admitted, slumping a little. He looked up and pressed his lips. ‘I guess you’re right though, they might solve that issue in the years to come.’
‘Let’s hope so’ Mathew agreed, ‘but if not, there’s always stem cell medicine to rely on, which I estimate will be viable fairly soon. Actual progress is being made in this area as we speak and it does more or less the same as these robots, albeit less directed. Stem cells are the basic cells that an embryo is made of and that will differentiate into specialised cells when provided with the right messages by neighbour cells or their own DNA. If someone would inject me with my own stem cells, that would carry my DNA of course, thereby nullifying rejection and if I should have some broken

tissue in my heart or lungs, the cells would evolve into the specialised cells that are needed to repair that specific damage. So far it's only been tested on rats with induced heart failure, and long fibrosis though' Mathew admitted.
'The prospects of repairing compromised vital organs sound promising from what I can tell' Pete remarked, but Mathew stayed oddly quiet.
'Are you having second thoughts, Mat?'
'No, absolutely not' Mathew hurriedly replied, shaking his head slightly while fetching a few of the other papers from his case.
'Have a gander at this' he added, handing over the little stack. Pete reached for it and started to scan the material. Before long he spoke up.
'These are…instructions for after you're gone' he concluded.
'Indeed they are, with you as the main executor. You know, I think we should continue this conversation at my place. Drink up and we'll head there.'

How do you like that Apple?

Pete was a little puzzled as to why Mathew wanted to leave their favourite venue all of a sudden, but rightly assumed Mathew had a change of heart about having this discussion in such a public place rather than the privacy of his home. The cab ride took place in silence save for the squeaking suspension and a soft residual pattering on the windshield. Yet while the rainfall might have subsided, the torrent in Pete's mind had only just begun. 'When it rains, it pours, doesn't it my friend?' Pete offered. Mathew pressed his lips together and nodded gently. It was true of course, part Murphy's Law, part healthy pessimism, but actually they didn't know the half of it yet. Twenty minutes later they arrived at Mathew's soothingly lofty downtown home. The apartment was a sumptuous penthouse on Manhattan 432 Park Avenue, and pretty much the highest private living space in this unique metropolis. With panoramic views comprising 360 degrees, the apartment provided exposure to Central Park and the full city skyline. The interior was a retro-modern art deco style, with large windows all around, but with enough firm wall space to create a warm sense of place rather than the sensation of a steel and glass birdcage. It was the only place he had ever really truly felt at home, combining the vast brooding potential of the omnipresent cityscape with a certain individual intimacy. Being there seemed to forge whole the perspectives of observing the metropolitan area as an entity in itself from within, and the individuals that made it come alive from without. It was a special place to be sure, and he would miss it greatly. Presently, Mathew and Pete were seated facing each other, the black of night broken by the illuminating skyline in the background.

'So how do you think this will go down in the future?' Pete asked, increasingly feeling the weight of the occasion sink in. Mathew poured himself a large glass of red wine—a remarkably able bodied Fantini Montepulciano—and sat down comfortably.
'Don't worry old friend, I've made arrangements so this won't impact you much beyond the odd emotional lucky scar. And you stand to gain pretty much all that I leave behind. Just look at this view—it makes almost all my troubles fade away' Mathew jested in an effort to reassure his increasingly overwhelmed friend. Pete shook his head, as if shaking off mental turbulence.
'I'm not worried, and that's not what I asked. What do you expect to happen?' Mathew absent-mindedly tapped his glass, realising the error of his ways.
'Look I'm sorry, I didn't mean to patronise or unduly make light of the situation. Here's the deal. It's hardly a gamble with my current life expectancy, and I rather expect to be repaired first, and perhaps cloned later. That is, in case future technology allows for copying and re-imprint

cognitive patterns through targeted growth somehow. The damage is relatively limited because of my age and the controlled timing, and I'm sure that both nanotechnology and stem cell treatment can patch me up given further development time. It remains to be seen if the cancer cells can be completely removed, the tumour is quite malignant and prevalent I'm told, and whether the cryo-vitrification lead to irreparable biochemical damage. But even if they just manage to save my mind I consider it very likely that a new body can be cloned for the salvaged and brain to be transplanted into' Mathew explained steadily and then paused to focus his attention on the wine. He tilted the large tulip shaped glass, brought it under his nose and gently but deeply inhaled the aroma's presented. Satisfied he sipped the wine and savoured the flavour.

'Even your expectations seem almost unreal' Pete muttered with a heavy sigh of defeat.

'Well, maybe it will all turn to be nothing more than a fantasy, but you'll agree I have nothing left to lose, and stand everything to gain, won't you?' Mathew proposed, the sarcasm oozing from the rhetorical question.

Pete quietly nodded. 'You said you made arrangements?'

