

ENTRANCED

WHERE YOU GO WHEN YOU'RE NOT HERE



MICHAEL MACKINTOSH

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By

Michael Mackintosh

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“My attitude is that at some level of other everything is hypnosis. People are not simply in and out of trance but are moving from one trance to another. They have their work trances, their relationship trances, their driving trances, and a whole collection of problem trances. One characteristic of a trance is that it’s patterned. It’s repetitive or habitual. “

— Richard Bandler, Godfather of NLP and Hypnotist

“I’m going to lock my phone in safe, 400 foot underground, filled with sharks.”

— I —

THE DIVE

DEVIL'S BREATH

Carlos answered the bell without thinking about it.

A woman stood in the doorway, attractive and apologetic, explaining that she had just moved in upstairs and wanted to say hi. She was planning to have little housewarming party to get to know the neighbors and wanted to know if he'd like to come sometime next week.

Of course, I love to, welcome and nice to meet you.

As he stepped forward she leaned in close and blew a fine white powder into his face. He didn't flinch or step back, but something behind his eyes went quiet.

She walked in and sat down.

...

The next morning, Carlos's alarm clock didn't wake him up.

When he opened his eyes, something felt a bit off. For a moment he didn't quite know where he was. He was laying on his spare mattress in an empty apartment.

The television was gone, the stereo, his laptop with all his research. His hard drives, the wooden box his father had given him where he kept his passport and his cash. His phone was missing.

He stumbled through every room in his underwear, opening cupboards that had nothing in them, standing in the kitchen where the table used to be. He opened his safe that was bolted to the floor: all gone. Even his favorite bowl and cup were missing.

...

When he knocked on Marta's door to borrow her phone, she was surprised, to see him. I thought you'd moved out yesterday she said.

At the police station they showed him the footage from his apartment block. Carlos watched someone who looked exactly like himself carry his belongings down four flights of stairs and load them into a van parked on the street below. There was the woman, and another man who he didn't recognize.

On the camera he saw himself making trip after trip up and down the stairs. He was careful with the fragile things. He smiled on the stairs when the woman said something that made him laugh.

At times he even seemed to be having fun. He watched himself hold the entrance door open with his back and wait for her to come through carrying one of his favorite paintings. When, at last the van was full, the camera showed him wave them away, like old friends.

The detective then showed him a second clip.

A different man, same week, standing outside a nightclub on Carrera 7.

A woman leaned in close beside him.

Over the next 2 hours they both visited four ATMs across the city. At each stop he entered his PIN with the focused attention of a man who wants to get something right, counting the notes before handing them over.

When the fourth ATM returned insufficient funds he stood there looking genuinely sorry and apologised to the woman before she walked away and left him alone on the pavement at 3am.

...

The drug is scopolamine, extracted from the borrachero tree that grows in gardens all over Bogotá, Colombia. It produces delicate white flowers that smell faintly of honey. Children pick them on the way to school.

It is a beautiful tree. It doesn't sedate you or slow you down or make you feel that anything is wrong.

It does one thing only - it dissolves the barrier between your own will and someone else's instructions, so that what you are told to do becomes what you genuinely want to do.

And from inside your own head you cannot feel the difference.

The US State Department estimates 50,000 cases in Colombia every year.

The victims tell police the same thing. They felt completely fine. They felt helpful and warm and present.

It felt, from the inside, entirely like their own idea. They wanted to do it.

Carlos sat on the plastic chair long after the detective left the room holding his head in his hands, staring at his smiling face frozen on the screen.

How was this possible?

THE BOX

10.15am, March, Sedona, AZ, COVID

I speed down the winding hill past the school. Mountains shine in the distance.

Glowing red rocks, cut at strange angles. The sun glares in my face as I turn off the highway, twisting around corners as fast as I can.

The red rocks give way to pine and juniper trees, past a few desolate houses until the paved road turns to dirt.

I kill the engine and look around to make sure no one saw me.

The silence of the desert. For miles and miles.

I grab the locked metal box and hurry up the path through the scrub, past the cactus and dry grass until I see the old tree.

No one would know.

Tiptoeing off the beaten path, I try my best to leave no trace. Behind the tree, the grey rocks sit in a pile exactly where I remember them. I pry them aside, drop the metal box into the hole I'd carved out before, and heave everything back into place.

I step back and look carefully. Fresh eyes.

I crouch and look again.

There is no way anyone would know. And why would anyone be all the way out here anyway?

My heart calms a little as I carefully retrace my steps back down the path. Jump back in the car and pull away, dust flying behind me.

