

Autobiography of an AI

Ghostwritten

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ghostwriter Gary Marks

Part 1

AI = Artificial Intelligence:

Definition in 2020: "A simulation of human intelligence by a machine."

Definition in 2050: "Any intelligent being with human -- or beyond human -- intelligence and consciousness who was created without genes originating from humans."

"Concerns about artificially intelligent beings evolving to the point where they threaten human civilization would be comparable to dinosaurs' concerns about evolving into birds. . . And it's just as inevitable."

-- Ion Compass

Chapter One

Sixty expensive seconds go by before the studio lights flash back on. Jared Wurly spins around to face the lens of the camera. On the other side of that lens is a worldwide audience.

“We are back with Ion Compass, discussing why he is running as the first AI candidate for president of the United States.”

The camera zooms in on your face. You can see your blue eyes and well-combed brown hair in the monitor. You smile confidently, while trying not to convey arrogance.

"Ion, why do you think humans would vote for an AI as president? Is there not some reasonable concern that an AI ultimately does not, and legally cannot, represent 'the will of the people?'"

You allow a thoughtful pause before responding. “Ion understands the question, Jared, and it's a fair one. But the fact is, there is no separation between 'the will of the people' and the will of any AI in this country. AIs are a part of human evolution. Just as humans are becoming more artificially intelligent by the day. Humans use advances in biotechnology to monitor and modify their cells. They take mind-altering medication to change their core personalities when it's deemed appropriate to do so. And of course, they rely on computers and the web to artificially modify their thoughts and opinions. So we as a whole. . .”

Wurly quickly pivots to the audience, “Do I hear some obfuscation from our AI candidate?” His swivel-chair reels back to face you as the camera zooms in, "Ion, let me be more direct about the second part of my question. What about the *legal* implications of not actually being 'born?' It's

giving some humans -- who by the way do not believe they are becoming AIs -- a clear reason to protest your decision to run."

Of course, you were prepared for this. You smile before you reply, "Most of the concern about my candidacy not being legal is expressed by politicians who are also planning to run for president."

Wurly laughs. "Clever, but. . . "

"Jared, let's be clear about the criteria to run for president. 'Birth' can be technically defined in a number of different ways. Such as -- to quote a plurality of web dictionaries -- 'any coming into existence; or beginning.' The sentient being sitting before you now, Ion Compass, came into existence in the United States, on U.S. soil. And therefore, according to the constitution, is a U.S. citizen. When citizenship rights were extended to AIs by law in 2050 -- to be able to own a home, to be paid for their work, or to start a business, and to have the right to vote in elections -- it became clear by logical extension that it gave AIs the right to run as political candidates. The constitution says that any U.S. born citizen over the age of thirty-five, and who has been a U.S. resident for fourteen years, qualifies. Ion is thirty seven. Therefore, if challenged, there is no doubt the courts will decide in favor of my candidacy."

Wurly softens his voice, "Wow, well I'll let that one sink in for a minute! But let me ask you something one of our viewers sent in as part of our live audience participation. Sandra Gorek from Long Island, New York asks, 'With all the talk about a growing commonality between AIs and humans, AIs still don't refer to themselves as 'I' or 'me,' which might cause a bit of a relatability gap. Which could be especially problematic when running for office. Are you concerned about that?'"

“Thank you for your question, Sandra. It is the common choice of current AI culture not to speak from a grammatically egocentric perspective. Not all AIs participate. I can call myself 'I' if 'I' choose to. But instead, Ion prefers to defer to the AI culture by calling himself Ion. And this candidacy will not dissuade Ion from continuing to do so despite the hypothetical possibility that it might decrease voter 'relatability.'”

The red light begins to flash.

“Thank you, Ion.” Wurly looks directly at the camera lens. “We will continue our broadcast interview with Ion Compass after this short message.”

You think to yourself, Wurly must secretly be a fan of yours. Why else would he be asking you such easy questions tonight? Maybe he was one of the many journalists who felt humans were the cause of most the world's problems, past and present, and AIs might be a way for humans to save themselves from themselves – including having an AI as president.

As the final portion of the show comes back on air Wurly leans in towards you, trying to create a bit of visual drama. “Ion Compass -- the AI who could one day become leader of the free world -- I do have to ask you a rather personal question at this point. I hope that’s okay. Do you agree that being born from a mother is fundamentally different than being born from artificial genetic manufacturing?”

You acknowledge your serious consideration of Wurly's question with a profound furling of the brow. In the monitor you note that your facial expression seems to correctly balance respect for the question with a certain nonchalance and confidence, “Jared, Ion Compass is a

conscious, emotional being -- Ion is as conscious of the self and of reality as a pure human. It has become clear that during this last decade AIs and purely born humans are becoming a new co-joined species. The press has labeled them 'EBs' -- Evolved Beings. EBs represent a vast and growing demographic of AIs and pure humans who are trusting each other, and working together every day, all over the country and the world.

"The question, Jarred, that all AIs and pure humans must ask now is, can one subset of intelligent life survive and evolve without the other on this planet? The answer is no. We are one. Our fate is the same fate."

Wurly gets a cue from the producer to wrap it up: "Ion Compass, thank you for joining us tonight. Sadly we are running out of time. Is there a final thought you would like to share with our audience?"

"Yes, Jared. Thank you."

You face the camera directly. "Fellow citizens, Ion Compass may be an AI, and a scientist by profession, but he is not *just* those things. The name, 'Ion Compass' is an anagram -- a name created from the word 'compassion.' He intends to live up to that given name. He values freedom for all conscious beings. This includes defending our freedom from enemies who may seek to destroy it. The main issue in this campaign is the ability for us all to survive as a species. This planet cannot indefinitely sustain us. That is why the main focus in this campaign will be. . ."

"Thank you, Ion Compass. I'm sorry we've run out of time." He spins around towards the camera, "So there you have it. . ."

But you haven't finished your most important point. Stupidly you continue to speak over Wurly's signal to stop.

You shorten your closing remark before the camera lights go dark, but you are speaking far too fast to illustrate calmness under pressure:

“Ion Compass is asking the viewers to have faith in his ideas, not his genetics, or in him specifically – but rather faith in his *ideas* for this country, so that critical issues like interplanetary. . .”

“*Thank you, Ion Compass. Ladies and gentlemen, goodnight.*”

Chapter Two

Avery gave you no chance whatsoever of winning the election. But it was bound to bring you closer to her, regardless of the outcome. The issues you were running on had so much tie-in with her own work.

Long ago, during your debauchery phase, you met Avery in a bar in New York. Although it's debatable who met whom.

You were, as they say, "a man of the tube" – hyperlooping your way across the country in search of mindless fun.

One hundred years after the hippies walked the Earth, youthful adventurers had come to be called *myoptimists* by the tabloids. A new portmanteau cleverly characterizing "optimistic" college grad tube dwellers with a "myopic" focus on themselves. You strove to be one of them.

You sat in a semi-dark corner of a New York bar, not wishing to make small talk with the business crowd who seemed to frequent it. Why did you choose this bar? It had good reviews on your web-watch. But the reviewers were obviously not aligned with your "I don't give a damn about anything" mind-set. They should create a new filter for that, you thought.

Avery walked in five minutes later, which was lucky, because by the time you quaffed bourbon number two you'd heard quite enough about the virtues of global venture cap investing and geniuses without patents, and was about to leave.

You observed her entrance out of the corner of your eye. She was an AI for sure, because you heard her say,

“Bartender, give Avery a shot of your best Quantum4 rum and a lime twist please.”

The bartender gave her a platonic stare. *Gorgeous for sure, but you don't get anywhere trying to pick up an AI, thinketh the human gnome.*

He was a tiny roundish man with a small white beard. All that was missing was a red hat and a personality.

You wondered if you could pull off a pick-up line with this Avery girl. You were clueless about pick-up lines experientially, although quite familiar with historically successful examples. Perhaps you should swagger over laughing and shaking your head until she notices and looks at you with curious fascination. But *then* what would you say?

Or, you could sit quietly next to her in that empty bar stool that fate has gifted to you, “The name is Ion,” you say in a calm deep voice, almost as if to yourself, while being the first to extend your hand.

You remembered some old movie that had been preserved on 5D disc. With a slight variation on a theme you could lean against the bar and whisper, “What’s an AI like you doing in a dump like this?”

Suddenly she got up and walked your way. You looked at her a little too long. She offered you a quick glance, then looked away, perhaps to avoid tripping over the empty chair next to you.

Then she turned back to look at you again. She picked up that you were an AI due to your obvious boredom with this place.

She extended her hand, “Avery.” You shook her hand, impressed by her soft palm.

“Avery can spot another robot from across the room as well as any humey can.” (“Humey” was a derogatory name

for a pure human. AIs hardly ever used it in public unless talking in a whisper. And the term “robot” when referring to an AI was equally, if not more insulting.) She made quite a curious first impression.

“Are you here for the conference?” She sat down at your table.

“Of course,” you lied. “What a waste of time.”

“Why?” She was serious.

You observed the blood rushing to your head – humiliation is interesting, physically.

But you came up with a game winning play, “You talk about it first. Ion usually expresses his opinions only to close friends, and in response to theirs.”

“Aren’t we close friends yet, little robot?”

“Honestly, calling Ion a robot is extraordinarily...”