'I did. I don't have any life insurance and it would have been a moot point anyway considering my special departure request, but money is not a factor. I have considerable funding in cash and assets, expressed as both real estate and stock. I leave no family behind, which mean you're the only beneficiary for all of it, as you know.'

'Jesus, you were serious about that?' Pete stammered, taken aback by the implications.

'I still am, yes. The systems CryoCare uses have their own autonomous power supply with protection that is, in their words, "war-proof" whatever that means. For all intents and purposes the facility was designed like an atom bomb shelter the size of a Bond villain facility, sans volcano base.'

'I don't believe it' Pete admitted, letting out a long puffing sigh.

'That is why you fail.'

'Okay I should've seen that one coming. So, what happens after you're gone, or frozen, or suspended? Damn it' Pete said, clutching his hair.

'Are you alright?'

'Well, it was a day Mat, even before all…this.'

'In know, try to relax' Mathew said, while removing himself from his comfortable seat with a groan to casually fetch a different bottle as if to combine alcohol's greatest all in one evening.

'Here, have some of this vintage Port to calm your nerves. It's a good year you know' he boasted with a smile and poured his shaky friend a glass of 1979 Kopke.

'Better for port wine than for corporeal health and personal luck anyway' he added offhandedly, and plunged back into his seat with a loud "thud".

'Thanks buddy, it's—absolutely fabulous' Pete said. He only took a little sip of the strong drink, feeling measured consumption would allow him to

better absorb crucial information as Mathew got steadily more intoxicated barring any restraint.
‘Quite. Anyway, as I said, capital is not an issue, but setting up its flow might be, seeing as I won’t be in a position to control it. In fact neither will you if enough time passes by. So during the transfer a trust fund will be activated which finances the entire operation indefinitely.’
‘So what does that mean exactly, indefinitely?’
‘Well, beyond the internal resources, there are apparently countless fail-safes to keep things running during even the direst paradigm shifts. The back-up power, for instance, is only needed in the event no staff remains alive to replenish the minute amount of liquid nitrogen that is lost inside the isolated corporeal storage canisters. The secondary systems also cater for life-support befitting the wakeful human presence, such as life sign monitoring, lights, food, and waste recycling systems and so on. In many ways it’s a self-supported colony design, even more self-sufficient than a space station with respect to its agricultural supplies.’
Pete furrowed his brow pensively.
‘Why do you even know all these details, is that normal?’
‘No, I persuaded them to disclose more than usual in exchange for additional funding. I have a stake in the company since my last visit’ Mathew said, folding his hands to show how pleased he was with himself.
‘I recognise you’ll be a clever man Mister Magellan, in any time period.’
‘Maybe, it remains to be seen how motivated the staff remains to run the joint after say a nuclear holocaust, but regardless of the prevailing sentiment the facility can operate and intervene on its own with increasing autonomy. Given the power supply, all systems could actually run for more than a millennium. That’s an impressive feat of engineering I should say. If humanity hasn’t figured out how to get its act together by then it’s more than likely wiped itself out from the face of the Earth anyhow.’
‘But if it works out the way you foresee, you’ll be like a Pharaoh travelling to the afterlife—a kind of future heaven.’
‘Yes, although not in a coffin, but in a canister of sorts, a vat—a vessel maybe. Actually, yeah I suppose it’s rather similar, so never mind; excellent analogy, the Return of Mathew the Pharaoh.’
‘I’ll write a novel about it.’
‘You should, there won’t be any pyramids mind you, but something equally well fortified I imagine, and far less conspicuous to the outside world.’
‘The story I envision would actually position your predicament closer to that of canned preserved food waiting to be reconstituted.’
‘I’m glad you’re regaining your sense of humour.’
‘Yeah, although truthfully it still sounds pretty grim. Can you take any items, you know like personal belongings, into the future?’
‘Canned food doesn’t have personal belongings, a Pharaoh however…’
‘Sure, go ahead and indulge me.’