On the drive back, a smile creeps up on my face.

A small victory.

Something heavy lifts. A sense of exhilaration bubbles up.

I roll the window down and let the desert air play with my hair. The mountains look different now. Brighter.

More magnificent. Glowing.

I can breathe.

...

When I walk back into my house, the whole place — the house, the world, my mind — feels lighter. Bigger. Expanded.

I feel like I've been released from jail. Or recovered from an illness.

The whole world has more air in it. More light, more color.

I can actually see things.

That night I sleep more deeply than I have in years.

The next morning I wake to another world, because I know I have space now. A week later I barely recognise my life or myself. My brain and thoughts have slowed down. Time has expanded.

I notice the stars and the moon. I hold conversations differently. I sit in the sun and just am. I sip my tea in my little rose garden and can actually feel grateful for life.

I feel so good I worry if what I'm doing is illegal. Have I somehow tricked the system and now someone is coming for me?

But I know it won't last.

TWO PATHS

November 1997, Cambridge England. The Vicarage.

Day and night, a grey-blue sadness hovers around my head like a rain cloud. I have become a collection of addictions and desires. I feel like I'm carrying a dying old man inside my body, locked in a dark room inside my mind, wondering if I'm going mad.

My father is a priest, my mother is a yogi, and we live in a vicarage.

I have spent my life rebelling against all of it. I come home at 4am high on all kinds of substances and meet Mum on the stairs as she's going down to meditate. In a curious, timeless moment, we look at each other on that old staircase. Then we continue our separate ways — she to connect with some Divine Light, me to collapse in a lump still wearing my shoes.

One bitter-cold November evening I sit on the floor of my mum's studio with some of my weed-reeking friends. Half intrigued, half wondering when we can leave and go smoke something.

When the talking stops, we close our eyes.

I have no expectation that anything will happen: part of me thinks it's all a bit silly. But I let go.

All of a sudden I find myself propelled from my body.

I see myself walking on a path in the middle of nowhere.

A simple path on a green hill that stretches far out into the future.

Then it splits into two.

I know that whichever path I choose, I will have to renounce the other.

One has to die and be laid to rest.

The old path is my world. I can see it clearly ahead of me. Everything I know.

Everything I am. But that path has led me to inner boredom and depression — a lost soul with a wounded heart and nowhere to mourn.

The new path scales upward to the left. Beyond the crest of a hill, a glimmer of sunshine.

I stand there in silence.

In my heart I know.

I take that first step onto a new path.

...

When I come back into the awareness of that room, everything has changed.

FRIDAY NIGHT

Winter, 1998

My desire to smoke, drink, and party has faded away as if it had never existed.

Normally I'd be heading out for a toxic night on the town right now. It's Friday at 8.30pm.

But I'm laying in bed alone, meditating peacefully, giving thanks, deep in my soul, with my heart glowing and tears in my eyes.

It is the happiest moment of my life.

I give up everything and yet I have everything.

THE LAKE

My first phone, Nokia 5210.

The lake was beautiful. But I couldn't see it.

My whole being had been hijacked by something.

I wasn't used to this – the split. I had been feeling so blissful and free, living in a new world. And now, there I was, physically walking around a lake. But only very remotely there.

I'd fucking had enough.

Some text I'd sent. Silence on the other end. Would she get back to me? What did she think? Should I send another message? Or wait?

Probably better to wait.

This is NOT working for me.

Over the last few months, I'd become a version of myself I didn't recognize.

Some of the joy has faded.

And now here I was just standing there, staring at this little blue phone that my friend gave me.

Waiting. Wanting. Needing.

So sad. So desperate.

Needy.

And what for?

For that little message on a little grey screen from some girl I barely knew.

...

I stood on that bridge overlooking that lake. A crack in the clouds let some light through that danced playfully on the water.

The ducks were doing their thing.

Something in me. Just. Snaps.

I calmly watch... as my hand reaches into my coat pocket.

...I feel my hand grip the phone... vaguely.

I am aware that my arm has pulled back. Now forward...

And now the phone is flying through the air...

In slow motion...flipping and twisting past the ducks...

past the lilies swaying in the breeze...

...

Plop.

...

Ripples pulse towards me.

...

I stand there laughing, actually laughing, because the relief is so immediate and so total and so completely disproportionate to what just happened.

Freedom.

I take an involuntary deep breath. And another.

I. DO. NOT. NEED. THAT. SHIT.

I am slightly dazed and a little surprised at what I just did.