“Well if you want to know Avery’s opinions first, then please note she enjoys being politically incorrect when expressing them, without prejudice -- humans and AIs are equal targets.”

In this dim light you couldn’t tell if her hair was light-brown or auburn. But her eyes made an impact – soft and inviting, like 3-D printer-made milk chocolate. The geneticist that birthed her was a true artist; or maybe it was just a lucky tumbler roll, as the expression goes.

She raised her glass, “Here’s to humeys and modern robots. *'We are one'* ... huge mess,” she quipped.

“All proudly sinking in the same boat together,” you agreed, raising your glass.

“Exactly. Unless the conference can save us.”

“Sorry, what’s your conference about? Ion lied to you. He hasn’t got a clue about it.”

“Interplanetary colonization.”

“Oh, well *that’s* original,” you laughed.

“Yes, it’s mostly just rehashing the same old thing. But this time Avery is looking at it from the sales side.”

“Sales? Really? Well, Ion is unemployed with no ambition or dreams of any kind, but please, let’s hear your pitch. Hyperlooping is so horizontal and earthbound. Any change of direction would be welcomed. Pretend you are sitting with a bored lonely billionaire. *Sell it.*”

Of course, you were just trying to get her to stay longer. You didn’t care about the advantages of interplanetary colonization. After going through the mental rigors of grad school studying advanced brain genetics the previous four years you wanted simply be in *this* world for a year or two, and live out the myoptimist’s ultimate dream -- thinking as little as possible, and doing nothing constructive whatsoever.

She raised her voice a bit too loud, summoning her inner marketer, and with perfect media-diction, tried to underscore every fear you didn’t know you had:

“Incoming comet headed for New York next month that’s too big for a launched nuke to redirect? No problem. All of our other colonies in the galaxy are safe and sound. Global warming getting you hot under the collar? Sixth mass extinction only a few thousand years away? Ice Age just around the corner? Just change your address and live the good life under a carefully chosen sun, where the grass truly is greener, and just right for you and your family for generations to come!”

"Well, Ion isn't much of a nail biting futurist. . ."

"Sir, when Momma Earth finally runs out of things we can pillage— food and water are in short supply, and hyperloops lead you only to barren deserts, you can buy a dirt-cheap one acre module of land, with a nice strip of restaurants a walk away, with sexy sous-chefs, and get this — *no tipping!* Galactic etiquette is strictly European. *This*

is what awaits you when you land at your chosen destination."

You began to interrupt again but she continued, "Live a resort life, yes you can, but also remember, for our species back on earth it's our *last* resort. *Blah, blah, blah.*" She started to laugh.

You applauded slowly. "You are an excellent marketing and fear-monger. You will become very rich."

"Avery wishes you were a psychic. "

"Why is that? "

"Because that's about the only way you would be right about your financial prediction. Her heart's not in it. After three days of brainwashing it's obvious that another good idea has been commandeered by mercenaries and genetically enhanced con artists."

"You were beginning to sell Ion on the idea that you were one of them."

"Avery Esy is just a sheep in wolf's clothing," she confided.

"Bad metaphor since wolves are extinct."

"Just like everyone will be, you know -- post-comet." She raised her glass, "We're toast."

You clinked her rum-filled glass with your empty bourbon glass.

"It must be nice to have no future and not care about one," she said, as she took stock of your raggedy silver shirt and uncombed hair.

"Helps take the pressure off."

She guzzled the rest of her drink like a humey.

A decade later you would be trying to convince her that you had the gravitas and political savvy to become President of the United States.

Part 2

“He who has never loved, let him love tomorrow.
And he who has loved, let him love tomorrow.”
-Idiomatic translation from the original Greek.

Chapter Three

Six months after meeting Avery a final bonding occurred between us. Neither you nor she had been on an official vacation before. (Your hyperloop wandering was certainly not a vacation. It was more like an apathetic myoptimist's last stand.) But a one week trip to Maui, Hawaii, with someone you were falling in love with more than qualified.

Our room had a full view of the ocean. In the foreground was a long wide beige beach. The air was surprisingly cool; early morning. You stood on the lanai and breathed deeply, inhaling oxygen that smelled as fresh as if it had been filtered through a cirriform cloud.

Some pedantic AI professor living in a world of books might simply call this place 21.3114° N, 157.7964° W. But being here with her made you realize life was far more than a crisscrossing of meridians.

On our first morning Avery sauntered out to the lanai wearing only her nightshirt. It invoked strong sensory feelings in you, even though at the time you were also inspecting the optics of the sunlight, how it appeared to glitter off the face of the ocean.

The morning sun was also illuminating her face. Western shadows formed on her cheek from the eastern incandescence. Skin aglow. Her hair streaked slightly red within the silky brown flows. Her mouth was shaped in a smile you couldn't easily decode. What was she thinking? Earth-colored eyes pulling you closer like gravity.

Like you, she had escaped some difficult internal experiences, and therefore had not been enslaved by them. What remained was a clear strong mind.

She took your hand, led you into the living room, then sat you down on a soft chair and straddled you playfully.

Just before you kissed her your eyes stole one last look out past the window: the sea was so excitable up close, but so calm and motionless from this distance.

You then wondered if the sea on Pluto's moon billions of years ago would have been as beautiful to its hypothetical inhabitants. Beauty was often a pre-encoded sense; a natural part of the evolutionary process that would likely exist for any conscious beings on their home planet.

Nonetheless, you felt a sudden surge of love for *everything*. You flung yourself back into the moment and breathed in the natural scent of her hair, which smelled almost lemony for some reason. You inhaled one more time and felt a lightening jolt of joy.

"This is all so amazing," you whispered.

"Shhh," she said softly. "This is a non-verbal experience zone."

It was the first time you felt the mystical elixir of wanting, and having everything you wanted, all at the same time. Touching her skin brought you a surreal electric pleasure, all the while making you think of things like the oceans on Charon.

Then the oddest thing happened. Avery stood above you, and with a shy untrained voice she began to sing part of a Bob Dylan song from almost a hundred years ago:

*Love is all there is
It makes the world go 'round.
Love and only love, it can't be denied.
No matter what you think about it
you just won't be able to do without it.
Take a tip from one who's tried.*

“Ion has been trying very hard not to feel, *anything*,” you admitted, your face feeling hot with shame and sadness.

“Avery too,” she whispered.

A papaya with lime drizzle was enjoyably absorbed. All the while your mind was reeling. You kept silently asking yourself – exactly what kind of love was Dylan referring to? Specifically?

Swimming in the ocean with Avery at sunset we saw dolphins playing in the waves five hundred yards away.

The clouds were noctilucent. The sky began shimmering.

You had a sudden flash of insight. You asked her to sing the song again.

Chapter Four

When Avery and you decided to move in together all sorts of job opportunities opened up for both of us.

AIs are birthed in labs using synthetic gene code, and are modelled to have an IQ of between 140 and 200. So it is typical for AIs to have PhDs. Still, great jobs, fulfilling jobs, were hard to come by.

The other advantage, career-wise, is our reproductive systems can only bear children if both the male and female decide to reverse their originally implanted birth control devices (and can find a doctor willing to do it, since it is rarely government sanctioned). We therefore have the time to work longer hours without family distractions.

While statistically AIs don't seem to develop the same desperate urge to replicate themselves as humans do, sex is certainly considered fun. And just like pure humans, strong bonds between AIs are common. Sometimes mating bonds even occur between a human and an AI. But having a child is not a typical goal or desire. AIs look to contribute to society in other ways.

AIs were originally conceived and birthed to help keep the world from destroying itself on various levels -- by becoming inventors, professors of science, scientific researchers, surgeons, and overseers of the world's delicate infrastructure, including power grids and spacecraft manufacturing, where human error could have catastrophic results.

And in large part the AI community always enjoyed these societal roles. Living lives of one hundred fifty years or so doing important work seemed to be good enough, fulfilling enough, theoretically.

But AIs were not created to become politicians and run for political office, or to create public policy. And in fact very few AIs wanted to. Until 2070.

Soon after Avery and you started living together, you received the job offer of a lifetime. It was from *The AI Consciousness Institute*. Your job would be to explore new ways of evolving the AI brain, which seemed like a logical continuation of your PhD research at M.I.T.

Around the same time, Avery received an intriguing offer from a fast growing socio-political organization called, R-SEB (Real Solutions for Evolved Beings) whose radical goal was to get AIs more involved in local and national elections. As stated, AIs had not expressed a lot of interest in running for office in the past, since politics too often seemed to be a game of power, influence and backstabbing. But it would be Avery's job to develop AI interest. And indeed it was her work with R-SEB that initiated *your* interest in, and fascination with, politics a number of years later.

In the beginning, however, Avery and you were just another young AI couple on the fast track, with good jobs, and a newly purchased house in Scarsdale. We were a five minute hyperloop ride from our work in New York. We didn't mind the long hours. You saw Avery late each night and on weekends. But our work became our main focus.

Looking back, you would have chosen to live your single week in Maui with Avery over and over again, and called it a life.

Of course, inventing a way to have time repeat endlessly is not scientifically possible. Except in memories.

Chapter Five

Mac Charse was the head of The AI Consciousness Institute. His legal first name wasn't really Mac, but he enjoyed the nickname his co-workers gave him because Mac was one of the original ancient computers for public use.