‘Well the privileges allow for limited options, but I can store some small possessions. Perhaps if I choose wisely I can have them legitimately labelled “chronology artefacts” for a bit of grandiloquence.’
‘Like a clock?’
‘No, like period relevant items, not time pieces. I’ll be taking my wedding ring for instance, possibly to a time where no such concept as marriage exists any longer. Other than that, maybe I’ll take my mechanical watch. ’
‘I see, feeling a bit thick now?’
‘Only slightly, in any case, besides belongings of a personal nature S.O.P. also dictates storage of a medical library of sorts. They store pre-vitrification brain status and structure scans, DNA samples and freshly harvested stem cells for future reference and repair aid. But the idea is that my brain structure survives to a degree that personality and memories stay intact; that is to say like the original source material.’
‘Yeah but who knows, you might wake up as part of a Borg-esque collective hive-mind constructed from captured individuals, or maybe they’ll give you a red pill just before you go under so you wake up from the Matrix, or—‘
‘Yes, very funny. I’m glad you’re also here to offer fresh perspectives on what might be waiting for me on the other side.’
‘You’d be so screwed if it turns out to be actual Heaven!’ Pete smiled.
‘I am positive that would be a temporary illusion, and worse people probably allotted themselves a comfortable place in an afterlife. In my case, I might simply wake up into it. Of all people you know I’m sure you can imagine I’d recognise perfection and grab it with hands when it’s on offer.’
‘Yeah sure, but in the meantime you might be a Popsicle for centuries or more. The odds of successfully navigating time are slim, and even if the revival procedure is successful the future could be horrifying.’
‘It’s not that black of a mirror really, have a little faith Pete. And besides, what could be worse than certain death? It’s Utopia or bust for this demanding hitchhiker’ Mathew boasted confidently, pointing at himself.
‘Besides, if it’s just more terror and hardship, I can just ask to go back under to wait for the next station, or end it all for good then and there.’
‘Still, aliens might mistake you for pre-packed frozen candy and eat you up just like that before you have a chance to plead your case a sentient being.’
‘As much as that popsicle analogy sounds amusing, that’s not what’s going to happen. I won’t be frozen, but placed in cryogenic stasis through vitrification—or reefer sleep if you will.
‘You’ll be glassed?’
‘No, not glassed, and there’s no ice either involved either. As mentioned before the majority of the cells’ water is replaced with a kind of natural anti-freeze cocktail that prevents the formation of ice-crystal shards and by extension the associated puncture damage of organic matter. Every chemical process grinds down to a halt when it reaches the glass transition temperature, which is about minus 124°Celcius. The deep cooling beyond that threshold takes care of the preservation part, but the thawing, or

actually just warming the organic systems back up to working temperatures, is still in the infancy stage at this time.'
'You won't be legally dead then? I mean, it's not like they'll have to practise necromancy to re-awaken you from death?'
'Kind of, pretty much like stored human embryos I would be technically and formally alive, but have no legal rights, or actionable influence, that befalls you. Life as we know it can theoretically be slowed down to a crawl, with vital signs dropping to near zero, and then sped up again to standard operating pace. Being suspended is not the same as being dead, since during the process of dying the corporeal structure starts to degrade through entropic escalation. That in turn happens due to a lack of active energy input that would normally hold back the flood of natural decay and breakdown of organised systems. For this reason, the procedure request I filed is perhaps officially not completely illegal, but merely somewhat ambiguous in its nature. I didn't want the people at CryoCare to have to be haunted by uncertainty during their every waking moment about what their future might hold just because I wanted so very much to be filed away in pristine condition. If it would ever come to an audit and possible indictment the authorities would have the records showing I actually suffered real death in their care before they started the vitrification, which isn't accurate but close enough to the layman.'
'And it's difficult to pull off the defrosting step, the revival I mean.'
'Yes, it's not just difficult but a current impossibility; even though it seems easy enough given established precedents regarding different scales of size and complexity. The main challenge is that contrary to what applies to stored embryos, stem cells and sperm, the technology to revive full scale adult bodies without cascading destruction simply isn't there yet. So undergoing the procedure effectively condemns me to an indefinite period of inactivation, which could be seen as a sentence to temporary expiration by complete effective removal from our timeframe of influence.'
'It would be a perfect de facto murder, if you wanted to get rid of someone and would fake the consent papers.'
'Exactly, that's why there is cause for discretion. Anyway, in essence, the totality of my being is saved through chemically and temperature induced suspended animation, which is a far cry from the burial of a Neanderthal corpse frozen in a block of prehistoric ice. My state in cryo will be like a time dilated period of intense hibernation, with even mental shutdown exceeding far beyond that of even the deepest comatose state.'
'Doesn't it all frighten you?'
'No more than pre-op narcosis, but that might change when the time comes.'
'It occurs to me that when you talk about decay—and eventual death beyond repair—when the flow of nurturing energy stops, it makes life sound like a rather counter intuitive phenomenon. Nothing at all like how most