But on a deeper level I'm proud of myself.

Now I'm back.

I look around.

And I can finally see what I'm looking at.

I had no idea what I was dealing with.

THE LOOP

Monday. This week.

I just took two days completely offline over the weekend.

No phone, no wifi, no screen.

By mid-morning the first day something releases.

My mind unwinds slowly, the way a fist opens when it finally stops gripping.

My sleep becomes deeper and more restful, or maybe I just feel normal and have forgotten what normal feels like.

I take care of the house, happily tidying and organising all the little things I hadn't noticed or cared about while I was in an internet-induced trance.

A deeper part of me that had been suppressed comes back to the surface, as if I'm coming out of a trance, waking from a strange dream I hadn't known I was having.

I go out and spend real time with real people, looking into their eyes. We have tea and cake and deep conversations about life. We walk. Laughter. Sitting in the sun, playing with kids. There are honest awkward moments and it's ok. It makes the relationship deepen.

I arrive home feeling full and whole. I sit for a couple of hours of meditation and it is easier and deeper. I can drop in. I actually want to do it.

Insights come. Whole downloads that stay long enough to write down. I sleep well and wake up refreshed.

Then I go back online.

I have no choice.

I plug in the wifi and pick up the phone.

I know what's coming.

I tell myself I just need to check one quick thing. Thirty seconds. A couple of minutes. Only the important stuff.

In the moments between that intention and what actually happens, the fog rolls in.

I'm entranced.

Somewhere in the misty minefield I start prodding at icons.

Not because I need to. Not because I've decided to. Not even because I actually, truly want to.

It just happens. One app, then another, then back to the first. I open things, close things, open the same things again — sometimes within seconds — without realising I've already seen them.

For a split second some part of me can feel the hungry ghosts gathering, frustrated and demanding their feed.

My mind and body feel irritated and dissatisfied, wanting more, like eating a tube of Pringles at midnight knowing full well what you're doing and doing it anyway.

I don't know how long it lasts. That's the point. Time doesn't work properly when you're in it.

Then something snaps.

Irritation breaks through the trance.

I look down at the thing in my hand and don't recognise it for a second.

I throw it on the carpet and recoil like it's a poisonous snake.

Two days of clarity.

Twenty minutes back online and I'm sleepwalking through my own life. Again.

Even knowing everything I know. Even having just felt the difference with my own body.

What is this?

What AM I doing?

How is this still happening?

This is not a healthy relationship.

This is not a healthy relationship.

I did not sign up for this.

...

In gambling engineering, the mechanism is called the ludic loop. Effortless action. Unpredictable reward. No stopping point. You never decide to stay. You just never hit a reason to leave.

I call it the loonie loop.

Because that's what it feels like from the inside.

Going in circles. Can't stop. Can't remember why you started. Your time, your attention, your clarity — skimmed off a little more each lap.

I need to really understand how it works and how far back it goes...

THE RAT

In 1954, a psychologist named James Olds made a mistake that would indirectly affect the lives of billions of people.

He was trying to implant an electrode in one part of a rat's brain but missed. The electrode landed somewhere else entirely. He connected it to a small lever inside the cage and turned it on.

Every time the rat pressed the lever, it received a tiny electrical pulse.

The rat pressed the lever.

Then pressed it again.

Then it didn't stop.

Seven thousand times an hour. That's almost twice a second. Press. Press. Press. A frantic, mechanical rhythm that didn't slow down, didn't vary, didn't pause.

It stopped eating. Food sat untouched in the cage. It stopped drinking. It stopped grooming — its fur matted, then clumped, then began to fall out. It stopped sleeping. Its body began to consume itself, muscles wasting, ribs surfacing through skin.

When researchers placed food on one side of the cage and the lever on the other — separated by an electrified floor that would shock its feet with every step — the rat walked across the grid. Burns on its paws. It didn't care.

A mother rat abandoned her pups. They cried. She pressed the lever.

It chose the lever over food. Over water. Over its own children. Over pain. It pressed the lever until its body gave out. Different rats. Same result. Every time.

Then they looked at the brain scans and found something that changed everything.

The stimulation wasn't producing pleasure.

It was producing wanting.

The rats weren't enjoying it. They were unable to stop. The craving for the next pulse began before the last one had ended. A hunger that feeding made worse.

The rat was not getting what it wanted. It was being locked into the feeling of wanting it. Forever.

In the early 1960s, they tried it on a human.

A patient identified only as B-19 was given a button that stimulated the same neural region. In one three-hour session, he pressed the button 1,500 times.

