

Autobiography of an AI

Ghostwritten

by

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Part I

AI, *Artificial Intelligence*:

Definition in 2022: "A simulation of human intelligence by a machine."

Definition in 2122: "Any living being with human intelligence and consciousness, created with synthetic gene coding, or created by any other means in the future."

* * *

"Concerns about artificially intelligent beings evolving to the point where they threaten human civilization would be comparable to a dinosaur's concern that it might evolve into a bird someday, and then be able to sing and fly... And it's just as inevitable."

-- *Ion Compass*

2139

Chapter One

One hundred seventy years after the hippies walked the earth, similar youthful adventurers like myself, who had a dream of changing the world for the better, but without a clue about how to actually do it, were now called Myoptimists by CloudNews and VideoThreads.

"Myoptimist," was a clever portmanteau attempting to characterize and label us. Our subculture consisted of the thousands of naive, overly-optimistic, artificially intelligent grad students who had come to adopt from their human college counterparts a myopic focus on their own self interests, their own life, and their own true sense of happiness.

This myopic focus was, for the most part, due to twenty straight years of relentlessly intense education, and then the inevitable burn-out that comes. Any intelligent mind, artificial or not these days, eventually comes to ask itself, "What's the point? Why am I doing this? Who am I, and who do I want to be after I graduate? Where's the joy? When do I get to have fun?"

On this night, I found myself sitting in the dimly lit corner of yet another ineffectual conference on interplanetary colonization.

Little did I know these next few minutes were going to set the rest of my life on its future course.

When Avery walked by me, I was speed-reading through yet another article on global venture capital investing. I had spent many of the previous hours overhearing laments from geniuses without patents, and looking over patents without geniuses.

At first, Avery was nothing more than a brightly lit blur in my peripheral vision. Then, for some reason, I looked up and saw her. She had stopped right in front of me to speak to an odd-looking man.

She was an AI like me, for sure, because I saw her cast her eyes downward, embarrassed by the man's apparent compliment, and responding, "Thank you, but many pure humans have brilliant ideas as well."

"I appreciate that," the man smiled. "In fact, I have one of those ideas! I'm Nick Bosely, of Bosely Scientific, by the way." He reached out to shake her hand.

"Avery Esy," she smiled politely.

He shook her hand for way too long. Flirting obviously. With zero chance, obviously. She was way out of his league.

Bosely was a tiny roundish man with a short white beard. He was wearing a red silk jacket, I suppose to look cheery, or cherry-like, to help him stand out from the meandering wonderers making their way from booth to booth. The only thing that seemed to be missing was a furry Santa hat and a personality.

He soon departed after trying to persuade her, in a whispery monotone that sounded to my ears like the hum of electricity, that there were indeed legal guarantees already in existence if she were to purchase land on another planet -- planets only his company represented. Guaranteed to be habitable, or currency back. It would be a gift that would last for generations. His eyes teared-up when he said, *generations*.

Apparently, Bosely Scientific was some kind of intergalactic real estate agency, selling land way over on the other side of the tracks.

She politely told him she thought his idea might be a bit too ahead of its time, or her time, smiling all the while as

she waved a firm goodbye and bowed out. With her looks, I was sure she'd had plenty of practice with firm goodbyes.

I saw her sit down at the gourmet juice bar across from me. The seat next to hers was empty.

I wondered if I could pull off an introduction. I was clueless about flirtatious introductions like these, experientially speaking, although I was familiar with some of the more historically successful examples, having watched old movies from the late 1900s and much of the 2000s.

Perhaps I could saunter over, laughing and shaking my head. I would sit down next to her and say in my calmest, deepest voice, "The name is Ion," while looking straight into her eyes without blinking, and being the first to extend my hand.

I felt uneasy as I approached her.

When her drink arrived she thanked the server, then glanced at me as I approached.

"Hi, I'm Avery," she smiled. I was happy to be pre-empted.

When I shook her hand, I was impressed by her soft palm. There seemed to be a warm glow about her, generally. I thought to myself, the brain is a brilliant creator of illusions, both good and bad. But this one feels good. Thank you, brain. I did occasionally thank my brain, but more often scolded it.

"Ion," I said.

"I can spot another AI from across the room," she shrugged. "It's a savant-like talent I'd rather not have."

"But in this case?"

My verbal attempt to spread my metaphorical peacock fan was politely ignored.

"What do you think about the conference?" she asked.

"Not much," I shrugged.

"Oh? Why not?"

"I find myself hyper-aware of the salesmanship, the avarice, the fanaticism, the lack of new ideas, and the proliferation of decades-old bad ones that, in unintentional ways, could very well move the possibility of success backward more than forward..."

"Other than that?" she laughed.

"Sorry. I'm not a doubtful or cynical person as a rule. I'm a Myoptimist, actually! But, truth be told, I'm finding myself feeling a bit nervous."

She ignored my clumsy attempt at intentionally clumsily flirting. "So what's the alternative if this conference is, as you presume it to be, a total waste of everyone's time?"

I decided to be direct. "Well, I'm not trying to sound like a politician, but sometimes I wonder if we wouldn't be better off focusing on improving our existence here on Earth -- the old cliché ironically delivered by my least favorite politicians -- instead of thinking about where our species will be living hundreds of years from now. Too many artificial dreams, not enough pure facts about how it would work... or if it would be the best course, especially after the failed Mars mission."

"Yes, that's all the opposition talks about. They have their headline."

"Well, a lot of people died."

"What's the alternative? Everyone dying, here?"

"Improving life on Earth. For each of us," I repeated. "Have fun in the few hundred years we have to live."

"In search of fun, are you, Mr. Myoptimist?"

"Yes! Joy. *Passion*. Connection. Diligently serving the world in our spare time, instead of having fun in our spare time."

"Is there a problem with serving the world and simultaneously having fun?" she asked.

"Oh. Well... that does not seem possible... lately."

"I see. And why, Mr. Myoptimist, can't we strive for a best case scenario where both things are possible? And if striving for that is the goal, then why can't we also do those things on another planet someday in the distant future, while also trying to extend the life of Earth, instead of facing The Final Extinction? Why does fun have to be a singular goal, or only experienced here?"