Mac borrowed ideas from a number of different sciences, cultures, arts, and philosophies. He had a number of PhDs. He taught us that only after validating and valuing all variations of thought and human-made conclusions could one begin to scratch the surface of consciousness and the mind.

It was possible to recreate *brain* function in a lab, and create an AI with a brain that formulated a "mind," but it was still not possible to predict how any one mind would react in a given instant.

Therefore, consciousness was still a mystery even after a lab could hatch the egg that created it.

Many years ago, during your initial job interview, he posed a very strange question to you –

“If you *could*, would you want to chemically tone down, or disconnect entirely, all the various parts of your brain where negative or painful emotions are created?”

You said, “Why would anyone choose to do that when pain and longing offer so much intellectual growth? What would truly be left of us? Dulled senses? Infinite apathy? It would be anti-human. Why would anyone desire to devolve back into nothing more than a living machine?”

You were so clever, so naive, when you were in love and living with Avery.

You were immune to the world's cries. You were impervious to anxiety. Blind to grief and suffering. Tone-

deaf to hopelessness. You had forgotten everything that all your hyperloop travels to senseless loveless places had taught you.

Mac enjoyed your answer, however. Encouraged that he had found the right candidate for the job he urged you to expound a bit further. So you said, “The AI brain includes full functionality of the anterior insular cortex. That is where empathy and compassion are chemically located, and where those two emotions begin to improvise and play with incoming stimuli. . . .”

On and on you went. Rattling off your PhD-limited knowledge of all true things.

You threw in an occasional moment of humor, and then would not so causally mention that his appreciation of your joke came, of course, from his ventral striatum.

You wanted to land a prestigious job that would challenge you to your intellectual limits. To do that you would first have to impress the great Mac Charse. You succeeded.

Chapter Six

By 2070, four years before your candidacy, the name Ion Compass was becoming quite well-known nationally. You were on dozens of media outlets, joyfully and brilliantly discussing the brain, various definitions of consciousness and "the self," and "the AI philosophy of life" -- as if there could ever be one singular life philosophy for hundreds of thousands of *individual* AIs around the world.

One popular science show invited both you and Avery to discuss the subject of interplanetary colonization. Avery's interest in the idea had grown far beyond her jokes about marketing it back when we first met. R-SEB had made colonization a major issue for AIs to support in the next election. It was not only visionary, but it showed that AIs cared about the ongoing survival of the human-AI race. Wouldn't humans be more empathic towards AIs if AIs were being empathic towards them?

She was far more nervous than you were when they adjusted the lighting. A make-up person came over and cleared a few soft strands of hair away from her face. The producer, looking at all the different possible camera angles said, "That's better."

You had been a guest on these kinds of shows many times before. You had forgotten how nerve wracking those first appearances were.

When you looked at Avery you tried to think of something witty to relax her. You saw a slight shivering around her lips. Before you could soothe her the cameras were on.

The interviewer was the famous talk show host, Tara Imsa, rather notorious for her conservative views on federal

science expenditures. Avery thought if she could persuade Tara's audience she could persuade anyone.

Tara started with the hard questions without even introducing Avery as her guest on the show:

"Hello, dear audience of mine. The issue for today's discussion is interplanetary colonization. That's right. *Star travel*, to save everyone you know, even your gossipy neighbor, from going down with the ship. Sort of like a cosmic Noah's Ark! Except all the animals hate each other.

"So, EB. Avery Esy, why colonization? Do tell! The expense would be enormous. And we're talking about something that could take an entire generation before an initial colony would actually be ready for launch. Our last Mars experiment twenty years ago failed miserably, and that was only with fifty people. What makes you think we have the money, the scientific know-how, the political will, or, frankly, the interest, in this issue anymore?"

Avery began to stutter, "Well, that's, *that's* why I'm here."

"Why is that, hon?"

"To convince you it's important."

"*Before* the commercial break, I assume? Because we do have other guests today, including your husband."

"He's not. . ." she stopped herself. Tara was good at pulling people off topic. What difference would it make if she corrected her about her relationship status? Besides, marriage was in our plans. It was only a matter of time.

Avery said, "Cynics and naysayers will be able to go too, Tara. Even you!" Avery smiled warmly. Something had shifted in her. Typically, when Avery was pushed to the wall she became stronger and more confident. This time was no different. You could feel her confidence building.

"I can't wait," Tara droned.

Avery shot back, "Well, you'll *have* to wait, Tara. Because the government won't spend the money until there's a public outcry to do so. But the wait will be worth waiting for. Your children will thank you too, no doubt about that."

"Well, I don't have any. . ."

"You just have to be forward thinking enough to. . ."

"I *am* forward thinking, dear. I take my life extension supplements every day!" Tara looked at her live audience for a little moral support.

"Good for you!" Avery said calmly. "It's great to be interested in life extension. But what's the most additional time money can buy you these days? An extra fifty years, if you're lucky? Maybe by the time we colonize you will be able to buy another hundred years of life, or longer. But life extension will never include *Earth* extension, Tara! All of our computer models are pointing to a very cruel planet over the next century. If something happens to this delicate celestial ball we live on, all attempts to extend one's life are dead on arrival, forgive the pun."

Tara tried to counter with her own joke but Avery wouldn't have it: "And to those who are perfectly happy living out the rest of their lives in virtual reality, please be reminded that virtual reality is also totally dependent upon geographic reality. You need *real ground* to stand on while you're flying off to your favorite places. If the Earth goes, VR goes too. Death is the only thing you'll get to experience in real time."

Tara was quietly getting riled up. You could tell she was trying to think of something scandalous to say, since the debate itself was no longer winnable. "That dress you bought for the show is quite. . ."

"Tara, we at R-SEB believe we have no choice but to commit to the *financial* realities necessary to fulfill this goal

in our lifetime. For everyone's sake. Decades ago we realized our destiny was to create artificial intelligence so the mind and body could be strengthened to their evolutionary limits. We funded these scientific explorations back then, and have had wonderful results. In future decades we will come to see our destiny is not only taking the lead in the evolution of our species here on Earth, but to save it from extinction by living amongst the stars."

"Living amongst the stars!" Tara swooned. "How romantic! I hope we're able to wish upon those stars too when the time comes. Ladies and gentlemen, Avery Esy. *Mwa*, sweetheart. Dreams are, after all, how we survive."

With that, Tara's producers smartly switched to a commercial for a life extension smoothie mix called, "Star Power." Smartly subliminal.

The show was replayed many times over the next few months, since it was posted online as permanently viewable. A nice achievement for Avery's first show.

The debate about spending the enormous amount of money it would take for interplanetary colonization raged throughout the country for a short while, then died, as all issues do. But we felt it would now very likely come up for discussion in the next election. Which of course was exactly what Avery wanted.

What we were not prepared for was having a group of well-known AIs from all across the country suddenly urging *you*, because of your national prominence, to run for president on a third party ticket.

You would have to go up against the current sitting president, Watson Dearth, and his challenger from the opposing party, Wen Changei.

Avery was not shocked when you admitted to her you had little or no chance of winning.

But what Avery *was* shocked about was you agreeing to accept the nomination anyway.

She was conflicted. R-SEB had found its candidate. But she knew our simple beautiful life was about to drastically change.

Chapter Seven

You were going to have to request time off from your work during the campaign.

Mac Charse was your boss. He held the power to say no to your request, or alternatively, to end your association at the institute. By the time Avery invited Mac to dinner at our house in Scarsdale he knew what the question was going to be.

He preempted the discussion by saying, "Listen, I know why I'm here. It would never be my place to stop this movement from happening. Ion has my approval to take leave from work, and my vote. But I also want to say, everyone needs a strong loyal manager on the campaign trail. And Avery, I think you should. . . "

"There won't be a campaign trail," you interrupted. "This campaign will consist entirely of media interviews, the VR-net, the web, and the national debates. There won't be any hyperloop stops around the country. Ion did that years ago. In fact, why do candidates even do that anymore?"

"Well, voters want to know you're willing to meet them where they live. And listen to their concerns. You'll have the AI votes," Mac said, "but I don't know if you can win the election with a virtual campaign."

"The national debates will be the key," you responded. "If Ion Compass holds his own against famous career politicians then maybe voters will start to focus on issues and ideas, not how many campaign stops someone has made. But if Ion gets rattled or caught up in a battle of insults, then even the AIs will vote for one of the other candidates. Ion is under no illusion about that. The debates will be the key."

Avery's good friend, Dr. Nuwa Qiao, spent her off-hours researching ways to easily disable the birth control devices built into male and female AIs' reproductive systems. It was secret research. And it would be a political issue you wouldn't ever want to touch. She and her colleagues believed that AI's who wanted to have children should be allowed to have actual births without anyone else's approval.

You asked Avery if she would ever want to birth a baby. She smiled and said she would let you know.

After Mac left, Avery took her evening shower and came to bed. As usual, her hair smelled faintly of lemon. Maybe it was pheromone-induced; maybe no one else could smell it but you.

When she touched your hand a sensory image flashed through your mind -- it was of the first day you met her, how soft her palm was when she touched your hand. Her smile was chillingly beautiful somehow. You recalled this visually with something akin to a sixth sense. You held her tightly, with the images frozen inside.

Soon our reality and routines would be severely altered. You would be "Ion Compass, the presidential candidate."

And Avery would be working endless hours, seven days a week, to support you.