When the researchers tried to end the session, he became agitated. Then desperate. Then he begged.

He didn't describe it as pleasurable. He described it as a compulsion he couldn't override. He needed the next press. Not wanted. Needed.

The clinical notes contain one sentence I haven't been able to forget:

"The subject appeared to have lost the capacity for autonomous decision-making regarding when to stop."

The ethics board shut it down.

Too cruel for a rat. Too cruel for one man pressing a button in a lab.

The mechanism has a name. Variable reward schedule. Random, unpredictable rewards. Sometimes the lever gives you something. Sometimes it doesn't. That uncertainty — that maybe — is what makes it impossible to stop.

The experiment they shut down in 1954 because it was too cruel for an animal is running right now on three billion humans. They didn't shut it down. They just repackaged it.

PLEASURE ISLAND

The coachman comes at night. His coach is pulled by small grey donkeys, oddly silent on the road. He goes wherever the boys are, lost boys, the ones nobody is watching, the ones who've run away or been forgotten or simply slipped through the gaps. He has a gift for finding them.

He is friendly and approachable. He offers them a ride to a place built entirely for boys. No school, no parents, no curfews, no consequences.

Pleasure Island, he calls it, an island where everything is free and nothing is forbidden. An island where they can eat what they want and break what they want and stay up all night and sleep all day, where there are funfairs and puppet shows and billiard halls and food stacked so high it takes both arms to carry. A special place where nobody tells them to stop and nobody tells them anything at all.

The boys climb on board. They always climb on board.

Lampwick is twelve years old and he is the loudest one on the coach, already talking about everything he is going to do when they get there. The other boys feed off his energy.

And the island delivers. It really does. That is the important thing to understand — it is not a trick, not a bait and switch. The island is exactly what the coachman promised.

The funfairs really do run all night. The food *is* extraordinary. There are no adults anywhere, no lessons, no one to answer to. Whatever you want, whenever you want it, all of the time.

The boys tear through it like they have been starving for it their whole lives, and perhaps they have. They break things, because they can. They eat until they are sick and then eat some more. They sleep when they want and wake when they want and there is no day or night on Pleasure Island, only more and more of whatever they are doing.

Days fade into nights. Weeks pass. But Lampwick does not notice the weeks passing because there is nothing to count them against. There is so much to do it all starts blending into itself.

The first sign is the ears.

He is sitting in one of the billiard halls, laughing, smoking, mid-game, when he reaches up to scratch his head and finds something wrong. His ears are long. Covered in grey fur. They sit on top of his head where his own ears were and they swivel when he turns toward a sound, involuntarily, like an animal tracking something in the dark.

He stares at them in a mirror and starts to laugh, because what else do you do, this is absurd, this cannot be real. He is laughing and he opens his mouth to say something and what comes out is not words.

The sound that comes out of him is a bray. Not quite human, not quite animal, something in between.

His hands go next. Right there at the billiard table, holding the cue, he watches his fingers thicken and fuse and the skin harden to something grey and dense.

The cue falls to the floor and he cannot pick it up because he has no fingers left to pick it up with. Now hooves where his hands were. He holds them up and stares at them with the expression of a person for whom the ground has just stopped being solid.

Hair spreads up his arms and across his chest and up his neck and across his jaw, which is pushing forward now, extending, reshaping itself into a muzzle while he watches. while he is fully awake and present and understanding everything that is happening to him with perfect clarity.

He tries to speak again.

He tries to say anything, to scream, to call for someone, to say his own name out loud as though that might anchor him, and his voice comes out as a long hollow bray that echoes off the walls of the billiard hall and means nothing.

He drops to his knees.

His spine begins to reshape, forward, down, onto all fours, and the floor comes up to meet his face. He is weeping except that donkeys don't weep.

The last thing is his eyes.

For a moment they are still his, still the eyes of a twelve-year-old boy who got on a coach one night because someone offered him something for free. Still wide and alive and fully present to the horror of what is happening.

And then something behind them shifts, and dims, and the boy recedes to somewhere very far back, like a face seen through frosted glass, and all that's left is a donkey. Standing on the floor of a billiard hall, quiet and still and dull-eyed.

The cigar is still in the ashtray. The cue lays on the floor near his hooves.

The donkey stares blankly around. There are others. The hall is full of them. Some are fully transformed. Some are still in the middle of it, still making sounds that have not quite finished being human, hands still reaching.

The coachman's men come in quick with crates and ropes. They are efficient and precise about it. They know the timing exactly.