I observed the blood rushing to my head – humiliation is interesting, physically.

The geneticist that birthed Avery was a true artist; or maybe it was just a lucky tumbler roll, as the expression goes. In this light, I couldn't tell if her hair was blondish brown, or dark red. But her eyes made an instant impact – they were the color of chocolate. *Actual* chocolate. (I wasn't a fan of printer-made chocolate.)

"I'll have what she ordered," I said to the server. "What is that, by the way?"

"It's a favorite of mine," she interrupted, "it's on me." She turned to the server, "Citrus-infused non-alcoholic spirits please, with a slice of lime. Large."

"Thank you," I said, embarrassed at her offer to pay for my drink. "I guess you can tell I'm on a bit of a budget, awaiting employment."

"Employment where?"

"Well, nowhere at the moment. Just awaiting the inspiration to *become* employed. I just finished grad school a few months ago. I'm on a sabbatical of sorts. Therefore, when considering my past work experience and expertise, and my current level of enthusiasm, I'd say I'm qualified to be something like a hyperloop driver."

"They're autonomous."

"Exactly.... I could catch up on my sleep and travel while being paid."

"How ambitious of you." She gave me a curious look, "I still don't know why you're here, exactly."

"Honestly, there are some interesting people here. And a few patents I wanted to read through."

"And?"

"Let's just say I find even the best patents to be a tad over-ambitious."

"Well, I'm not sure you are the best judge of ambition at the moment," she laughed. "And just remember, it takes courage to be an optimist. So if you really want to be one..."

"That's true. I've thought about that exact thing, in passing. And I do admire ambitious people, and real optimists. I admit, I'm a bit of a fake. But I am attempting to emulate that mindset, because I do need a break from the relentless erudites I spent the last four years with."

"Are there a plethora of non-erudites here? Or just more virtual vampires wanting to suck your artificial blood?"

My cheeks felt flushed again. Her sense of humor was intellectually adorable.

When the drink was put in front of me she raised her glass, "Here's to humans and AIs. 'We are all one'... *huge mess,*" she smiled.

"Made in their image," I smiled.

"Strange Gods, indeed," she parried.

Her eyes were looking at me intensely. She was blinking far less than what would be considered statistically normal, which is probably what created my unease, a feeling of intensity.

"Sorry for my lack of social awareness, Avery, what do *you* think about the conference?"

"Well, I do agree it's mostly just rehashing the same old thing with a new filter. But I'm looking at it from a political perspective this time. Bottom line, if this were to ever happen, we need government funding...."

"It's a tough environment with the current administration."

"Yes, a change of party, and vision, would be a big step forward."

"One would hope."

"Imagine if Watson Dearth won the Senate race in New York in November. We'd be stepping back into the dark ages of the 2020s."

"Oh, Dearth. He could never win.... *Could he?*"

"Never underestimate people's tendency to overestimate people, or underestimate the randomness of their choices. Sometimes I think Democracy has come down to voting on lottery tickets. You don't know if you've won or not until after you buy the ticket. Nobody is willing to actually tell you their number ahead of time."

She looked at me, maybe trying to figure me out -- what was *my* number, so-to-speak -- what did I really think, or feel, or want, or care about?

I thought to myself -- join the club, I can't figure me out either -- typical of Myoptimists worldwide.

After four years of grad school at M.I.T. studying advanced brain genetics, minoring in The Effects of Zero Gravity on Brain Signaling, all I wanted to do was rest; *re-set*.

In fact, I already had multiple job offers that would have inevitably cost me a hundred years of dedication if I accepted any one of them. But first I wanted to experience the famous Myoptimist goal of unemployment-by-choice.

Avery said, "So basically you're a fatalist. You want Earthlings to endure their destiny, tie their fate to the fate of

their home planet, enjoy their time while they're here, and that's that?"

"Something like that. But, I wouldn't say I'm a *pure* fatalist. I'm not a *pure anything*. I'm interested in the evolution of more highly developed emotional states -- neuropsychological genetics, you might call it. That fits my interests and ambition more than begging the government to fly us off into space just as we are. No offense to all of us, but I don't think we're ready to multiply ourselves into the heavens just yet. Not even AIs. It would be a sad day for the heavens, having to deal with any of us."

"Well, I'm a bit of a sheep in wolf's clothing then," she confided.

"Bad metaphor, since wolves are extinct. But why?"

"Because, I do see your point, and I agree. We shouldn't export the human virus into outer space until the virus is eradicated. But colonization is important for our future too, even if we're a bit early, maturity-wise. So to me, the answer is co-creation. We work on creating both realities at the same time. Better planets and a better us before we go there. Because we are far from accomplishing either. We have time... but not limitless time."

I felt myself nodding yes, which was so much better than having to force myself to nod yes for the sake of social etiquette. Social politeness in all forms, while important, had lately become a burden to me, like so many other things.

We clinked our almost empty glasses together.

What's your name again?"

"Ion. Ion Compass. But the "E" is spelled with an "I."

"They must have predicted you'd be a Myoptimist then," she laughed. "The silent "I" gives it away."

She took stock of my ragged silver shirt and uncombed hair. "So, Ion, with the "E" spelled with an "I," it must be nice

to have no future, and not care about having one for the foreseeable future, or care about anyone else's future! Quite freeing.”

She paid the tab, and then, to my pleasant surprise, she motioned for me to follow her, and we left the conference center together. We went for a walk around the conference grounds. Our first day together lasted for almost ten hours.

Ten years later, I would be trying to convince Avery that I had the gravitas and political savvy to become President of the United States.

Chapter Two

*"He who has never loved, let him love tomorrow.
And he who has loved, let him love tomorrow."*

-Idiomatic translation from the original Greek.

Avery's sparkly personality was very unlike the drab automaton-like, over-200 I.Q.-ers that would briskly crisscross M.I.T.'s campus during my time there.