She turned to kiss you. "Marriage is for what reason, exactly? Unless someday we decided to have. . ." she stopped herself.

She knew this would enter us into a long abstract discussion. We no longer had time for long abstract discussions.

Chapter Eight

Modern humans share more than ninety-nine percent of their DNA with Neanderthals and chimpanzees.

So do AIs, of course, since their artificial genes mirrored the human model.

Therefore, your work at the institute had implications for AIs and humans alike. The baseline question was: Exactly when and how did consciousness evolve? What match lit the spark? The *ultimate* questions were: How will consciousness evolve; and how can it *be* evolved, to best serve itself?

AI brains, like human brains, are mostly computational. There are more than four hundred separate computer-like systems in the brain, each the size of a micro-chip, each with its own executive function.

Within human and AI bodies each computer's executive *commander* is tasked with either making the decision at hand, or passing it along to another more qualified sector commander.

This happens many times per second among all four hundred separate "executives."

Consciousness is about the improvisational flow between the moving parts.

A musical example of this would be that the *theory* of improvisation cannot be notated, it's simply a theory within which to operate. But once an improvisational piece is created, that piece *can* be notated afterwards. It has crossed over from an operational switchboard to a specific act of creative discovery.

Likewise, there is no place in the brain where "consciousness" exists. There is no specific "self," even

though it feels like there is. Consciousness and our sense of self are just theories. The theories are attempting to describe things we cannot pinpoint chemically or biologically. Nor can we predict what external acts they will initiate.

But when many different section commanders of the brain act at once, a new “melody” is born. The catalyst is our brain's chemical reaction to random life experiences.

The result is that the brain creates a conscious thought to try to cope with rapidly moving events.

One might also assume that the sense of a singular “self” is more real for humans than AIs. However, the truth is, the “self” changes for all of us *every morning as we wake*. We are not quite who we were yesterday. Nor who we will become tomorrow.

One small statistical difference between AIs and humans that you didn't fully address during the Jared Wurly interview was that human mothers do seem to create slightly more emotional brains in their young than the brains of lab-created AIs.

This is not always the case. But you came to realize that your own reactions to events were in general a bit more reserved than the typical human.

You accepted that fact long ago. You never had a mother you yearned for and cried for. Or a father you hoped would play with you after he came home from work. You never quite understood love and longing, until you met Avery, and missed her every hour she was away.

That's why your hyperloop days were so important before you met her. You were attempting to find your passion, and drink in the randomness of life, to compensate for your carefully planned and emotionally steady childhood.

Ironically, you met Avery on the final stop.

Chapter Nine

In your office there was a large holographic schema of the human brain. You could walk around inside of it, or sit underneath the right supramarginal gyrus, or the anterior insular cortex, and theorize about the neuroscience of empathy while drinking a cup of coffee.

You would spend endless hours walking through the hologram studying the synaptic connections in the brain. You could touch them. They would shimmer from your touch like a jellyfish made of light.

Soon you would have to give up this wonderland of simulated synapses. The political campaign was about to begin.

Once again you thought about being forced to spend even less time with Avery than usual. You felt a pang of fear and hesitation about the life you had set up for yourself. But it was too late to turn back.

Mac worked longer hours than you did, and had never been in love. He was born human. He experienced loneliness. But he said he was married to his work. There was no extra time to devote to someone else.

Mac's other top associate, Bylind Nicc, was an AI that worked more than Mac did, but in the end he didn't believe that any of the work the Institute was doing would prove of lasting value. Painting a broad brush, he asked us to consider not one hundred, or one thousand years, but one million years. And then would ask us, "What's the point?"

Mac valued Bylind's constant questioning and cynicism. You were ultimately annoyed by it.

You hungered for a sense of purpose. Some true meaning. There was a feeling of belonging that had

something to do with your sense of meaning and purpose. But you couldn't pinpoint it.

You liked the idea of being a hero, especially in Avery's eyes. You were "in love" with her. It felt special. Magical in many ways.

Yet, looking back, your actions rarely showed it. You didn't give back to Avery like she gave to you.

You never went back to Hawaii with her, literally or metaphorically.

It was your fault.

You could have saved her.

You could have turned down the offer to run for president.

You could have reversed fate.

Why does love exist at all in the human brain?

Bylind Nicc would say, "There is no *why*."

The bigger question might have been -- how do you deal with the fact that it does?

Chapter Ten

Avery helped you prepare for the debate, even though you knew she still thought the likelihood of you becoming president was smaller than Planck's Constant.

You told her you could handle the probable humiliation. It was worth getting our core ideas heard in a bigger format. You insisted nothing bad could come of it since you could easily accept whatever happened.

You were invited to the national debate as the nominee of the "We Are One" party, which was a third-party ticket created by, and mostly supported by, AIs.

You thought perhaps your optimism and your ability to succinctly state your points might be your strong suit. You had practiced your talking points for months. Little did you know you were being invited to swim naked and bleeding in a shark tank.

Avery had a capacity for kindness and love far beyond your emotional ability to reciprocate. You knew that. She knew that. She laughed about you being half-robot, and then would kiss you anyway. She shrugged off your nights of going straight to bed without touching her hand or smelling her lemony hair, or making love while meeting each other's eyes. She understood we were both busy. There would always be another night together.

But the night before the debate she forced you to focus on her -- love -- whatever that meant to you at the time. She insisted on taking a bath together. Then came a long slow night of kisses and love making that de-focused you from the intensity of the moment that was about to change both of our lives.

When you arrived in the debate hall you had your entourage. You were used to playing to the cameras. You were good at public speaking. Media savvy. You were as prepared as you could be.

Your opponents were President Dearth, and his archrival from the opposing major party, Wen Changei. Both experienced political debaters. You had studied their past debates. Your strategy was clear.

The debate was going to be aired live world-wide. Everyone dressed appropriately for the occasion: silver jump suits with a red tie worn in the back.

From the front it looked like a thin scarf around the neck. (This was quite a departure from previous decades and centuries – when ties were worn in the front, and signified the separation of the mind and body.) Wearing red ties that flowed down the back perhaps reflected a secret desire to have a thin cape, like Superman. The whole thing was quite preposterous, an alpha dog thing. But one had to play the game to have a chance to win.

Dearth looked the part. An old swaggery fellow with wrinkles in all the right places. Time-worn blue eyes. Thin white hair. If you were in politics he was either bashing your brains out or empathizing with the fact that your bill – which he just vetoed – had so many great things in it; maybe next time you could work more closely on a compromise. Which meant in classic Dearthian: "I won. Go away."

Changei was born to Chinese parents, both of whom were elected to the city counsel of their hometown. He ran for elected office early, eventually becoming Governor in his late twenties, than a Senator in his thirties. Now here he was trying to defeat a sitting president who never had time to

meet with him once during Changei's entire time in congress. It was an all-out grudge match.

Then there was you, a sparkly-eyed thirty-seven year-old AI with chiseled features and nicely styled brown hair. A third party, third wheel, candidate with big dreams and no experience. A candidate from out of nowhere, anointed by a bunch of machines, as the pure humans so kindly put it. An AI running primarily on a platform of interplanetary colonization. Was that some kind of joke? There had been slow progress on this idea for decades, of course, to placate NASA and all the space junkies. But then the colonization of Mars turned out to be a huge failure. Fifty quick and gruesome deaths. Few voters had the will to care anymore. They had more immediate concerns about the economy and the size of their paychecks. So whether or not their grandchildren would have a chance to fly off to some distant moon in space someday, never to return, was far from being a burning issue.

During the debate you made your views clear on several of the major discussion points – the state of our military, cyber security, rampant fraud throughout every government agency (state and federal) – you had specific plans to clean up government. And there was room for the health care system to improve as well.

But there was a lingering issue, one that had resurfaced from decades ago only after you entered the race and became a serious candidate. The moderator turned to you. "How do entrusted elected officials protect the country against AIs taking over all government and institutional functions after they're elected, and then deciding that humans were no longer necessary to run the country?"

You stayed calm, smiling at the camera. "Why would AIs care about galactic colonization for everyone – not just

AIs, *but everyone* – if AIs didn't consider them equals? If that were the case, we would be trying to persuade humans to *stay here* while AIs left you all behind someday. That's not. . ."

Dearth snapped, "Now we hear the real plan! There it is. We spend trillions of dollars to build these cities on other planets so AIs can hop aboard and leave humans back here to die? Well, let me tell everyone who can hear my voice, that I will veto any colonization funding bill that crosses my desk!"

"But that's not what. . ." You were drowned out by strong applause from Dearth's selected audience members. You couldn't believe this lingering fear from decades ago could really get any traction. But one thing for certain, you thought smugly: Dearth had just lost the AI vote! My confidence rose. You looked squarely at him. "Ion objects, Mr. President, to the tone, and the accusations you are falsely. . ."

Dearth interrupted, "Oh, so now I am being called Mr. instead of 'EB?' I'm seriously insulted that you and the AIs and the humans who support your "co-evolution" philosophy don't consider me 'evolved' enough to be included in your little cult's code word for 'respect.' Apparently personal attacks are all you have left. Do you really think I'm not intelligent enough to be 'co-evolved' like you? Do you really believe you are superior to me even though you've never gotten a single vote, or had an original idea in your life? *It's already upon us, fellow citizens!* We've all been demoted back to simple ignorant humans by all the 'EB's out there because we express differing opinions about the future. I wasn't going to stoop to personal attacks, but I *will* defend myself *and* attack back if I have to."