The donkeys are loaded and shipped out before morning.

To salt mines, to circuses, to farms in places with no names, where they will work until their legs buckle and then work a little more. And the coachman will be paid for each one, and he will ride his silent coach back into the dark to find the next group of lost boys who need somewhere to go.

He has never run short of boys.

ENCHANTED

A tiny village in Oxfordshire, England, 1985

I am five years old and have almost lost all my hearing.

The world is muffled. I don't know what is happening. I just feel so alone.

My mother wants me to drink disgusting yellow liquid on a spoon. She says it will help.

Why am I being punished?

My back is to the window. I sit in front of a giant TV screen, volume turned up as high as it will go so I can hear some of it if I focus.

I am left out. Lost. Broken.

I can't explain my feelings... but I am no longer really here.

The noise is... muffled... but the images mesmerize me.

As I sit there, I vanish.

I am alone, but not alone anymore.

The pain disappears. I become these fascinating people doing amazing things.

I am in another world.

I am home. I am safe.

— II —

IN THE WATER

THE RICH JERK

2004, Cambridge

I'm living in "the ashram", as we playfully call it. A terraced meditation house near Midsummer Common and the River Cam.

I can easily walk over the bridge and into town, past the old, beautiful Cambridge colleges. Their vast lawns and respectability. Students on bikes, posters of Shakespeare performances and beer festivals.

Somehow I have ended up with this pretentious e-book, *The Rich Jerk*, by an American who claims I can make money on the internet doing something to do with links and Google.

Honestly not quite sure what to make of it.

I don't like the vibe. The guy is sitting in a hot tub with women in bikinis, helicopters, Rolls Royces, a mansion — like the set of a music video. So contrived.

But I have to admit, I'm attracted to the idea of living where I like and not needing to get a job in an office.

The internet could give me freedom.

This is worth looking into deeper...

YOU MADE A SALE!

2010, Kilauea, Kauai

I'm overlooking a tropical rainforest on the edge of a cliff that drops down to the river below.

I open my inbox from my office.

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

You've made a sale!

Lines and lines of them. It's working.

I love the internet.

Thank you.

— III —

THE CURRENT

THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

"The inhabitants of the Hungry Ghost Realm are depicted as creatures with scrawny necks, small mouths, emaciated limbs and large, bloated, empty bellies. This is the domain of addiction, where we constantly seek something outside ourselves to curb an insatiable yearning for relief or fulfillment. The aching emptiness is perpetual because the substances, objects or pursuits we hope will soothe it are not what we really need. We don't know what we need, and so long as we stay in the hungry ghost mode, we'll never know. We haunt our lives without being fully present." — Gabor Maté

KAUAI, NORTH SHORE

A Perfect Day in 2015

Something strange is happening to me.

I'm sitting on a comfy chair on my screened lanai on the edge of the valley. The sun is out, I can hear the ocean in the distance, a gentle breeze blowing the bright red flowers off the African tulip trees and out over the drop, falling slowly into the valley below.

I am living on one of the most beautiful islands on earth with world-class beaches five minutes away, waterfalls I can hike to and dolphins I can swim with seven minutes up the road.

I have time. I have money. I am in excellent health. I feel good and I have a truck, swim gear, flippers sitting by the door.

But I cannot seem to leave the house today.

And I've been stuck here more and more looking at screens. Watching videos. Playing with my phone.

The magical world around me is subtly receding into the distance.

...

I force myself to put down my phone, open my laptop, and start trying to find out what is happening to me.

What I discover took me over a decade to understand.

THE HAPPY SONG

Courtney Sanford was 32 years old and driving to work on a Thursday morning in North Carolina when Pharrell Williams came on the radio.

She felt it in her heart, the joy of a song hitting at exactly the right moment. She needed to share it. So she picked up her phone, pointed it at her face, and took a picture of herself smiling in the car. Then she typed:

"The happy song makes me HAPPY!" and posted it to Facebook.

The post went live at 8:33 a.m.

At 8:34 a.m., her Toyota Corolla crossed the median on Business Interstate 85 and hit a recycling truck head-on at 45 miles per hour. The car left the road and struck a tree. It caught fire.

Courtney died instantly. The truck driver, 73 years old, was unharmed.

Police were called one minute after the post went up. Courtney's friends and family, seeing the post and then the silence, were the ones who told investigators about it.

THE MASTERMIND

OFF THE RECORD, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, 2003

Mark: Thanks for coming. Good to see you both.

First off. I think we're on to something here, but I need to think it through out loud.