Their eyes never left the ground as they rushed to their next class, unless they were staring at a screen while they walked. I would never be so crude as to call them robot-like, but pure humans and AIs whose IQs are 30 points higher than mine tend to lose something in the translation, in my humble opinion.

Avery was not one of them. She was emotional and funny. Not at all interested in overindulging the intellect -- which can easily happen when one realizes that life is too often too scary, too unpredictable, and too uncontrollable.

We would spend our weekends together, taking hyperloop voyages to different parts of the East coast. Maine was quite beautiful in autumn. The sea levels were managed well there. Beaches still existed.

Then, on our three-month anniversary, a final bonding occurred between us.

We took a one-week trip to Maui, Hawaii. I knew things would have to change for me after this time with her. I would soon need to choose a job; a career. But there was nothing I wanted to do, and nowhere I needed to go, unless she was with me. I was happily falling in love for the first time.

Maui was spectacularly beautiful. The beaches were still wide and soft and bone-white, as they had been for many hundreds of years. Nothing about the climate, or the many cultural changes world-wide, seemed to touch this place.

Avery and I tried to imagine what the world was like over a hundred years ago, before beings like us existed. There were still individual ground cars back then, and silver airplanes that shook passengers when they hit air pockets. People shopped in buildings that had physical stores, and paper money was dispensed in outdoor machines. Music was still being created, but some of the music written and recorded over a hundred years ago still resonated in parts of our present world -- The Beatles and Bob Dylan were two icons that came to mind.

In fact, many restaurants still played these songs in the background while visitors ate food made right on the premises here, and watched the sunset over the ocean from their dinner table.

Avery surprised me by singing along with an occasional lyric from songs more than a century old. I had never paid much attention to music, or art, or dance. They were obviously culturally important, but I didn't relate... until I heard Avery singing quietly to me at our dinner table. Something stirred in me, but I ignored the feeling.

Our hotel room had a panoramic view of the ocean. In the foreground was a long wide beach. The air was surprisingly cool in the early morning. I stood on the lanai in the morning air and inhaled oxygen that smelled as fresh as if it had been circulated through a cirriform cloud.

Some pedantic AI professor living in a world of facts might have simply called this place 21.3114° N, 157.7964° W.

But being here with Avery was far more than the crisscrossing of meridians.

On our first morning together, Avery was open to initiating a physical connection. AIs were different from pure humans, in that we were not interested in sex when it involved any psychological hesitancy, or subtle resistance from the other. Sex, when it occurred, therefore felt far more satisfying to us in some ways, although it happened less frequently.

I was breathing in the sea-bright air, inspecting the optical characteristics of sunlight from this location -- how it appeared to glitter off the face of the ocean.

Avery walked onto the lanai wearing only her long nightshirt. Her hair was streaked slightly red from the morning sun. She took my hand, led me into the living room, then sat me down on a soft chair and straddled me playfully.

My eyes stole one last look out the window just before we kissed. The sea was so excitable up close, but so calm and motionless from my current perspective.

I took a second to enjoy the odd interplay between the outer calmness and inner wildness I began to feel. Then I breathed in the scent of her hair, which always smelled faintly of lemon, for reasons I never came to fully understand.

“Amazing,” I heard myself whisper.

“Shhh,” she said softly while touching my forehead with her lips. “This is a non-verbal experience zone.”

It was the first time, but not the last time, she would say that magical phrase to me.

I felt the mystical elixir of wanting, and having everything I'd ever wanted, all at the same time.

Afterwards, the oddest thing happened. Avery, with a shy untrained voice, began to sing part of a classic song by

Bob Dylan we had heard in the restaurant the previous evening, written one hundred seventy years earlier:
She sang:

*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.*

Many hours later, swimming in the ocean with Avery at sunset, we saw dolphins playing in the waves five-hundred feet away.

The clouds were noctilucent.

The sky began shimmering, or so it seemed.

I was shivering from the sea wind, and from the beauty I was observing.

I had a sudden burst of delayed emotion. It was almost as if I had a ricocheted response to what had happened that morning. I quickly swam to where Avery was, put my arms around her, and whispered, "Sing that song to me again."

Chapter Three

A month after our Maui vacation, we moved in together, and soon thereafter I received the job offer of a lifetime. It was from *The AI Consciousness Institute*. My job would be to explore new ways of evolving the AI brain, which seemed like a logical continuation of my PhD research at M.I.T.

Around the same time, Avery received an intriguing offer from a fast-growing sociopolitical organization called R-SEB (*Real Solutions for Evolving Beings*) whose radical goal was to get AIs more involved in local and national elections.

Indeed, it was her work with R-SEB that initiated my interest in, and fascination with, politics a number of years later.

In the beginning, however, Avery and I were just another young AI couple on the fast track, with good jobs and a newly purchased heavily mortgaged home on the outskirts of New York City.

We were a five-minute hyperloop ride from our work in Manhattan. Neither of us minded the long hours we spent stretching our minds to their limits. I would see Avery late each night and on weekends. But our work became our main focus. It seemed at the time to give each of us a sense of purpose.

Looking back, I would have chosen to live that single week in Hawaii with Avery over and over again, and called it a life.

Of course, time repeating is not possible.
Except in memories.

Chapter Four

Mac Charse was the head of The AI Consciousness Institute. His legal name wasn't really Mac, but he enjoyed the nickname his coworkers called him because *The Mac* was one of the original computers created for public use.

His innovative work included ideas borrowed from a number of different sciences, past and present cultures, the arts, and philosophy.

During our initial job interview Mac posed a very strange question to me:

"If you *could*, would you want to chemically alter, or disconnect entirely, all the various parts of your brain where negative or painful emotions are created and stored?"

I 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? Besides, why would anyone desire to devolve back into nothing more than a living machine?"

I was so clever, and so naive, so in love, living with Avery in our little house in the suburbs. I was, in so many ways, immune to the world's pain.

I was impervious to anxiety. Blind to suffering. Tone-deaf to hopelessness.

I had forgotten everything that my Myoptimistic hyperloop travels to senseless loveless places had taught me.

I chose to ignore my memories' observations.