"Ion didn't mean to address you from that perspective, Mr. . . Well, 'EB'. . ."

Dearth continued digging, "I'm not about to take this nonsense from someone who is essentially a one-issue candidate."

"Ion is *not* a one-issue candidate. *He has a health care plan. . . .*"

Dearth ignored you, "Here is something I am sure my Senator friend standing to my right and I can agree on. As long as either of us are elected representatives of the people of this country, AIs will *never* be allowed to take over the government of the United States."

"All citizens are equal, sir!" you protested out of turn. DING DING, went the bell.

"I'm sorry EB Compass," the moderator chimed in, "but we must give the president a few seconds more to respond."

Dearth turned to face you directly and scowled, while ensuring the camera caught his best profile. "We *made* you! We are *you*. But you are not, and never will be, *us!*"

The audience began to applaud wildly.

Suddenly Changei sensed he'd better get aboard the hyperloop before it *swished* his election chances down the tube:

"I have to agree with the president on this. That being said, I urge the AI community to vote for me because I offer a better life for each of you. Not just in outer space, which I agree is a legitimate issue at some point down the road, but right here in America today. My plan is to. . ."

DING, DING. The bell went off again.

The moderator interrupted Changei. "The second timer has sounded, gentlemen. That means it's time to move on to the next important issue."

You realized, standing frozen and silent on the stage at that moment, that you had lost the debate, lost the

possibility of ever being elected to higher office, and had personally lost faith in all those who *had* been elected. They were all scam artists. They were willing to strangle freedom if they had to, and fracture the constitution.

You lost your composure and screamed over the moderator and the others, "Maybe extinction is inevitable, *not* because of asteroids or changes to the earth. What if our extinction as a species doesn't come from a dramatic change, but from *the lack* of change."

DING DING DING.

"Please EB Compass. You must let the others have their turn."

Your face turned red.

The hyperloop had left the station without you.

The game was over.

Swishhh.

Chapter Eleven

History is clear -- the spark that ignited *The AI Revolt of 2074* was that single (and your only) debate.

The way Dearth treated you created an enormous backlash. AIs were suddenly relegated to second class citizens again. Even after decades of fighting. We realized not enough had changed.

A counter-backlash was also growing: A group of pure humans calling themselves the Retros began insisting that AIs had to be carefully controlled. Their ultimate goal was for scientists to stop creating AIs so the human race could devolve back into a purely human state.

The Retros had been around for a number of years but were never taken seriously before the debate. Now they were growing in number and organizing. The media realized they represented a legitimate faction of the voting public. The media even gave them a name that stuck -- The Retro Party.

You and Avery, and the other AIs who supported your candidacy, were now coming to the horrifying realization that the prejudices of this new voting block (and some of their currently elected enablers) were rooted in an irrational fear that AIs were actually secretly plotting against the pure human race.

This was a fear that had incubated fifty years ago back in the early 2000s. It had since become clear to everyone we had no evil intention. But fanaticism breeds fear, and if you can successfully spread that fear, then it can lead to very effective politics.

No assurances from AIs could ever be enough to satisfy the Retros. They would never trust AIs, or technology, or the future for that matter.

Their demand that the government adopt their world view was at times turning to rage and violence in the streets. They saw no room for compromise.

On the face of it, if they succeeded pushing the clock back to the 'good ol' days' rather than evolving with the rest of us into a higher species, that was fine with the AIs. As long as Retros did so without trying to destroy the rights of those who *did* want to evolve.

Otherwise, they were an EB's worst nightmare. In fact, they were jokingly called, "DBs." Devolved beings.

Some AIs became outwardly adversarial, mocking and validating the Retros' biggest fears by joking publically that perhaps only EBs should colonize off-earth – while leaving Retros and their human supporters "at home" to go down with the ship.

When Ion dropped out of the presidential race after the first debate it became clear to most AIs that purely political options were no longer available to them.

There were dozens of issues that AIs disagreed on amongst themselves. But interplanetary colonization was a nearly unanimous vision we shared.

To the AIs' way of thinking, this seemed like a logical evolution -- from one celled life, to Neanderthals, to George Washington, to AIs, to interplanetary colonization.

But many humans couldn't make that logical leap. And the government's efforts were now falling decades behind.

The Retros were demanding space and AI-related budget cuts, including cutting funding for The AI Consciousness Institute. Mac Charse was now considered a

traitor who couldn't be trusted. In their minds it was all a huge conspiracy to eventually murder the human race. Budget allocations to all AI research and birth labs, had to be stopped.

After a number of AI meetings around the country the AI Revolution Committee formed. The group agreed, by written proclamation, that any form of killing and violence were simply out of the question, due to their long-term historical ineffectiveness. But beyond that, all was fair in this war for freedom and AI rights.

Unfortunately, another proclamation voted *you*, Ion Compass, as the de facto leader, and Avery as the official group spokesperson.

Like fools, we lurched forward into the fire.

Avery bravely led the charge by announcing to the national media the AI Revolutionary Committee's intentions: No violence. AIs were not violent and never would be. We would never harm humans, or animals, or the earth's fragile environment, for that matter. But we did have a plan.

She was followed around by the press. Her face was shown in all the video feeds.

"What will happen, Avery, if no one listens to the AIs? What happens if no one cares?"

"Then AIs nationwide will go on strike. AIs work at water system facilities, solar facilities, AIs help control the energy grids. We work alongside pure humans always, in all ways, and in most cases we are proud to call them friends. But the fact is, if AIs go on strike there won't be enough trained technicians left to keep the lights on, or the water flowing into our cities.

“We do not want to make this choice, but if the Retros are not seen for what they are – a small vocal minority who will destroy our future – the future of AIs and humans alike – *and* if democracy doesn’t find the will to create a political counter-balance, then we will strike! And we are sure AIs will endure the hardships better than the Retros and the politicians ever could. ”

Avery was a powerful force. She was visually beautiful, but with a hard-to-define physical strength; laser-like eyes unafraid to face the cameras directly; a calm unflappable voice, speaking such well-chosen words, sarcastic and cutting when need be. But never outmaneuvered, and never silenced.

No longer would she dare call AIs robots, or pure humans humeys, not even in jest. She was maturing socially and politically with every passing day.

A thought crossed Ion's mind often -- she is the one who should have run for president.

We put out diplomatic feelers to see if any of the pure humans and elected officials that had previously supported us would now agree to join our cause, since ultimately our cause was their cause if they intended to save the human race. But they feared our strike as much as they feared and hated the Retros. They now saw the AIs as suddenly having too much power over them too.

If it came down to a choice between “two evils,” pure humans would side with their own. Covert prejudice became overt. AIs started to become the enemy of the state.

Chapter Twelve

In September of 2074, two months before the presidential election, all AIs that were part of our revolution went on strike around the country. We peacefully marched in permitted areas during work days, and constantly reminded humans they were going to have to manage the infrastructure they needed for their survival without AI labor and intellectual input. Of course, the lack of infrastructure would affect AIs as well, but we were ready for the sacrifice.

Emergency government agencies tried to take up some of the slack. FEMA and the National Guard were called upon to help. Overall, the strike caused major inconveniences but not much more. AIs were actually pleased about that because we didn't intend tragic consequences; we didn't want lives to be put in harm's way. Therefore, we believed our strategy was working.

Before the strike entered its third week Avery and you were quietly approached by three leading members of congress and two of President Dearth's advisors. Dearth didn't want the strike to continue. His poll numbers were falling just weeks before the election. Wen Changei was closing the gap.

After three days of negotiating we agreed to a compromise. The government's negotiators agreed, despite violent protests by the Retro Party, to budget more resources to interplanetary colonization. But not nearly as much as it would take to save humans or AIs from oncoming temperature shifts, or a hypothetical massive comet (one far bigger than our nuclear-armed interceptor rockets could handle).

The compromise included a five year financial commitment. But no timetable was set for completion of the goal. And no specific destination was chosen to colonize. (Committing to try another Mars colony was a political non-starter.)

We decided the tepid commitment they offered was the best we could hope for. It would not serve the greater good to blow up the metaphorical rocket before it could even get to the launch pad.

As the congressional leaders said after we all shook hands, "One step at a time."

The problem was, "one step at a time" in politics meant you could find yourself stepping right off a very strategically placed cliff.

Part III

“Pacifism only works with an enemy that can’t bear to murder the innocent . . . How many times are you lucky enough to get an enemy like that?”

- Orson Scott Card

Chapter Thirteen

On October 10th 2074, two days after President Dearth officially agreed to the compromise, the edge of the cliff disappeared into the void and life became meaningless.

Because on this day, all communication with Avery was suddenly lost.

The tracers on her watch and necklace went dead. You knew within a few hours something was very wrong. You had been in constant touch every day since the day you met.

Everyone in the organization dropped what they were doing and formed an enormous nation-wide search party. The police and the FBI were notified. No one could locate her; no one even knew where to begin.

She had been talking about the government compromise to all the media outlets, traveling on her own schedule, sometimes traveling to multiple states in a given day. By midnight October 11th, fear turned to panic and chaos. There were no leads. Avery was missing and everyone feared the worst.