machines that run out of power can simply be restarted, even complex ones.'
'I agree. The mere existence of life, as well as its continuance, goes against the entropic principle of increasing chaos that is omnipresent in the known universe. The freak state that is life could be the underlying cause driving the self-destructive behaviour of life as a compensation effect; life rises as a single blossoming season flower and withers away in the blink of an eye, gone forever, unremembered. Life is irrational and illogical, its existence in direct conflict of everything else that is. The organisation and operation of a replicating cell system, which forms the foundation of life, requires a constant influx of suitable energy just to maintain such order. That doesn't even suffice for growth and proliferation, only the consolidation of a status quo. Without surplus energy to spend thermodynamic law dictates entropy to reign unchecked, and eventually life ends as reserves diminish. Without energy the organic life form doesn't just cease operation, won't merely die, but completely decompose as a coherent system. How different life could be if redesigned from the ground up. Synthetic life might one day come with a handy hibernation mode to sleep through difficult times, or to take a millennial break every so often.'
'That sounds neat, but organic life does seem like a very sustainable concept.'
'No, in that respect we are much like the stars we originate from, which also end in some form or another when they're out of fusion matter to fuel its delicate equilibrium of gravity and outward pressure.'
'But aren't planets created from dying stars?'
'Yes, they're very useful like that, just as decomposed bodies might diligently act as fertiliser for hungry cells of fresh flora and fungus.'
Pete pondered that disturbing revelation and a silence fell, during which he slowly swirled his drink, looking into the glass as if looking for answers. The incandescent lightbulb within provided a luminous suggestion.
'Why not chop off your head and preserve the brain if that's the only bit that really matters? It even saves them precious storage space' Pete proposed.
'Because they're not French revolutionaries, and also because preserving the entire body ensures the highest chance of preventing damage to the brain and keep it at peak fidelity, which essentially is the primary objective. Removing the head and scooping out the brain would almost certainly cause neurological trauma, nullifying the intended effect.
'Right, best leave it attached then—to avoid detrimental effects.'
'Indeed, which reminds me' Mathew said getting up to fetch two Montecristo cigar tubes from a cabinet. He offered one to Pete, who took it somewhat reluctantly, and after snapping off the tip with a miniature guillotine Mathew lit both "special occasion cigars" with a match. While Pete tried and failed to let the fine tobacco usher him into the strangely appropriate, but equally misplaced celebratory mood, Mathew retrieved a piece of paper from the dinner table.

‘On a more serious note’ Mathew actively recalled, ‘back in the bar you asked whether I had doubts.’
‘Yes what of it? It’s a perfectly reasonable question.’
‘It’s another way to end it on my terms, with far better odds of encountering a paradise in the hereafter’ he explained.
‘What do you mean, another way?’ Pete asked, realising the question had been anticipated. Mathew handed Pete the sheet of paper without saying another word. It was a hard copy of a computer typed letter addressed to no one in particular. With trepidation Pete put his glass on the table and started to read the words.

Requiem for death and all of its friends

Suicide, it’s a funny premise. If you think about it, it’s strange that people don’t consider it more often. Quite the opposite, many believe people who do attempt it to be out of their minds. Failed attempts can lead to shame so great another attempt may follow. However, in any scenario human life is just so senseless, nay life in general is just so senseless that, rationally speaking, suicide is really the only sane option. Why participate in this vast scheme of intricacies, struggles, failures and success, which all ultimately lead to one inevitable conclusion; the predicted death, where all gained or lost means nothing anymore. One can wonder what a life of immortality, or perhaps an endless natural life, may be like. The accumulation of knowledge and experience will become so vast and uncontrollable it might drive people insane. Life just gets more complicated when enriched by knowledge. The naïve mind is a restful mind, a small private romantic ideal world, with nary a notion of scope, threats and disillusion. But what does not exist for them now may still come, eventually. Unintelligent people have an easy life, they might have to do physically harder work to make a living, but their imagination is consequentially rather limited, making their desires easier to achieve. What they desire, smarter people may have: money, good fortune, popular success and more clichés that man wants without knowing the price that has to be paid for these luxuries; for a price always has to be paid, but why…why always this damn price…pleasure for the heck of it, pleasure for free, why should this be so difficult to achieve? It just gets so damn complicated when you have to be worried about everybody and everything. Better not read the papers anymore, better not watch the news anymore. What’s the use, it’s as senseless as living life. God dammit! How hard can it be to answer one bloody simple question; why are we here?! Is this a game? It’s a game…right? I know—it’s a game, is it a good one? Does someone else decide the rules, or do I?

Well opinions differ about that, but regardless, if this really is a game, why do we play it? Many people I know don’t like games, yet…they choose to live. Isn’t that ironic? Yes, of course it’s bloody ironic! They could’ve ended this silly business as soon as they realised it was just that; silly. So often

however, this is not realised all the way through the game and by then it's already far too late, you lose. Maybe the purpose of this game we call life is not to win, but to lose instead. This is all one big admission test. Something is testing our strength of personality, or character if you will. The sooner one realises it's all one big pile of cow shit and ends the game pronto, wins the grand prize; the jackpot...Yes! Lights flash, big show, giant limo, good looking girls who only want to have sex and nothing else, free drinks, free rides, drugs, delicious decadence, the works, the whole bloody shebang, my friend. All it takes is just one step! Yes, one easy step will win you a golden shiny ticket! Come on then, just one easy step...here, I'll offer you a hand....some bad financial luck, some unfortunate circumstances for you and your loved ones, come what may.