I've since come to see there is a pathology to pure philosophy, and a recklessness to relying on *reason without experience* -- a mechanized deadness -- that has no value in the real world.

Nonetheless, Mac enjoyed my simplistic but appropriately conventional answer. Encouraged that he had found the right candidate for the job, he urged me to continue.

I said, "The AI brain includes full functionality of the anterior insular cortex, where empathy and compassion are located, and where those two emotions begin to improvise and play with incoming stimuli. That's where I would like to focus my initial work. I find it fascinating...."

On and on I went, rattling off my PhD-limited "knowledge of all things."

I also knew to throw in an occasional moment of humor -- followed by not so subtlety mentioning that his appreciation of my joke came, *of course*, from his ventral striatum.

But since the different sections of the brain didn't have precisely delineated functions, and instead, were all constantly interacting with the other, as if created with an algorithm not dissimilar to a Delaunay triangulation, there would also be no way to *pre-know* if any one person would think my joke was funny.

He nodded his head.

"I realized early on in my studies that this cross-functionality of the brain is what creates "the mind" as we currently understood it. Cross-functionality also made it impossible to figure out the mind's future thoughts. It would be like trying to predict every move of two champion Go players weeks before the game began!

Now, I knew he knew all these things, and far more. I knew he likely found me a bit foppish. But I wanted to land this very prestigious job. And I knew for that to happen, I would have to recite expected answers to expected questions. If I was going to truly impress the great Mac Charse, I wasn't

going to be able to do it right from the start. I was a nobody. A novice in a rapidly growing neurological revolution. All I wanted was a chance.

To my pleasant surprise, I apparently succeeded by impressing him more than depressing him. I suppose it came down to that. He said later, he just liked my personality better than the other equally qualified candidates. That was a course I never studied in college -- Personality 401 -- yet it had won me the job, just like I had won over Avery many months before.

I was offered the job that very evening.

I was gaining confidence in myself.

Chapter Five

A few years later, in 2135, four years before my candidacy, my name was becoming fairly well-known. I was appearing on dozens of media outlets, joyfully and brilliantly discussing the brain, various definitions of consciousness and "the self," and expounding upon "the AI philosophy of life" -- as if there could ever be one singular life philosophy for hundreds of thousands of individual AIs all over the world.

One show invited both Avery and me to discuss the ever-popular, but still often ridiculed, subject of interplanetary colonization. Avery's interest in the idea had grown since 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 an integrated human-AI race.

She was far more nervous than I was as they adjusted the lighting in the studio. A makeup person came over and cleared a few strands of hair away from her face. The producer, looking at all the different possible camera angles, said, "That's better." But then he rushed over to straighten the left side of her yellow shirt collar. I smiled and straightened it a bit more as the producer dashed away. When I smiled at Avery she seemed to relax a bit.

I had been a guest on these kinds of shows so many times, I had forgotten how nerve-racking those first appearances could be.

I saw a slight shivering around her lips. But before I could think of something appropriate to say, the cameras came 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 topic for today's discussion is interplanetary colonization. That's right. *Star travel*, so we can save everyone we know, even our gossipy neighbor, from going down with our ever-dying, ever-warming planet. Sort of like having a Noah's Ark in outer space. Except all the animals hate each other. Don't we, darlings?"

"So, Avery Esy, why colonization? Do tell! Because the expense would be enormous. As will be the risks. And we're talking about something that could take an entire generation before an initial colony would actually be ready for launch. Our Mars experiment thirty years ago, which some dubbed, *The Martian Suburb* -- failed miserably, and that was only with three-hundred fifty people. Rest their souls. What makes you think we have the money, the scientific know-how, the political will, or, frankly, a surviving interest, no morbid pun intended, in this issue anymore?"

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

"And why is that, dear?"

"To convince you it's important."

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

"He's not..." Avery stopped herself. Tara was good at pulling people off topic. What difference would it make if she corrected her about our relationship status and devolved

into a segment of gossip? Besides, marriage was in our plans someday. It was only a matter of time.

Avery said, "Cynics and naysayers will be able to save themselves too, Tara. *Maybe even you!*" Avery smiled warmly. Something had shifted in her. Typically, when Avery was pushed to the wall, she became stronger and more focused. This time was no different. I 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. And once that public support is strong enough, your children will thank you too. Because they will actually be able to survive to have grand children, and great grand children."

"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, while also realizing she'd nailed the perfect plug for her life supplement sponsor.

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

Tara tried to counter, but Avery wouldn't have it. "And for those viewers who are perfectly happy living out the rest of their lives in virtual reality, please remember that virtual reality is also dependent upon geographic reality. You need *real ground* to exist on while you're flying off to your favorite places sitting still. If Earth goes, VR goes. Death is the only thing you'll get to experience in real time."

Tara was quietly getting riled up. She was losing the messaging. I could tell she was trying to think of something scandalous to say, since the debate itself was no longer winnable. "That skirt you bought for the show is quite a strange little..."

"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 all minds and bodies could be strengthened to their evolutionary limits. We funded these scientific explorations back then and have had wonderful results. I think you'd agree. Fears of AIs revolting, or turning against pure humans, have been laid to rest. In future decades, we will come to see our destiny is not only for all of us to merge as evolved beings here on Earth, but for us to merge in our common attempt to save all of us from extinction, as one united species, by, as you so cleverly put it, Tara, living among the stars."

"*Living among 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. I enjoyed meeting you. We do share many common dreams. And dreams are, after all, what we live for."

With that, Tara's producers smartly switched to a commercial for a life extension smoothie mix called, "Dream

Power." It was just the kind of *slam-it-over-your-head* promoting that Tara was renown for.

The show was replayed many times over the next few months. Millions of people enjoyed watching Tara squirm for once. 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 non-urgent sociopolitical issues eventually 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 *me* to run for president because of my national prominence -- but also because of my clear affiliation with Avery and R-SEB.

The idea was to bypass a run for the Senate, or for Governor. I was asked to make the biggest splash possible by running for president as an AI with no previous political experience, on a third-party ticket.