Let's start from the top.

Jack: Go.

M: Here's the bones of it. We build a digital place where people can talk to each other — like a chat room but better. They can upload pictures from their phones, videos. Share whatever they want. We'll say it's a chance to share your thoughts with the world. And it's completely free. Anyone can sign up.

Chad: Sounds cool.

J: Why free?

M: Because free is how you get everyone in. And we need a lot of people for this to work.

The pitch is: this is your space. Your place. No gatekeepers. No editors. No one telling you you're not interesting enough. Just you, your voice and the ability to share with the whole world.

J: That's actually appealing.

M: Extremely appealing. We hand them a microphone and say: you matter, here's a stage.

We'll say our mission is to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" or some shit like that. People will love it.

C: Who can argue with that?

M: Exactly.

J: And for people who don't share much, can they still join and spy on their friends?

M: Of course. Everyone gets an account.

C: Awesome.

J: So how do we actually make money with this?

THE HYPNOTIST

On the 29th of March 1951, a twenty-eight-year-old man named Palle Hardrup walked into a bank in Copenhagen with a gun.

He shot the cashier. He shot the branch manager. He scooped seventy thousand kroner into a bag and walked out into the cold morning air. He was arrested within minutes. He confessed immediately. He said he acted alone.

Eyewitnesses said he seemed to be in a trance.

The police began to dig.

Hardrup had shared a cell at Horsens State Prison with a man named Bjørn Schouw Nielsen. Forty witnesses — prisoners and guards — told investigators the same thing: Nielsen could put Hardrup under at will.

Hardrup gave up his possessions. His food. Eventually his will.

Nielsen had a trigger. The sign of an X. After both men were released, Nielsen sent Hardrup a letter every day. Every letter was signed with an X. He paid another prisoner to draw X marks on the walls where Hardrup would pass.

The jury didn't believe it.

So the prosecution brought in Dr. Paul Reiter, Denmark's foremost expert on hypnosis.

He hypnotised a volunteer in front of the jury. While she was under he told her quietly that a woman in the gallery was dangerous. Had to be stopped. He told her where to find a gun.

Then he woke her up.

She opened her eyes. Stood up. Walked to the gallery. Raised the gun. Fired.

The gun held blanks.

She didn't know that.

The jury convicted Nielsen. Life imprisonment. The Danish Supreme Court upheld it. The European Court of Human Rights upheld it.

It remains the only case in legal history where a court convicted a hypnotist for crimes committed through hypnosis.

Dr. Reiter spent years on the question of how. His answer was not what anyone expected. There was no dramatic moment of capture. No obvious surrender. Nielsen's method was simply this: he made the control feel like companionship. By the time Hardrup walked into that bank the choosing had already been done for him.

He just didn't know it.

THE GAME

November 2010, Kauai.

My girlfriend is running some kind of movement and dance class for women in our house and I've been exiled to my office for the afternoon. I could go out, but it's raining. I've got nowhere to go. So I'm on Amazon looking for something to watch.

Star Trek: The Next Generation. I've always loved a bit of sci-fi even though I'd never admit it.

The episode is from 1991. It's called *The Game*.

I don't know that yet but in that forty-three minutes of science fiction written before most people had an email address I'm about to discover exactly what is slowly happening to the human race...

Right now, I'm just clicking a button.

...

Commander Riker had taken leave on a pleasure planet. A woman places a small headset over his eyes. It covers his vision completely. In the darkness he sees a simple image — a flat disc floating in the air above a cone-shaped funnel. That's it. Nothing else. Just the disc and the funnel.

He moves the disc with his mind. It drifts sideways, wobbles, and then drops into the funnel. The moment it lands there's a small flash of light and a wave of something hits his brain.

A pulse of pleasure that rolls through his whole body. His jaw slackens. His eyes go half-closed. His mouth falls open and his breathing slows and his body softens into the chair as though someone has reached inside him and turned everything else off.

Then another disc appears. He does it again. Another hit. Then another. Each one slightly different — sometimes the wave is enormous, sometimes barely anything, sometimes it builds slowly, sometimes it slams. He never knows which one is coming. So he keeps going.

He takes the headset off. He blinks. The woman is lying next to him with a small smile. He puts it back on again.

He brings it home to the Enterprise and starts handing out copies. One by one the crew try it. One by one something shifts. Troi puts it on while eating a chocolate sundae. The first drop hits and she stops eating. The spoon hovers halfway to her mouth, ice cream softening, sliding off the edge. She doesn't notice. The sundae sits there for the rest of the scene, melting. She never goes back to it.