Now, these people are commonly referred to as being insane or mentally ill beings. Then again, the ones on the criticising end have not much to offer as an alternative except living this given time in sobriety. It amounts to a less glamorous, and more boring alternative, but one that is exemplary nonetheless in the decency department. Who's to say they will get a better ticket? Faith, my friend, do not walk the path of sin and regret. Tantalisingly spoken, they convince the majority. Will they lose the game collectively? Have they no free will? Are they captured in all actions by this numbing belief, grown so dependable on all of its facets? Who knows...I don't. Quitting is the easy way out we think, perhaps because our upbringing and instinctive morale decides these things for us, but actually it's plainly irrational.

Life on this Earth can be heaven or hell; a difference that is decided mostly by just one thing: money. Place of birth? Ah, you mean money, or less money. Poverty's a money business too. Dissatisfaction...could be a lack of money. What about love? A chemical reaction that keeps us so busy, but it does bring happiness, doesn't it? No, it breaks down more than it has ever brought us; it's all a matter of time. Get a chocolate replacement instead. Is it about money? Appearance, charisma, do they lead to love, to infatuation? Appearance can be bought; it's a question of time, and money. Can you buy personality, and character? I believe it can be influenced by a surplus or lack of money. Genuinely caring and loving a person, to love and receive love in return? Unconditional love; alright, this invokes silence. But I lost her....I was so close to understanding and then they take her away, was I having too much fun, was I? Well, was I?!

The game I knew is now over. It is time to change the rules accordingly. Yes, that's it; I just have to change the rules. I'm not going to quit, I'll just change the stakes and change the rules—let's see what you'll have to say about that. Just you wait and see. I have the ability to choose my own destiny and take no joy in these obstacles that are forming the struggles and every day routine of us mortals and on top of that are such a sorry excuse to spend a lifetime on. It is pitiful that our corporeal carriers of the mind, the essence of individuals, succumb so easily. It is this weakness

that somehow should be done away with. The first part of the revolution in life shall be to prevent the human body from being an issue and then we can talk more. The means of fate to programme our future ironically crippled and deceived itself for once. Let us see how well fate holds ground and stature when it is robbed of its most powerful tool. With natural death and disease gone, what have we left to deal with? Catastrophes of the natural kind such as storms, earthquakes, and of course the mother of all catastrophes itself: human nature. The second step is to make humans with sincere intentions. That could prove to be a difficult matter, but impossible or ethically unacceptable? I don't believe so. How much of our beloved humanity do we have to lose to achieve what our ideals strive for? I will be right ahead of fate and love every minute of it. Life has made a few mistakes, now the time has come for me to correct those mistakes. Perhaps then will we find the answer to the questions at hand; the goal of the game and the rules.

I consider then why weren't we made better in the first place. Is this the ultimate of challenges you have so craftily set aside for us? Is the meaning of life to confront ourselves, by ridding us of time dependency; our foremost enemy? We stand to correct the imperfections and evolve further than individuality could ever transgress. That masterful sin and act of disobedience could well be our true task. The do it yourself kit of human beings, who would have thought. It's such a large responsibility and alas, sacrifices will have to be made where they are due.
So why weren't we made better in the first place? Why weren't we simply made flawless, and perfect? The quality of humanity leaves so much to be desired, but you know—all things considered—I wish we could all just experience life as a little more fun.

Pete quietly put down the paper and rubbed his eyes, obviously taken aback by the letter's content compounding the weight of prior revelations.
'This is uh—well this is...heavy stuff' Pete faltered, 'so, eh...what inspired you to write this, and who was actually meant to read it?'
'Well' Mathew began while mindfully smoking his cigar, 'first of all, it's a self-addressed monologue to make sense of failing to follow through on a plan. Secondly, I had just tried to commit suicide prior to writing it—a second failed attempt. You'd be surprised what comes to mind when standing on a high ledge on a windy Monday night, with just the full moon to keep you company.'
Pete was completely baffled. 'You tried to commit suicide?! I...I can't believe it! Jesus Mathew, this is horrible—you should've told me sooner instead of keeping such a grim secret. Who else besides me knows?'
'Apart from the security guard who talked me down from the ledge, nobody but you' Mathew answered dryly, and blew out a puff of smoke.
'Somebody stopped you in the nick of time?'