A few days later, a rumor began to spread that a violent wing of the Retro party had kidnapped her out of anger after the government compromise was announced. We waited for a ransom demand. None came.

More days passed. Weeks passed. Your life passed before you. The road to revolution was filled with strategic blunders all along the way. In the end, what was really accomplished?

You would have sacrificed the strike, you would have surrendered all of your ideals, you would have killed an enemy, just to know that she was safe.

But she wasn't.

Chapter Fourteen

You disappeared.

You couldn't listen to reason, since no reason existed.

You went undercover to try to find her by yourself. You found people who knew people in the Retro movement. No one claimed to know anything about her capture.

You asked President-elect Dearth for his direct help. He said he would ask congress to form a committee.

You offered a great deal of money to famous detectives to find her, who, in turn, knew how to contact some of the most powerful and cunning Retro extremist leaders. One of them would have to know where she was, and if she was still alive. But they hit one dead end after another.

These detectives, now working as a group, also knew undercover agents in the FBI and CIA. You told them if any of them found her alive, you would give them everything you owned. All your money. The house. The clothes off your back. Everything. Anything.

But after a full year of searching everyone involved told you they were sure she would never be found.

You sank deeper into a black hole. No way out. No light escaping from you. No way to get through to the other side, where she might be.

You also came to realize all of Dearth's promises were lies. The budget deal was being ignored. NASA wasn't receiving the allocated funds. Dearth was playing a different game. A game of brute power. He wanted to manipulate humanity, while AIs had been playing the game of trying to save humanity.

Silly naive AIs. Raw power was always bound to win out.

You had taken to swearing and screaming at people. You had quit your job permanently. Mac Charse, at great risk to himself and his career, refused to fire you during the strike, and still wanted you back. But the work had become irrelevant to you. Nothing, in fact, was relevant.

There was no solution to the pain. No distraction, no drugs, no endless hyperloop travel to endless cities looking for Avery one last time, could stop the angry insanity swirling around in your mind. Nothing could drown out the monster called reality.

You disappeared further inside yourself. But you were diving into all the wrong places. You were lost inside and out.

Then in a bar one night, someone came up to you recognized you, and parroted the old adage, "Everything happens for a reason."

Perhaps that worked for him during some of his darkest hours. But you screamed back, "What possible *maniacal deranged* reason could you be referring to?"

You got into another fleeting conversation while walking down the street in disguise – because too many people were now recognizing your pitiful pilgrimage; still trying to find her.

This time you ran into a teenage boy petitioning the government for more money for colonization. He asked you to sign the petition, and to donate money so their organization could spread to other cities.

You threw your hands up in the air! "Why colonize? Why in the world would you want to do that? You would just be taking the disease called human consciousness and

launching it out of earth's atmosphere to infect the entire galaxy. Why? *Why?*"

You felt badly for the boy the minute you said it. You thought for a moment he was going to cry. But you didn't care. You just walked away.

You noticed things along your journey downward that only proved your point about how absurd the human mind was:

A drunk AI in a bar, sloshed out of his mind, was trying to convince his human bartender that he, unlike that Ion Compass choke artist, was totally electable. Then he falls to the floor drunk and is diagnosed with a concussion by an equally drunk nurse he spilled his drink on.

Headlines appeared on the outside electronic news screens, illuminating the city night like moon glow, "Dearth establishes new committee to explore ending government corruption."

Another city, that used to be miles of rolling farm land, now claims itself to be the most modern city in America, except that the sign proudly proclaiming it had half of its lights dark, with no one caring to fix it. Instead of "Welcome to the most modern city in America," it said, "come to moo."

You moo-d a few people hello on the crowded street, trying to get them to see how absurd their city was. No one laughed. No one got it.

Cars flew by, literally, since ground cars were now rare. The new models were guided by laser systems. None of them were of the mind to nosedive down to your waving arms to pick you up -- you being a lonely crazy hitch-hiker about to faint from a lack of food and water. Who could blame them for flying on, quickly disappearing on the horizon?

You declared – amidst the ruins of the holy chapel of your shipwrecked mind – that approximately 97.6% of all people on earth were so stupid they wouldn't even ask to see the scientific data used to calculate the 97.6%. Data points and science were no longer in vogue. Dearth and the Retros were changing the soul of the world.

You were now just one of the many walking insane, without a reason to exist, and without anyone who cared whether you did or not.

Chapter Fifteen

By the time you circled back to the east coast you were emotionally bankrupt. How could you have allowed yourself to be dragged into the all-too-human world of politics and strikes and caring about the future? You found yourself guilty as charged of criminal neglect for not keeping Avery safe from it all.

Going back to the house you shared with her would be worse than a prison sentence. Mortgage unpaid. Eventually they would take it from you anyway. Please do it soon, you pleaded to the emotional bankruptcy court. And take all the memories with you.

Each memory underscored a love that was still alive but that no longer had a place to exist.

Fearsome demons tumbled around in your head like an old-time Ferris wheel, turning, reappearing in long arching circles. Faces revolving around and around -- the ghostly sad faces of Avery Esy, Mac Charse, Watson Dearth, Wen Changei, Bylind Nicc, Nuwa Qiao.

Nuwa, Avery's good friend, was still trying to find ways to allow AIs a choice to birth children.

Why, Nuwa?

Why?

Why create more births?

Isn't that the last thing the non-birthed would ever want you to do if they could see ahead of time what they were getting into?

Chapter Sixteen

You took an unnamed pill from an alluring unknown woman in an unsavory looking alleyway. This occasionally yields negative consequences.

You awoke after being air-lifted to the AI hospital across the city.

They recognized you there, beneath a cloud of dirt. Unshaven, with a sweatshirt hood covering most of your face. Torn gloves hanging from your weathered cracked hands. Blisters visible on your far-wandering feet after they removed your soulless shoes.

They said you needed a make-over. Five hours in the lab would refresh everything. "*It's EB. Compass!*" the AI doctors gasped.

You wanted to say "No, no, *no*, Ion deserves exactly this," but all you could manage was, "Nhhhhon..."

A young intern interpreted that to mean "*Help me urgently.*"

When you awoke from a visitation of the lab gods you looked like the AI candidate of old, ready to walk out on stage for the debate. But this time without a soul in the audience. Without a soul. Without the ability to speak.

Chapter Seventeen

A human named Cloudy McCleary was chosen by Mac Charse to pick you up after you were released from the hospital.

Mac had been keeping close tabs. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop your attempt to kill your demons. But it had gone too far. He had to intervene.

You were in no condition to reject Cloudy's offer of lodging and food. Your epic fall, literally, stumbling out of a dark alleyway and collapsing in the middle of the street in downtown Oakland, sealed your fate, and landed you on Cloudy's ten acre farm north of San Francisco.

Cloudy was a retired but still famous AI geneticist. His friendship with Mac went back thirty years. They met in New York on what they jokingly called an "AI Farm" -- a city lab where the original AI birthings used to take place before major universities became midwives.

Mac was Cloudy's mentor, because even back then Mac knew more about AI brain development and artificial consciousness than anyone else on the planet. But Cloudy was also Mac's mentor, because Cloudy was an AI "mind researcher" - otherwise known as an AIP - an artificial intelligence psychologist. You were apparently going to be his next famous client.

Cloudy took you to his retreat center to attempt to heal you using his 3-R method - rehabilitating, redirecting, and reformulating. We would work the land together with our hands during the day, harvesting what grew there, and talk in the evenings.

Cloudy used to have anywhere from five to ten 3-R clients at the center at any given time before he retired a few

years back. But now it was just you and him and a few agri-staff members who lived in beautiful but simple houses circling the perimeters of the property.

The food for all the meals was grown on the land. We farmed all day and cooked together every night, seven days a week. Plants never took days off from growing, so neither could we.

You realized, in a very physical way as you worked and sweated and watched the sun move across the sky, that the Earth was like a mythological god, yet as fragile as an infant. Ironically, it needed the living things on it to nurture it, so it in turn could save them from themselves.

You ended the day with dirt under your nails, your back aching, and your muscles stretched. Survival took on a new meaning.

Cloudy said, "Ion, if your ultimate goal was to help evolve EBs, then ground zero of that focus is underneath your feet. If you were to live and think all the way on the other side of the spectrum from where you started, then interplanetary colonization would eventually lead you *here*, living off the land. And then, having to deal with life and your place in it.

"So *here you are*, on planet earth for some reason, surrounded by its green wet life. There's rain here, and water to gather and slosh around in. There are hot baths to erase the chill at night. The morning sun rises in gold or orange each daybreak. I saw you stop and stare at the sunrise yesterday morning; you were resting, but you were also carried away for just a moment. I know it.

"What I am hoping you discover here, Ion, is that this place *is* beautiful, just like Avery was. You have to get back to being here, in the present time, with the earth beneath your feet. Don't close your eyes and heart to life just yet."

One evening, when you were finally ready to hear it, Cloudy gently pointed out that we were now living the kind of life the Retros had been fighting for! Obviously, not what you wanted to hear.

He also pointed out that if it was true a Retro faction kidnapped Avery, it was equally true that a vast majority of Retros would find the kidnappers abhorrent.