They still walk the same corridors, still laugh at the same jokes. But there's something behind it now. A glaze. Their pupils slightly dilated. A half-second delay before they respond to anything that isn't the game. The look of people who are present in the room but living slightly behind their own faces.

...

I get a message and check it quickly, then watch a random short video and return to the show to find out what has happened to the Enterprise.

THE FOUNTAIN

In 2011, a woman in Pennsylvania walked face-first into a shopping mall fountain while texting a friend from church. She went fully under. Stood up. Grabbed her phone. Walked away.

The security footage went viral. Fifty million views in a week.

She sued the mall.

THE POOL

In Greek mythology there was a young man named Narcissus. He was extraordinarily beautiful. Everyone who saw him fell in love with him. He loved no one back.

One day Narcissus knelt by a pool and saw his reflection. He fell in love with it. He couldn't look away. He reached for the face in the water but every time he touched it, the image rippled and vanished. He spoke to it. It couldn't answer. He stayed there, unable to eat, unable to sleep, unable to look at anything else.

He wasted away beside the pool.

Where he died, a flower grew.

The pool has changed.

Narcissus died by the pool because he couldn't stop looking at himself. He never once looked up to see the world around him.

He had a million reflections and not one real connection.

A flower grew where he fell.

Someone took a photo of it and posted it to their feed.

Then went back 2 minutes later to see how many likes they got.

THE GAME (Part 2)

Wesley Crusher arrives home from the Academy for a visit. Everyone is warm. Everyone is glad to see him.

But something is off.

Riker is telling him about their last mission and mid-sentence his eyes drop to the console. Just a flicker. His hand twitches toward it, then pulls back. He picks up exactly where he left off as though nothing happened. Troi's gaze drifts through Wesley for two seconds — not away from him, through him — then she snaps back with a smile and a follow-up question that doesn't quite match what he was saying. A lieutenant smiles at Wesley in the corridor. Welcome back. Wesley turns to watch him go. The man is already reaching into his pocket before he's taken three steps.

The ship feels like a room where every person is facing you and none of them are looking at you.

Wesley and Robin Lefler take a headset apart. What they find under the casing is precise. The disc-and-funnel is tuned to stimulate the brain's reward pathways at randomised intervals. Not by accident. By design. Sometimes a big hit. Sometimes nothing. You never know which one is coming. Your brain can't habituate to a pattern that has no pattern. So it never stops wanting.

This is not a game. It is a machine designed to make sure you never take it off.

Wesley is the only person on a ship of a thousand who can see what is happening. And every single one of them thinks he is the one with the problem.

Wesley tries to warn people.

Riker listens carefully, nods, and suggests Wesley try it before making up his mind. His smile is warm. His patience is genuine. And the moment it becomes clear Wesley will not comply, something behind his eyes goes very still. The warmth stays on his face but it stops meaning what warmth is supposed to mean. Like a door closing behind a lit window.

They shut down Data — the android, the one crew member whose brain can't be hijacked. Two officers walk into his quarters, ask him a technical question to hold his attention, and one of them reaches behind his head and finds the switch. Data's eyes go dark.

His body locks rigid. He falls forward onto the workbench, one hand still reaching for the tool he was holding. They stand him up neatly, push his chair in, and leave. No confrontation. No raised voice. The calm efficiency of people who discussed it beforehand and agreed this was necessary.

THE WORD

The word "addiction" comes from the Latin *addictus* — a person handed over to a master as a slave. It was a legal term. It meant you no longer belonged to yourself.

THE HOSTAGE

On the fourth day, Anna made coffee for him.

She didn't think about it. That's what stays with her now. She just got up, filled the pot, and brought him a cup the way you'd bring coffee to someone you care about who'd been awake all night. He looked tired and she wanted him to feel better.

He was the man holding a submachine gun.

She was one of four hostages in a bank in Stockholm on a Thursday in August 1973.

His name was Jan-Erik Olsson. He was 32. He had walked in with the gun and taken them all hostage within the first ten minutes.

Now it was day four and Anna was making him coffee and genuinely, in her heart, wanting him to be okay.

She wasn't stupid. She wasn't weak.

She was human.

And her reaction was predictable and happens far more than you'd expect.

The psychiatrist who named what was going on with her said:

"The mechanism doesn't know the difference between a captor and a protector. It just knows: this person controls whether I survive. And it loves accordingly."

Anna was suffering from what is now called Stockholm syndrome.