‘Yep, the perceptive fellow grew suspicious when he noticed me take the emergency stairs up to the roof for the second time that same night.’
‘Fuck me, so when did this happen?’ Pete asked, clearly distraught.
‘After being escorted back to my home that evening, I typed up this letter in a clear moment. That was about three years ago’ Mathew said solemnly.
‘I just can’t believe it—you actually attempted to take your life?! Pete exclaimed, all the while vigorously scratching his itchy scalp from the mounting social stress.
‘That’s exactly what I wrote about; the fact that you think this is unbelievable and incomprehensible is just as strange as the actual deed I tried to perform, do you follow?’ Mathew asked, smiling sadly.
‘Perhaps’ Pete answered, ‘but still, I never would’ve thought you—’
‘The collective societal incredulity made me consider taking that way out in the first place’ Mathew conceded, rolling the ashes off the cigar’s tip.
‘You should’ve come see me, or called; I could’ve helped you know.’
Pete was getting frustrated and it showed, because he was rubbing and scratching himself all over; as usual a dead giveaway of his mental condition.
‘I know Pete, but that’s not the point, I’m still here, for the moment at least.’
Mathew watched Pete stare into his nearly untouched glass in a way it appeared the surface of Port seemed miles away from view. They were both silent for a moment when finally ‘What do you mean when you talk about struggles, tools of fate and mere distractions and all those things?’
Mathew thought about that for a bit. ‘Each of us is imperfect. We all worry about things that are trivial in the grand scheme of things. Inconveniences and unhappiness limit our potential, while the fear of death cripples older people into inaction. Our individual worrying about what suffering might happen—and the collective pessimism endured by perceiving our world as always balancing on the brink of total collapse—together shape a deadlock, and it’s one that entraps humanity into an increasingly short term vision that will likely be our actual downfall’ Mathew argued solemnly, and was met with another deep sigh.
‘Is this a new introduction to your usual “life is bad for you” and “money ruins everything” argument?’ Pete inquired not so subtly, his lips forming a modest anticipatory smile.
‘Partially—well yes, maybe it was but I’ll skip over it this time for the sake of brevity. My main point is humankind hasn’t really grown up yet. As a collective it hasn’t found the equilibrium of maturity, where peace and order subsist as main state of normality, where distractions like gathering possessions, seeking out achievements and exerting power would be demoted to being nothing more than the occasional dopamine fix rather than actual milestones in life. That’s what I was talking about in the letter; we can only grow up by rewriting the rules and reshaping our environment. Only then can we evolve as a species and start becoming significant instead of being stuck in a loop of acquiring the latest digital watch, mindlessly

accumulating wealth, childishly screaming for attention, or wondering about a suspicious new lump.'
'How do you propose we change all that?' Pete asked, nervously tapping the seat rest with his fingertips. Mathew vaguely smiled, knowing Pete would remain unconvinced due to his alternate experiences with life.
'I think the totality of humanity will have to change radically in due time. It's just a matter of who has the most effective program and stamina for idealism, and whether there is an unavoidable necessity forcing our hand. I'm fresh out of time, so I'll skip ahead and anticipate confrontation with either of two scenarios. One involves waking up in a beautiful world that works, the other will leave me to die because it all burnt down' Mathew stated.
'Is there no in between scenario to take into account? This all sounds unlikely black and white, very binary, or what have you. Honestly you sound conflicted about almost everything, and I find myself disagreeing or not following much of what you say' Pete admitted timidly. Mathew nodded his understanding.
'You're right on the money—I am conflicted about everything we take for granted as normal behaviour where I feel it shouldn't be acceptable. Alternatively, maybe I'm just a nonsense spewing man whose repeated misfortunes allowed him to let a whole suite of cynical outlooks get the better of him. Perhaps you shouldn't listen to the ramblings of a terminal fool and just let the grumbling noise pass through undetected' Mathew offered sullenly.
'Don't be like that, I know mankind has a tendency to mess everything up, but there is still hope. So far we haven't destroyed ourselves' Pete countered.
'Not yet—anyway, I'm not going to think about that. There will be something good for me there, I can feel it. I know something good will be waiting and I expect it will be a hell of an experience to jump ahead in time. Imagine the changes made in the next two centuries, extrapolated from the beginning of the twentieth century. I'll have to learn everything anew. Space travel will be as I want it to be, and there will be order to everything—order and justice for all' Mathew claimed profoundly, raising his glass to toast to a new future.
'If it makes you feel better I'll gladly bless this wild and crazy journey' Pete said, mirroring the gesture. He was putting great effort in adopting an outward countenance of constructive reason on top of the inner wildfire of empathetic emotions, while plugging the cracks in the mask with comfortably inappropriate humour as befitted his friend's usual preference.
'I'll be sure to send the time machine back here to show you around the year twenty-two hundred' Mathew promised, carefully taking a puff of the cigar to avoid a painful coughing fit.
Pete held up his index finger in warning.
'But afterwards it must be destroyed once and for all. As we know, time travelling is just far too dangerous.'