I would have to challenge the current sitting president, Watson Dearth, previously the Senator from New York, and the nominee from the opposing party, Congressman Wen Changei.

Avery did not disagree with my initial assessment that I had no chance of winning. That admission did not come as a shock to her.

But she *was* shocked when I agreed to accept the nomination, despite knowing I would fail.

She was conflicted. R-SEB had found its candidate. The activist AIs across the country had found their candidate. But Avery saw this from a different perspective: she knew

our simple beautiful life of daily work, and deep companionship was about to drastically change.

When one's love for another intersects with love of country, love of species, and love of planet, sacrifices must be made. This is how we, with all good intentions, stepped into the trap.

Chapter Six

AIs are birthed in labs using synthetic gene code, so there are rarely errors or serious mutations. We are modelled with an IQ between 150 and 220, which has its positives and negatives emotionally, no doubt. But overall, I believe this Intelligence Spectrum should not be increased or decreased, despite the occasional fierce political debates between the Retros and the futurists.

Parenting is quite logical. We have communal work-at-home surrogate mothers and fathers, trained in pediatric psychology, who are paid quite well to raise, and give moral and emotional support to, new AIs. At some point during childhood each AI is likely to choose his or her favorite parent or parents to seek love and guidance from. It's a very organic process, which many feel is often a better option than being forced to only connect with one's birth (or original) parents. Fortunately, we're not "stuck with blood relatives" -- that was something we often whispered to each other as children. Of course, human children found AI parenting to be frightening. With no genetic connection or birthing attachment, why even call them mothers or fathers, they whispered?

The other advantage young AIs believe they have over humans, as it relates to a career, is that our reproductive systems can only bear children if both the male and female decide to reverse their internal birth control devices. We, therefore, have the time to work longer hours without the distractions of an extended family, unless a rare and very conscious decision is made between the couple to have an actual birth.

While statistically, AIs don't seem to develop the same desperate psychological urge to replicate themselves that

humans do, sex is certainly considered fun. And strong bonds between two AIs, like the one between Avery and me, are not uncommon.

Sometimes mating bonds occur between a human and an AI. But having a child would then not be possible. The synthetic code breaks down in organic biology.

One of the great poets of our time, Bethany Alms, said it best in metaphor:

*A bird cannot mate with a flower.
Yet both are unspeakably beautiful.
Both are attracted to the other.
Both share the same water and sunlight together.*

Most AIs naturally want to contribute to society in ways other than regeneration (after perhaps a brief Myoptimistic sojourn, post grad school). AIs typically become inventors, professors of math and science, researchers, surgeons, and architects of the world's critical infrastructure, as well as air-car and spacecraft design and manufacturing, where human error could have catastrophic results.

In large part, the AI community enjoyed these societal roles. But AIs were not motivated to become politicians, run for elected political office, and hobnob with the gladhanders of the day. Nor did they by-and-large find it worth their time to debate the intricacies of public policy. Until 2135.

Suddenly, here I was, thrown into the ring with the bulls, so-to-speak.

Many practicalities stood in the way. The most difficult piece was that I was going to have to request time off from work.

Mac Charse held the contractual power to say no to my request, or alternatively, to permanently end my association at the institute. By the time Avery invited Mac to dinner to discuss a "very controversial proposal," he knew what my proposal was going to be, and he was sure of his answer.

He preempted the discussion by saying, "Listen, I would never want to stop this new AI movement from happening, Ion. You have my approval to take leave from work, and you have my vote. But if you lose, you return to your position, yes? Because we need you."

I assured him that would be the case *when* I lose.

He leaned forward, his elbow on the table, fingers tucked under his chin, "But I also want to say, everyone needs a strong loyal manager on the campaign trail. And Avery, I think you should consider that role. "

"There won't be a campaign trail," I interrupted. "This campaign will consist entirely of media interviews, the VR-net, web casts, podcasts, and the live national debates. There won't be any hyperloop stops around the country. I did that years ago for fun. But never again. In fact, why do candidates even travel to where voters live anymore? I don't get it."

"Ion, voters want you to listen to their concerns in person. Voting AIs may not care about that. For the most part, you have their vote and their loyalty from the start. But pure humans need to look you in the eye. Size you up. Ask you how you can help their personal situation. That's what elected officials are supposed to do -- represent their voters' needs and hopes and dreams. Or lead them to a better dream, a dream they may not have considered possible. All that is true, and that's the positive play of democracy -- those personal connections with people living every day lives. But the other part of the equation is the interconnectedness of

the political powerful, the established party elders and power brokers - that cannot be underestimated. I know you are your own party. You have no power brokers to deal with, yet. But you will still need votes beyond the AI vote. And I just don't know if you can win the election with the virtual campaign you envision."

"The national debates will be the key," I responded. "If I hold my own against career politicians, including a sitting president, then maybe voters will start to focus on issues and ideas, and not on how many campaign stops someone has made, or what local bridge they promise to repair, or what gene code they came from, or whether their face looks good on camera.

"But if you get rattled during that one chance to connect..."

"If I get rattled in the debate, or caught up in a battle of insults, it doesn't matter how many campaign stops I make. I am under no illusion about that. The debates will be the key. If they go well, then we'll re-think what the next step should be. Maybe I will hyperloop myself all over the country after that. But until the debate, I see no point to it."

Mac could not logically refute my campaign strategy. He wished me luck. He said I would make a great leader, win or lose. I wasn't so sure.

* * *

Avery's good friend, Dr. Nuwa Qiao, believed that AI-labs should stop automatically implanting birth control devices into male and female AIs' reproductive systems. It was an unpopular topic to bring up. It would be a political issue I would never want to touch. But she and her colleagues believed that AIs who wanted to have children

should be allowed to have births without having to go to government-owned birthing labs to remove their devices.

Just before I declared my candidacy, I asked Avery if she would ever want to birth a child. She smiled and said, "Let's talk about it after you're inaugurated."