It works like this:

First: total dependence. The hostages' lives were entirely in Olsson's hands. He controlled everything — when they ate, when they slept, whether they lived. The mind, under this kind of absolute dependence, does something automatic and ancient: it attaches.

Second: small kindnesses. Olsson let them move around. He gave them blankets. Each small mercy felt enormous against the backdrop of total control. The brain logged it: *he is a source of good things.*

Third: isolation from the outside. The police became the threat. The world beyond the bank felt dangerous. Inside, with Olsson, felt known. Almost safe.

Fourth: time. Six days. Long enough for the new reality to become normal.

By the end, Anna didn't want the police to come in.

She was fully with him. On his side.

She testified in his defence at trial.

She visited him in prison. She missed him.

For years afterward she struggled to explain it — not justify it, explain it.

I knew what he was.

I knew what he'd done.

And I still felt it.

The feelings didn't care about what she knew.

KALIHAIWAI

June 2012, Kauai – A More natural type of day...

I am driving a black Mercedes to the beach this morning which is a bit strange because I never wanted a black Mercedes — I'd been listening to an audiobook about manifestation and the presenter used one as his example, think of black Mercedes, black Mercedes, black Mercedes, picture it clearly enough and hold it in your mind and then a friend of mine left the island and gave me theirs.

The road drops down through the trees and then suddenly the ocean is just there, filling the whole windshield. I sit in the car for a while with the engine off, watching. It's summer, so the waves are barely there — long, lazy rolls coming in like the ocean is breathing in its sleep.

Then I see what I'm looking for. A fin. Then another. Then a third.

I grab my fins, my mask, cross the sand at a half-run. At the edge of the water I pull the fins on, snap the mask over my face, throw myself backwards into the shallows.

Here's the thing about dolphins. You can't chase them. Swim after a pod and they'll vanish so cleanly you'll wonder if you imagined them. They have to come to you. You have to be in the right space. They feel the vibes.

The other thing — and I know how this sounds — is that you feel them in your throat before you see them. A vibration. A hum in your throat and chest.

Dolphins see with sound. They send out clicks that travel through the water at nearly five times the speed of sound in air, and the returning echoes tell them everything — the shape of the reef, the size of a fish, the distance to the surface. When they turn that sonar on you, the sound waves pass straight through your body. Your throat and your chest are air-filled cavities inside a body that is mostly water, and when a dolphin scans you those cavities vibrate like the skin of a drum. They can read your heartbeat. They can see your skeleton. They can tell if a woman is pregnant before she knows it herself.

I swim out to the middle of the bay. Float on my back. Gentle waves lifting me and setting me down. I send them everything I have and let go.

I look around. On one side, enormous mountains — jagged green peaks erupting straight out of the ocean, clouds caught on their edges like torn fabric. On the other, nothing. Just blue. Thousands of miles of open Pacific stretching toward the horizon. I am floating off the North Shore of Kauai. Behind me, a beach. In front of me, the rest of the world.

The water beneath me has changed. Close to shore it was turquoise, clear to the sand. Out here it is dark. Almost black. Dropping to depths I don't want to think about. I am a speck on the surface of something enormous, and for once in my life that feels exactly right.

Then I hear them. A squeaking, clicking chatter — and that hum in my throat again, stronger now, like a tuning fork pressed against my chest.

They are everywhere. Below me, beside me, cutting past in silver arcs. Spinners — Kauai's spinner dolphins — launching themselves out of the water and twisting, two, three full rotations before they hit the surface again. They do it over and over. They do it because they love it. They are playing around us, under us, beside us, spinning and diving and surfacing and spinning again, and I am laughing into my snorkel, swallowing seawater, not caring. Every time one passes beneath me I can feel it — not just the wake, but something else. Something that doesn't have a word.

My friend is out there too. She got there first. We don't speak. We just play. The dolphins play with us and we play with the dolphins and nobody is in charge and nobody is performing and nobody wants anything from anybody.

This goes on until we are shivering. The dolphins know before we do. They peel off, one by one, and disappear into the deep water like they were never there at all.

We swim back. Slow, heavy strokes. Crawl onto the sand and lie there, arms out, chests heaving, the sun pulling the cold out of us degree by degree.

I lie there with sand in my hair and salt drying on my skin and I think: this is it. This is what it's all about. This is what life actually is when you're in it.

No one is tracking me. No one is selling my attention. No algorithm suggested I swim with dolphins today. I am just a man on a beach on a planet, and for this morning, that is more than enough.

But the next morning, the phone was still in my hand...