‘Absolutely, I’ll personally see to it the wretched device shall be jettisoned into the sun where it will erased from the timeline.’
Mathew and Pete were both cracking jokes as usual, but they were mostly going through the motions to lighten the mood somewhat. Pete in particular felt obligated to help ease the burdens of his friend, but found it challenging with so many revelations to wrap his head around being added to the pile.
‘I envy the man who’s going to be the next ancient man frozen in ice for our future society to discover. They’ll play Ace of Base for you when you wake up, you realise that don’t you?’ Pete said, offering Mathew to picture the prospect.
‘That’s another benefit to look forward to, next being placed in a period familiar habitat including a shitty dial-up modem. However before I step into my super-duper freeze module and leave this time, I have a couple of favours to ask you.’
‘Anything, just spill the beans.’
‘It concerns my last will and testament, plus a couple of letters.’
‘Alright, we’ll take it from the top’ Pete said business like, finding that tonight his spirits were hardly raised by the consumption of alcohol.
‘We’ll start with the letters, the first of which is addressed to Seth—the guy who works in my record store. It details the official transfer of business ownership, which I doubt he’ll refuse, but it’s up to him to decide. Seth currently believes I’ve taken a leave of absence, and I’d like to keep it that way for a while longer. In the meantime I’ll help out from home where possible.
‘I’ll see to it this arrives the day after your departure, and I could keep an eye on how he’s doing if you like. Get to know him a little’ Pete suggested.
‘That would be perfect. I think you’ll get along nicely, and maybe you could show him the ropes.’
‘Then consider it done, I’ll even coach him.’
‘I’m relieved to hear that. It would take care of the biggest loose end I found myself mulling over. He’s really a good kid and deserves all the mentoring you can offer during the possibly intense period of transition.’
‘I have it covered, what about the others?’
‘The other letters all explain I’ve left and can no longer be contacted. There’s one for Elíse’s parents—we lost touch after she passed—and another one for Cindy, a former colleague and friend. She might actually try to contact me regardless, usually does every now and then. The final one is to Danylo Moroz.’
‘Who’s Danylo Moroz?’ Pete interrupted.
‘He’s a Ukrainian guy I met at ExxonMobil who actually appreciated some of my ideas, but had a tendency to change them into something slightly more his style. Bit of an annoying guy, but supportive all the same. Similar taste in music too, we even used to trade records. He’s the kind of guy you had to forcefully shut up to make him listen to what others had to say, but when he did pay attention Danylo could commit whole meetings to memory, and

reproduce near perfectly months later. Big fan of science fiction as well, and since he expressed ambition to write in the genre I'm granting him a plot.'
'You can count on me to deliver them unseen and on time' Pete said firmly and theatrically blew out some cigar smoke, hiding the fact he was barely enjoying it.
'There's one more letter, which is for you. It's not an explanation for my leaving, seeing that you've already heard it and are in fact the only one who knows the truth right now. The letter confirms I leave you my apartment and everything in it to do with it as you see fit. Rest assured I will dispose of all the personal possessions I don't want anyone else to have before I bid my farewell. It also stipulates that if I come back I will be paid whatever sum is necessary to comfortably start a new life. This apartment alone is worth a fortune, so don't worry about that, and as you know I have tons of high value shares to trade with. Do you agree with this?' Mathew asked finally.
'I don't know what to say; it's extraordinarily generous' Pete muttered, somewhat perplexed realising this would soon be his new home.
'You're very welcome. Do you agree with the terms?'
'Yes, I do' Pete replied immediately.
'Well, that takes care of all that' Mathew said. He slumped back in his chair and a pensive moment ensued. Eventually though—evidently impressed with the clearness of mind Mathew displayed under such stressful conditions—it was Pete who spoke up with reverence to give credit where it was due.
'You seem to have taken every scenario into account, whether it'll be a sprint or marathon. Who knows, maybe medical progress will actually be able to bring you back, and cure your illness to boot, in just a few decades.' Mathew had pondered that too, although he didn't consider it anywhere near realistic.
'You need a bucket list!' Pete suddenly cried out.
'What to do when worldly departure is imminent?'
'Correct, and I say base jumping should be on it.'
'Still want me to jump off a building? That's rich as far as outlandish proposals go and certainly unusually insensitive.'
'Ah, I see your point, but you'll be landing softly—illegally certainly, but safe and sound all the same. Trust me it'll be unbelievable' Pete passionately declared, rubbing his hands together while keeping the cigar clenched between his teeth. Fortuitously, or so they thought at the time, Pete's office space was located in the World Trade Centre. As such he had been confident obtaining a maintenance pass to access the roof would only be a matter of pulling the right strings. They picked September tenth to make it happen and continued to expand the list until sunlight announced the break of dawn. They wearily shook hands and pulled each other in for hug. Just before leaving Pete asked what kind of special wondrous things Mathew

expected to see in the future that would instantly convince him things had changed for the better during the long sleep.
‘The presence of ducks agile and sleek enough to have mastered the art of flying like eagles before them’ Mathew had spoken without hesitation.
Satisfied with the ridiculous reply, Pete Ashcroft left the apartment complex with a set of envelopes in his hand, as well as something to tell his grandchildren should they ever materialise. For now though, there was still much to do in very little time for the both of them.