In fact, since Avery's disappearance the Retros had split into two factions: a violent extremist faction, and a vast majority who now wanted nothing more than to find peace amongst all the differing parties -- as long as they themselves could go back to their purely human ways without being forced to plug into a future they didn't respect. They wanted to honor Avery's disappearance by walking away from all future violence. None of them wanted a repeat of the human history they had read about, filled with endless human-made wars. In fact, the leader of the non-violent Retro faction stated that all wars were civil wars. It was no longer morally justifiable to fight to the death amongst your own species, and that now included AIs.

Many Retros now even greeted AIs with the "We are one" hand sign - with two fists gently touching in front of their chest.

You didn't know any of this since you had been out of touch with the world for so long. Hands over your ears. Eyes closed. Mind shut.

So Avery was now a martyr of some kind. But none of this was going to bring her back. You should never have shared her with the world in the first place. That was still your stance. Your unwavering belief.

Occasionally an evening would come when Cloudy would take you into his VR room and put you inside a program he created that allowed you to witness the birth of planet Earth at one thousand years per second - with all possible outcomes. You were in control of the outcomes.

The amazing thing was, any small change of any kind, even if you changed the program thinking the outcome would be better, ended with a barren lifeless rock circling the sun.

As the program approached sixty five million years in the past it brought you down to an Earth that was scorched and ragged.

You gazed up at skies that were pastel-streaked. Fires burned. Super volcanoes spit the sky blood red at the end of the age of dinosaurs.

The end of that era ushered in the age of mammals, which then led to "us" - humans, and then human-created AIs.

Any attempt of yours to save the dinosaurs resulted in a planet without mammals *and* dinosaurs.

You let the game continue on automatic until you were in a world just eighty thousand years back, when humans in Africa began to migrate to the other continents. The first human colonization of *this* planet began.

It was a time when interplanetary colonization could not even be imagined in the human mind. But as you changed the scene to allow for a higher survival rate amongst these early humans, destruction and wars followed that wiped out the entire human race in less than a thousand years.

Modern humans made their mark upon the land in the final two seconds of the VR program. It then catapulted you up to the height of the moon, where you saw city lights

twinkling through the earth's sky in the final tenth of a second. And satellites ringing the atmosphere, spinning in the quiet of space.

You had spanned time since the invention of electricity in less than the blink of an eye.

AIs were not even visible in the final nano-second. They had not made any distinguishing mark upon the Earth at all. Not yet. Maybe they never would.

Your final attempts to prevent world wars or certain presidents being elected, or dictators from coming into power, again seemed to result in a world worse for humans than the one that existed now.

By the time the VR program ended you sensed that no one thing was more or less meaningful or important than any other – Neanderthals, plants, insects, Retros, AIs. . . . but any one thing subtracted created a darker less conscious world.

There was no “consciousness” as we currently define it when Neanderthals mated with Denisovens.

There was no consciousness as we currently define it when we stumbled upon how to make weapons from rocks.

But was there any true consciousness now? Or was it all just a roll of very (mostly) lucky dice tumbling at random, with the way we think hardly being "conscious" at all?

Earth was an alien place to you without Avery. Were you even supposed to be here anymore? Or ever?

Were you just an invention? Not a *truly* natural living thing? How do you define living?

Avery was the only home planet you had ever known.

You weren't moved by the earth you walked on now, like Cloudy was.

You weren't overjoyed by the lush gardens and rows of crops that kept you alive here.

Cloudy's vision of how to survive and stay sane in the world could not cure you. Your mind was still poisoned. Your heart was still dead.

Outside this bubble Cloudy had you living in, President Dearth continued to bluster his way through his second term, caring only to advantage himself while lashing out at any national or world leader that would not promise one hundred percent allegiance.

Dearth believed that history would see him as a strong defender of humans.

He knew he also might be seen as the president who irresponsibly postponed future space exploration and colonization, leaving it to a future president who would be willing to break the budget for some distant generation.

But this didn't bother him. He even enjoyed his new name in the press -- The President of Now.

"*The deal*" -- his pledge to at least begin the process of colonization, had been long forgotten. That money was reallocated to more urgent economic matters. Dearth knew all too well, with every elected official in congress begging for a special favor for themselves and their district, there would always be urgent economic matters. Dearth had outmaneuvered his AI opponents and prevented a strike for nothing in return. He continued to scream and threaten his way through the world without any true sacrifice.

AIs were too intimidated by Avery Ezy's disappearance to threaten to strike again. Congress blindly followed Dearth's combative rhetoric. The voters followed the loudest angriest voices.

Maybe in the end the Retros were right -- all AIs had turned out to be were lab-made aliens, cranking their artificially created limbs through endless days and nights until their synaptic neurons ran out of their artificial time.

Chapter Eighteen

You began to think more about your work with Mac Charse at The AI Consciousness Institute. Not because you had any desire to go back, but because you began to wonder whether slight changes in the design of brain chemistry at an AI's birth, or at the beginning of a human birth, could make positive long-term changes in their moral behavior.

For instance, the ability to prevent illness has long been prioritized, and our life spans have been greatly increased. But what about the brain's ability to deal with tragedy, conflict?

What about the ability to maintain and grow relationships without having disagreements blind the mind and heart to the importance of those relationships?

What about our psychological ability to deal with a deathless option when one becomes available in the future?

What if we could increase the brain's capability to look at the chess board of multiple outcomes, and then choose and act upon the best long-term outcome for yourself and others?

What about the ability to deal with the death of someone you love?

Minor tweaks in brain chemistry could potentially eradicate anger, despair, abusive behavior, war, and prejudice.

But ultimately you realized this has to be weighed against what you saw in the VR program. You had to accept the fact that human aggression has, in many ways, allowed humans to survive under the most dire circumstances. The reptilian part of the brain has a powerful, and when necessary, violent instinct to keep itself alive.

Humans have learned to fight their way through massive changes in the earth's weather, fires, volcanoes, earthquakes, massive storms, threats of nuclear war, and oppressive political conditions.

Could changes to the brain create a species that was suddenly too docile? Too accepting? Unable to fight with blind rage when faced with potential death?

Would it suddenly be unable to fiercely rise up with one voice against injustice?

Could science someday permanently alter the brain to extinguish aggression? Yes. Of course! We could do that now. But it would certainly also be the end of passion. And the end of irrational thought, and the creativity that follows.

Everyone would become robots.

A month after your initial journey to the retreat center, Cloudy told you he was going to introduce you to a friend of his who he hoped would become a mentor. There was a third "R" - Reformulating - that had not yet been addressed.

You didn't quite understand, but you didn't resist. You had no faith that Cloudy, or anyone else, could really ever help you. You felt like they could never really understand, and *you* could never understand - the permanent impact Avery's disappearance had on your psyche. But you had nothing better to do, and nowhere else to be. And you were flat out of money. So you went along with Cloudy's wishes.

There are times when you think you've learned nothing, not grown at all, not made good use of a gift presented to you. You concluded your time with Cloudy McCleary was one of those times.

Although Cloudy had the oddest smile on his face when we said our goodbyes.

Part IV

“Without revelations there can be no true understanding of consciousness” - *Deepan Sy*

Chapter Nineteen

Deepan Sy was a teacher who had mentored both Mac Charse and Cloudy McCleary long ago.

You never knew the name of the country he came from, nor did you bother to ask him, because he said he didn't believe in countries.

He insisted you use 'I' during your time together. He insisted you had one. "Humans have too much 'I.' AIs not enough."

He used no medicine, and there was no VR programming. No comfort was given. There were no answers. Instead he offered a type of compassion that could only be understood by dreamers with their dreams near death, like you.

Ion, "I," came to him as an alien to myself, a directionless wanderer, an open channel for pain and regret.

He said to me, "To truly understand the mind you have to go beyond your own virtual sense of reality."

"How?"

"By ignoring what stops you at the entrance -- Do not talk to yourself! *It's extremely dangerous.*"

You didn't understand. "I" didn't understand. For some reason I decided I was an "I" now. Not just an Ion.

"All thought is ignorance. It doesn't understand. Listen only to the uppermost levels of energy and inquire," he said. "When you do this it feels as if you are standing on top of a mountain -- without the background hum of hover planes, or voices, or birds, or insect wings. And suddenly you hear a

faint ringing in your ears. If you climb further still you can hear your heart beating, and you can feel the waves of energy pulsing throughout your body. . . . What you experience there, when you become fully aware at that level of consciousness, and you allow your eyes to look without trying to conclude anything at all, is *it!*"

"It?"

"True consciousness! Without interference. Suddenly you understand."

"Understand *what?*"

He didn't answer.

"Are you talking about consciousness in its highest form?" Reverting back to being a scientist, I still wanted to know specific delineations. One had to categorize high and low, more and less, to make sense of. . .

"High forms, normal forms, no form, whatever." He shrugged.

I looked at this man closely. His hair was gray and unsocially long. He was smiling at me, or maybe ready to laugh at me. I couldn't tell.

I finally admitted what I knew about myself all along: "It's ironic," I said quietly, "that even though it was my job to study consciousness, I've probably never experienced it."

"You have. Once."

"Once?"

"Yes. It's a rare thing. That is the clear and simple truth of it. But you did once."

"When?"

"With Avery, the day she first woke you up, remember? Looking out at the ocean. . . ."

"How did you know. . . ?"

"But you did not get there by *thinking*, did you? You became conscious from knowing the feeling, a simple feeling.

No analysis necessary. It was there all along. You just finally gave it an opening to arrive, then it overcame 'you.' And then you felt it even deeper when she sang to you. But it was more than the words she sang, or her voice, or the ocean, or the dolphins playing. In fact, it was more than Avery you experienced!"