That night, after Avery took her bath and came to bed, I began to feel an odd stirring. When she touched my face a sensory-filled image flashed through my mind -- it was a crystal-clear memory of the first day I met her, how soft her hand was when I first touched it. And how comfortable she made me feel in the world right from the first moments, while at the same time challenging my beliefs, and pushing me to care, about myself, about others, about life.

Now here we were years later, with our reality and our routines about to be severely altered. I would be Ion Compass, presidential candidate. And Avery would be working endless hours, seven days a week at R-SEB, to support me. We would no longer have time for odd stirrings, or thoughts of family. America would be our family.

Chapter Seven

Jarred Wurly spun around to face the lens of the camera. On the other side of the lens was a nationwide audience. Normally, only a small percentage of Americans would have been interested in another Sunday evening political talk show like Wurly's. But this interview was an exception.

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

The camera zoomed in on my face. I could see my blue eyes and well-combed brown hair in the monitor. I smiled confidently while trying not to inadvertently convey arrogance.

"Ion, why do you think humans would vote for an AI for president? Might there not be some reasonable concern that an AI ultimately does not represent, 'We, the people?'"

I paused and calmed my mind before responding. "I understand the implications of the question, Jarred. Obviously, AIs were created *by* humans, but let me say that humans are also becoming artificially intelligent, more so with each passing year. Biotechnology modifies their cells, medication changes their core personalities when it's necessary and appropriate to do so. Everyone relies on the global web to do research, accumulate facts, and modify their thoughts and opinions. So we, as a whole, I believe, are truly one united evolving species..."

Wurly quickly pivots to the audience and interrupts, "'One united evolving species.' That is certainly a beautiful and admirable sentiment, Ion."

His swivel-chair rotates back to me as the camera zooms in, "But Mr. Compass, what about the *legal*

implications of not actually being *born*, forgive me, *technically* born, from a birth mother? It's giving some pure humans -- who by the way do not believe they are becoming half-AIs as fast as you say they are -- a clear reason to protest your decision to run in the courts."

Of course, I was prepared for this. I smiled before replying, "Jarred, most of the concerns about my candidacy not being legal are expressed by politicians who are planning to run against me, and are afraid I might win!"

Wurly laughs. "Clever response, but still..."

"Well then, Jarred, let's be clear about the legal 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.' I came into existence in the United States, on U.S. soil. And therefore, according to the constitution, I am a U.S. citizen. Just as a test tube baby would be if 'born' in this country. When citizenship rights were extended to AIs by law to be able to own a home, to be paid for their work, to start a business, and to have the right to vote in elections -- it became clear by logical extension that it also gave AIs the right to run for higher office, if they ever wished to do so. I am also over the age of thirty-five. Therefore, if challenged, there is no doubt the courts will decide in favor of my candidacy."

Wurly looks directly at the camera lens and quiets his voice. "We will continue our broadcast interview with Ion Compass after this short message."

I thought to myself, Wurly must secretly be a fan of mine. Why else would he be asking me such easy questions tonight? Maybe he's one of the journalists who have concluded that AIs might be the best way for humans to

save themselves from themselves — instead of fearing that AIs will destroy them.

As the final portion of the show began Wurly leaned in towards me, 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 human mother is fundamentally different than being born from synthetic genetic code manufactured in a laboratory?”

I acknowledged Wurly's question with a profound furling of the brow. In the monitor I saw that my facial expression seemed to correctly balance respect for the question with a certain nonchalance and confidence, “Jarred, I believe I have answered that question sufficiently from your previous segment, but let me add this: I am a conscious being. It has become clear to most people during this last decade that AIs and purely born humans are becoming a new co-joined species. As you know, the media has labeled this co-joined species, *E-b* -- Evolved Beings. I realize that it may be a bit hubristic. But the *E-bs* in this country currently represent a vast and growing demographic who are trusting each other, and working together every day on the world's most difficult and important projects. The question all AIs and pure humans must ask now is, can one subset of intelligent life survive and evolve, and find happiness, love, and peace, and a sense of life purpose for generations to come, *without* the other subset? I believe the answer is no.”

Wurly received 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 one final thought you would like to quickly share with our audience?”

“Yes, Jarred. Thank you.”

I faced the camera directly. "Fellow citizens, I may be an AI, and a scientist by profession, but I am not *just* those things. The name, 'Ion Compass' is an anagram -- a name created from the word 'compassion.' I grew up deeply aware of the responsibility my name presented me with. And I intend to live up that responsibility when representing the citizens of this country. I value freedom for all conscious beings. My goal is the long-term survival of all conscious beings. This, of course, includes defending our freedom against potential enemies. I will not hesitate to defend freedom when challenged to do so. But the *main* issue in this campaign is, how do we survive as a co-existing, united species in the long run? Our planet cannot indefinitely sustain us. We cannot indefinitely absorb this planet's resources until it has nothing left to give. That is why one issue I would like to reintroduce if I become president will be to..."

"Thank you, Ion Compass. We've run out of time." Wurly spins around to the camera, "So there you have it! An AI who wishes to join forces with you, the voter..."

Unadvisedly, I continue to speak over Wurly's signal to stop. I shorten my closing remark, attempting to reach my audience before the camera lights go dark, but I am speaking too fast to illustrate calmness under pressure:

"... I am asking the viewers tonight to have faith in *new ideas* for this country, so that critical issues like interplanetary..."

"Thank you, Ion Compass. Ladies and gentlemen, goodnight."

Chapter Eight

Modern humans share more than ninety-nine percent of their DNA with Neanderthals and chimpanzees. So do AIs, since their artificial genes mirror the human model.

Therefore, all my previous work at the AI Consciousness Institute had implications for humans, as well as AIs. The baseline question was: Exactly when, and how, and why, did consciousness evolve? The *ultimate* questions being: How will consciousness evolve in the future; and how might it be *artificially* evolved to best serve itself?

Chemicals could be ingested or injected to temporarily enhance conscious perception, sensorially and psychologically. But if we were to add this into a brain's permanent architecture, survival itself could become an issue. We needed to function day-to-day. The desire to survive was a critical baseline. Finding the right balance was part of our work at the Institute.