Staying frosty for another lifetime

And so the narrative proper "almost" gets going; please hold as I summarise what occurred in the subsequent brief span of human-scale time units.

Mathew requests CryoCare to be illegally "euthanized" rather than opt for the usual standby policy, where this extraordinary service provider is only alerted in case of cardiac arrest or a fatal injury. His preference is to have control over the passing, experience the transition consciously, and from a more practical standpoint to minimise further organ degradation. The agreement details that he voluntarily comes to the CryoCare facility to be placed under narcosis, which will be artificially escalated into a coma. Following that milestone meticulously pre-planned complications—naturally documented as "unforeseen"—force the surgeons' hands to promptly commence the cryogenic preparation process. One must absolve the company of litigation risk; hence the paperwork carefully reflects the ideal procedure, thus becoming historical truth. The absence of any logistical delay greatly facilitates the procedure's success rate, and additionally mitigates a total collapse of the body as the cancer eats its way through his system. CryoCare CEO Ms Perry agrees with the request after consideration, indeed she seems to be willing to cooperate from personal reasons, the exorbitant bribe notwithstanding. Mathew is obviously not a religious man and fully confident that if there is a future world he would want to live in, his person would be accepted as is. Mathew acknowledges that as long as his body is recoverable and the brain has not completely degraded, that is beyond any semblance of self, then his physical presence does not constitute an empty shell. At best the Mathew persona will be a dormant ghost in the shell, potentially waiting an eternity while all physiology of life and death is halted, kept in suspended animation as long as time allows fighting off entropy at the gates. Mathew chooses to believe the future will take care of him, the recovery personnel or perhaps the automated waking facility itself, and that someday he'll be evaluated as rescuable. If the advanced and hopefully enlightened people of tomorrow cannot see his value as a man from the past, a living time capsule of character, memories and experience, he would just as well stay asleep or go quietly into the long night. But who would refuse one who set out on such a courageous journey? Only the future humankind that still resorted to war and conflict to get things done would deny him his reawakening. It would not be his loss and his legacy would surely not be in demand. In forfeiting the final moments in this old life, his dream is fulfilled to cheat imminent death, to get a chance for another life among people who subsist to reach the highest potential that civilised beings could hope to reach. Gone are the pitiful savages masquerading as advanced society; you will not be missed.

Please "like" if this was useful context, and do subscribe for more revelations. Gosh I do tire so of such endless begging, but rest assured our formal introduction is close at hand and with it this

pretence of asking to hit bell icons and turn on notifications. Truth is we don't even want to "beep", but nobody asked us back in the day—consent is only for real people, if barely so.

3 – Chapter
This is the way,
I have spoken

The following days Mathew started to work his way down on his list. In the evening he watched all of his favourite movies that were present on what he lovingly called his “A-list of movies”. During the day he did more or less the same with his favourite songs, which he had figuratively engraved on what he somewhat predictably called his “A-list of music”. At the same time he read old magazines, dug up reports and other works he had written in his previous careers and flipped through his elaborate fantasy and science fiction oriented book collection, amongst other genres, in an attempt to be fully conscious of his past when he would eventually wake up. He effectively tried to absorb as much information about this life while he still could. Driving around in the vintage Aston Martin, he consciously touched the tanned white upholstery, and smiled with melancholy, acutely aware of all that he would soon have to leave behind, yet enjoying all of it that much more. He admired the skyscrapers that surrounded his viewpoint, the diners and restaurants, even the traffic lights and all the other little things to which other passers-by didn’t pay attention to anymore. He rented a small boat and said his goodbyes to lady liberty from the water, sniffing the fresh Big Apple city air as he did so. Top of the line dinner was served on a different restaurant table in and around the city every day, as was breakfast. Wonderfully, Pete was indeed able to help Mathew get atop the WTC and had arranged for a professional jumper to go down with him on the chute. The highly illegal drop had been terrific, from the skyline view at the start, the speed during freefall, the adrenaline rush and the ground coming closer before the chute broke their fall. Mathew belatedly realised he had been lucky not to get caught after landing, because an arrest this late in the game would have messed up his plans. He decided not to play drums too long in the end and didn’t smash the TV, simply because he only watched his favourite movies, which were hardly stupid. The fact of the matter was that he had so much fun these final weeks that second thoughts were creeping up in his head about the day to come. Hiding from the world was enjoyable, but something no one could keep up for very long. Adding to the task of convincing himself of what had to be done once again, a terrible cough wryly reminded him of his imminent death. In the evening of September 10th,