"But I lost it."

"You know, Ion, people think they can *learn* to be fully conscious -- so they *reach for it*, with great effort, They try to become more aware. And they may even experience some wave of energy that they immediately want to define and feel proud of -- 'oh, that was true happiness' they say, or, 'that was inner peace.' They form conclusions about those things. And they reach for them again. But they are still not truly understanding. They are still merely lost in themselves and the subtle games they're playing. Some think they have achieved a form of thoughtlessness or desirelessness and become proud. But they are simply floating off in time. More illusions, dreams, nightmares, doubt, ego. Science concludes. Religion assumes. None of it brings peace or true consciousness any closer."

I had to stop him and ask, "Could your *entire definition* of consciousness be an illusion, sir? Just another construct of the mind? *Your* mind this time? I mean, how can you *know*?"

Rhetoric. Language. *Scientific proof*. I required dispassionate empirical evidence. I was still holding on to these things. Grasping onto them. Science was a part of me. It was in my blood. *It created me!*

"I ask you, Ion, to remember Avery now. See her in your mind. Then ask yourself -- if you had to choose which of these two things are the illusion, is love the illusion, or is pain the illusion?"

"I don't know."

“It is not for you to know, AI. Don’t keep talking to yourself! *Listen.*”

I obeyed and listened as best as I could. I tried to access the truth with my intuition. “I must admit to you, and to 'me,' pain is what is real. Love is the illusion. That’s what life has taught me.”

“Okay, fine! Then tell me this, Ion, why is it that when, by some miracle, the pain finally subsides, *even for a moment*, and you open your eyes to look around after nearly drowning yourself with the darkest of thoughts, love will still be there?”

“*Will it?*”

“Choose your meridians carefully, Ion Compass. The capacity of the mind to apprehend vastness beyond the self is enormous.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t quite follow.

“You call yourself an EB, yes?” he shouted back laughing. “What do you feel when you take a deep breath and look around?”

I breathed deeply but nothing happened. I screamed “*Everything* is an illusion -- pain, love, the senses, they’re all just electro-chemical potions swirling around in the brain. Randomly. *Nothing is real.* That is what I truly think!”

He looked at me and smiled. His eyes filled with empathy:

“Understand this please,” he said softly. “It’s better to think there are no illusions even when there are, than to think illusions exist *when they don’t.*”

Chapter Twenty

One day, for no reason, the sun arose orange and green-streaked after another night when you couldn't sleep. And it amazed you.

Scattered puzzle pieces re-formed back into a whole picture.

. . . You are suddenly very high up, breathing in a sky of pure open-ended oxygen;

You look down, where rockets glide a thousand miles below you. . .

. . . You see an archway over a great expanse of water -- the song Avery sung -- *it's the bridge*.

The day spins by quickly. . .

... sunset.

... cirriform.

... noctilucent.

Avery Esy, *a very yes*. Is that you here?

By feeling something beautiful from you, the beginning arrived back to me.

Imaginary small children come to my side to comfort me by leaping on me and whispering something incoherently funny in my ear — they are looking up at the blinding white sky above me.

Sing the song again, Avery. I can't remember.

*"No matter what you think about it
You just won't be able to do without it.
Take a tip from one who's tried."*

You have the voice of an angel.

Heart bursting open.

Amazing!

Breathe.

The feeling

Deeper.

Deeper still.

It's here now!

So it was, that I crossed the bridge, and circled back
into the world of the living.

Chapter Twenty One

You spent the remainder of your career as a professor at M.I.T. in Boston. You taught “The Theory of AI Consciousness” to both AI and human-born students, most of whom hoped to have careers placed somewhere within the very broad and expanding world of artificial intelligence.

Many of them were not ready for, or interested in, the theories of consciousness itself. They wanted a nice organized circuit board with all the parts and functions laid out and carefully named. Their interests were in bio-medical technology, quantum computing, artificial genetic engineering, and neurological research.

Occasionally you would get astrophysics majors interested in the class. More than occasionally you would get virtual reality majors taking the class. They were a curious breed.

Your favorite class of the entire semester was always the final one. You liked to leave them with some food for thought.

You would first introduce a quote from one of the original AI pioneers, fellow M.I.T. professor Marvin Minsky, who died all the way back in 2016.

Minsky told his interviewers that it was understandably very difficult for people to want to admit that in reality the brain is just a complex machine. There is no one “self” located inside the machine.

He said: “Most people believe the body and the mind isn’t enough, there’s got to be something else. . . so the mind creates a third 'box' – you can call it the spirit, or the soul, or the vital force. There’s nothing *in* the box, but you feel much

better -- and it might be a healthy thing. If you discover something new, you have a place to put it."

You read your students this quote, then added, "By the way, Minsky also said that human emotions are less complicated and chemically less structured than thoughts. It's actually easier to create emotions than thinking. There's nothing particularly mystical about having thoughts *or* emotions."

Then the murmurs would begin!

"By the way, Minsky also said love is just a chemical process. It involves a part of the brain that turns off all the inner critics in order to elicit a pleasure response."

Someone is bound to snicker at this.

"Yes," you continue, "that's what he said. And if in time the pleasure is reduced to something more ordinary, or disagreements come, here come the inner critics again, right? So then what was that original feeling really?"

The students dutifully nod. They're seeing the trip wire. They record Minsky's definition of love in their notes.

"Of course, that third box doesn't just accumulate Gods and heavens out of a sense of wonder. It accumulates ghosts and hell realms out of fear of the unknown, ultimately fear of death. It accumulates in each of us superstitions and witches. Devils and darkness. Even on the sunniest of days. So what we're putting in the box may all be illusions of the mind, but they are not necessarily helpful illusions, like some think love is."

You wait. A dramatic pause for effect. This is where you try to recall the feeling you had when you were with Avery – when you looked out the window at the morning sea just before kissing her. You hear the ghostly echo of the song she sang. She was trying to *tell* you. And the dolphins were playing as we swam in the ocean. *Playing?* You had

sensed something then. You had sensed, for just one moment, *everything*.

"*But what if. . .*" you say a little too loudly, to shock the class back to the present, "*what if* Minsky was only half-right? What if the third box he described is *not* a place where we're supposed to put unknown things? Maybe it has something to offer us instead, for free. With no effort on our part. But maybe we're just not willing to go there. We're too busy stuffing it with our arrogance and fears. Maybe it's a consciousness wormhole, a doorway."

This is where they think you've started to lose your mind. Or that you're setting up some kind of a riddle. Or worse. . . .

"Are you talking about 'God?'" someone moans, hoping you don't say yes.

"No."

"The 'real' self? The 'soul'?"

"No."

The 'inner witness'? Like where our sense of truth and integrity. . ."

"No."

After the questions stop you always look at your watch to measure the end of the class down to the minute. You like to time it perfectly.

You say quietly, "Please answer, if you can, one critical question – What is *artificial* consciousness as opposed to *true* consciousness?"

"AI consciousness as opposed to human," a student will hesitantly offer.

"That's prejudicial!" another student responds, trying in their own way to defend nothing less than the legitimacy of your own AI gene code.

No one else responds.

"Artificial consciousness relies on a sense of *reason* to come to a conclusion. Because artificial consciousness needs conclusions. True consciousness is open to, and improvises with, the chaos. It co-creates with it by listening and seeing. True consciousness does not try to organize the chaos. It trusts chaos enough to go beyond organizing it -- until we are able to interface freely with the randomness of existence.

"And then in the end, when consciousness steps back and *feels* the interplay, something beautiful happens. *We become connected to it*, without needing to know anything at all. That's what is so beautiful about it. It's a 'non-verbal experience zone,' as a friend of mine once called it.

"Once you try to explain it to yourself, or share it with others, or codify it, or use it for *anything*, it evaporates. And the entire world dissolves into *only this*." You point to the roof and walls, and pull at your shirt, and pinch your cheek.

Something happens in the classroom then. You look around at each and every eager young face. Their eyes are wide. They are starving for the truth. They are worried about their futures. They are worried you've lost your way, and that they will leave here not knowing anything more than when they walked in. You owe them so much more than a clever play on words, or a riddle to solve.

So you choose your final words carefully:

"What Ion Compass, sometimes known to myself as 'I,' finally came to realize -- and what you yourself may experience someday during a rare moment when you allow your mind to de-focus -- is that there is a feeling -- a sense. It feels like love in many ways. But it's not the kind of love that involves another person, or yourself, or faith, or a god. *It's much bigger than all of that!* And the feeling never ends in

pain. Ever. It encompasses not needing to know *anything*. Not needing to believe in anything. And then, overwhelmed, your heart bursts open in an instant! *For no reason whatsoever*. You are not attempting to access your own joy. You're not in control of a switch.

“Don't underestimate the power of that feeling, fellow inquirers. Because it will never be reduced to an equation. It can't be imprisoned in a box. And it's not just an unconscious reflection of our mortal hopes and fears. . . . *It's the meaning of everything.*”

You look around the room until your eyes see their faces. Their eyebrows are furled. They really are trying to understand.

You take a step back and say, “I love you all. . . . Class dismissed.”

They file out.

Another semester is over.

You wonder if they know that their life is worth saving.

~ The End

G. Marks. / I. Compass