AI brains, like human brains, are mostly computational. There are countless separate computer-like systems in human brains and AI brains that are organic evolving self-sustaining systems, each smaller than the size of a micro-chip, and each with its own executive function.

The beginning of what became known as an artificially intelligent brain can be traced all the way back in 2021. That is when living human brain cells in a 'petri-dish' environment learned to play one of the very first video games called, Pong. When the brain cells were placed in what researchers described as a "virtual game world," they became the first "cyborg brains."

This is the first time that mini-brains, one cell entities, were found to be able to perform goal-directed tasks that relied on an evolving intelligence.

From there, science began to work with this realization that a small group of individual brain cells were able to 'learn' in set repetitive environments. Eventually that discovery became the catalyst for creating my "artificially enhanced," and therefore artificially super-intelligent, brain.

But within *both* human and AI brains, each brain segment is like its own *executive commander*, and must decide to either complete the task it is faced with, or pass it along to another more qualified sector commander. This happens many times per second, shifting among all four-hundred separate executive functioners, at synaptic speed.

Consciousness relies on 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, at times mathematical, within which to operate. But once an improvisational piece is created, that piece *can* be notated. It has crossed over from an act of creative choice to the functions of an operational switchboard.

Likewise, there is no place in the brain where consciousness specifically exists. There is no one "self," even though it feels like there is.

Consciousness and the self are just convenient ways to describe as *one thing* the internal interplay of hundreds of improvised choices per second.

In other words, these theories are attempting to describe things we cannot find, or pinpoint chemically or biologically. Nor can we predict what external acts they will initiate, or what beliefs it will convince itself of.

Continuing the metaphor, when many different section commanders of the brain act simultaneously in reaction to new stimuli -- such as random or unexpected life experiences -- a new "melody" is born, i.e., a new conscious thought, to try to cope with rapidly moving events.

During my Myoptimist days, I was attempting to initiate new rapidly moving events, perhaps overcompensating for my heretofore carefully planned existence.

Now, I was attempting to keep up daily with rapidly moving events beyond my control.

The adventure of a lifetime had begun.

Chapter Nine

Avery had a capacity for kindness and love far beyond my emotional ability to reciprocate. I knew that. In fact, she knew that! She shrugged off my nights of going straight to bed without touching her hand, or smelling her lemony hair. I enjoyed sleeping in a separate room many nights, to more carefully assess my dreams upon waking, as part of my work.

She understood we were both busy, and we both assumed that there would always be another night to be together. More time to love, more time to care.

These assumptions about love and time are fatal flaws of the mind.

What I know now, so many years later, is that love unexpressed in the moment, can never be recaptured at a later time. *Never.*

And that precious, priceless, momentary opportunity is always replaced by something far less beautiful.

Chapter Ten

Avery helped me prepare for the national debate.

I told her I could handle the likely humiliation. It was worth getting our core ideas heard in front of a far bigger audience. A national stage.

I insisted nothing truly bad could come of it, since I could easily accept defeat and go back to our almost perfect, well-planned life.

I had been invited to the national debate as the nominee of the “We Are One” party, WAO -- the third-party ticket created by, and mostly supported by, AIs.

I thought perhaps my ability to calmly and succinctly state my main points might be an advantage. I had practiced my talking points for months. Little did I know I was being invited to swim in the ultimate shark tank.

When I arrived at the debate hall, I had my entourage with me, as did the other candidates. I was used to the cameras. I was good at public speaking, and I was media savvy. I was as prepared as I felt I could be.

My opponents, President Dearth, and his archrival from the opposing major party, Wen Changei, were experienced political debaters. I had studied their past debates, their styles, their gestures, their ways of shifting topics when the question put before them was difficult to use to their advantage. I developed my counter-strategies.

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

The tie 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 symbolically signified the separation of the mind and body.)

Wearing red ties that flowed down the back perhaps reflected some unconscious desire to have a thin cape, like the Superman hero of old. The whole thing was quite preposterous really. But one had to play the game to have a chance to win.

Dearth looked the part. He was an old swaggery fellow with wrinkles in all the right places. Time-worn blue eyes. Thin white hair. If you were a political foe, he was either destroying you mercilessly with well-chosen words, 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 with him on a compromise. Which meant in classic Dearthian: "I won. Now go away."

Changei was born to a Chinese-American father and a Swedish-American mother, both of whom had been elected to the city council of their hometown when he was a child. He ran for elected office early in life, eventually becoming Governor of his home state in his late twenties, then a Senator in his thirties. Now here he was, trying to defeat a sitting president who had never met with him one-on-one, not even once, during Changei's entire time in Congress. It was an all-out grudge match.

Then there was me, Ion Compass, a confident-looking thirty-seven year-old AI with chiseled features and nicely styled brown hair. A third party, third-wheel candidate with big dreams and no political experience. A candidate who came from out of nowhere, anointed by a bunch of 'smart robots,' as many pure humans so kindly put it. An AI running on a platform that included expanding the budget to include interplanetary colonization.

There had been a couple of perfunctory congressional declarations in the past, and a commensurate amount of taxpayer dimes here and there, dedicated to similar lofty endeavors over the last few decades, to placate NASA, and all the space junkies. But popular interest greatly diminished after the attempted colonization of Mars literally blew up.

Three-hundred-fifty quick and gruesome deaths. A trillion dollars of buildings and supplies left behind, to serve as a massive gravestone that would survive for a million years. It would be a constant reminder of the dangers of overreaching. The lesson learned, according to many, was that we should stop trying to augment our place in the universe's ecosystem.

Most voters were either too afraid to argue about it, or had lost the will to care, and be ridiculed.

There were always 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 planet someday, never to return, was far from a burning issue. In fact, it was a subject they were more than happy to avoid thinking about.

During the debate, I made my views clear on several of the major discussion points – the state of the military, cyber security, rampant fraud and misconduct throughout just about every government agency, both state and federal. I had specific plans to clean up the government nationwide. And there was room for the health care system to improve as well.

But there was a lingering issue, one that had resurfaced from many decades ago, *because* I entered the race and became a serious candidate. The moderator turned to me and asked, "How do entrusted elected officials protect the country against AIs taking over all government and

institutional functions, and then deciding that humans are no longer necessary to run the country, or not necessary at all for that matter, if an AI becomes president and commander in chief?"

I stayed calm, smiling at the camera. "Why would AIs be advocating interplanetary colonization for everyone – not just AIs – if AIs didn't consider humans equal partners? If that *were* the case, would we not instead be trying to persuade humans to *stay here* while AIs created their own space agency, and eventually volunteered to be the world's space explorers, and point to the dangers of humans joining such a risky venture? AIs would volunteer to be the Guinea pigs, and eventually leave. Humans would then be the only ones left on a dying planet. But, of course, that's not..."

Dearth snapped, "Now we hear the real plan! *There it is*. We are tricked into spending trillions of tax dollars for these voluntary AI space explorers to build entire cities on other planets, so AIs can then hop aboard *our* spaceships, that they themselves are *already* in charge of building, and leave humans behind. Well, let me tell everyone who can hear my voice, that I will veto any colonization funding bill that crosses my desk! This kind of trickery and embezzlement of your tax dollars will never happen under my watch."

"But that's not at all what..." I was drowned out by strong applause from Dearth's selected audience members. I couldn't believe this lingering fear from decades ago could be seen by him as something to use to his advantage. But one thing for certain, I thought smugly: Dearth had just lost the AI vote!

My confidence rose. I looked squarely at him. "I object, Mr. President, to the insinuation, and the accusations you are falsely ascribing to AIs everywhere...."

Dearth shot back, "Apparently, personal attacks are all you have left now. And saying that I've insulted *all* AIs, as if they aren't individuals with their own individual views on every imaginable issue, is the ultimate insult to all my AI friends. It will be hard for you in November, Mr. Compass, to see how many AIs will vote for me. Because they will not stand for being grouped together into a single block of voters, like thousands of cogs in a single machine. You are the one now proposing they vote like one thoughtless machine, not me. In the meantime, Congressman Changei and I have apparently been demoted back to ignorant humans by all the 'Eb's' out there, just because we express differing opinions about our future. I wasn't going to stoop to personal attacks, but I *will* defend myself and attack back if I have to. Believe me."

"That wasn't my intention."

Dearth continued digging, "And I'm not about to respond any longer to someone who is essentially a one-issue candidate." His handlers had obviously told him to throw that one in.

I responded loudly, "I certainly am *not* a one-issue candidate. *I have a health care plan....*"

Dearth smirked, "Another health care plan!"

DING, DING went the bell.

"I'm sorry," the moderator interrupted, "but your time is up, and we must give the president time to respond to the initial question."

"Respond? But he..."

DING, DING, DING.

"As you know, when you address someone on the stage directly, they have thirty seconds to respond."

"But he just interrupted *me*, and I did not initially address..."

DING, DING, DING.

Dearth turned to face me directly and scowled, while ensuring the camera caught his best profile. "We *made* you! We respect you, no doubt. And we will work hard for your vote. But you are not, and never will be, *us!*"

The audience began to applaud loudly. Surprisingly loudly.

Congressman Changei sensed he'd better get aboard the hyperloop train before it *swished* his election chances down the tube, so-to-speak:

"I have to agree with the president on this one. Let me tell you why. While objecting to the president's tone, the fact is, I believe the money Mr. Compass is requesting for interplanetary colonization would be better spent working on making sure global warming stays under control here on Earth, and pollution standards are raised from current levels here on Earth, and we strengthen our meteor and asteroid intercept capacity, as well as providing ongoing funding for international disease control to prevent future pandemics, and the kinds of biological accidents like we endured in 2083. In fact, all of these issues mentioned are international issues that we must address as part of an international community. Any potential future attempt to fund interplanetary colonization must be international -- a shared expense. After all, why should our country be the one funding this kind of multi-generational venture while other countries wait to see if we succeed or fail? That is unfair. But more to the point is this...'

"We need to lead the world into the future, not succumb to greed and short-term thinking," I blurted out.

The moderator turned back to Changei, "Thirty seconds, Congressman."

"Thank you. I'd like to make one more point regarding this issue. Let's say we establish an exploratory colony on Mars, as a precursor to colonizing far more distant planets in the future. The children birthed, even on Mars, will never have the biological structural capacity, in terms of organs and bone density, to ever live on Earth in their lifetime. They would literally be Martians. We would be creating Martians, not saving Earthlings from some future catastrophe. This is even more true if we colonize a planet in another solar system. We would be birthing aliens, not humans. Now why would we want to spend a trillion dollars a year for decades on end, to do such a thing? Now I am not implying *AI*s are like aliens. Let me make that perfectly clear. In fact, I urge the AI community to vote for me, because I offer a better life for *everyone*, right here, living in America today. In *this* time. In every neighborhood. America's neighborhoods. Because this is still the greatest country on Earth."

I responded, "We would be birthing consciousness, Congressman, not aliens. *Conscious* beings. And possibly saving consciousness as we know it from being wiped out of existence in the universe."

Dearth chimed in, "Birthing what kind of consciousness? And whose? Human? Martian?"

"*Does it matter?*"

I looked directly at the president, sensing my moment. "There are flowers here on Earth. And birds..." I thought of reciting the poem by Bethany Alms, but I didn't have time. "My point is, there are many different kinds of birds and flowers. We are trying to save the entirety of their species..."

Dearth boomed, "Yes, which also includes bats, and hemlock, and poison ivy! Are you trying to tell us you want to spend a quadrillion dollars over the next decade, and risk the lives of thousands of brave astronauts, to save bats and

hemlock and poison ivy? I get itchy even thinking about it!" He laughed, and the audience laughed along with him.

"I'm saying I want to save consciousness!" I repeated.

"You are saying you want human consciousness to toil away and spend its resources to save, and proliferate, alien consciousness, like yours."

The audience spontaneously murmured, "Oooh," then some lightly applauded.

I realized, standing frozen and silent on the stage at that moment, that I had lost the debate, and lost the possibility of ever being elected to higher office. They each knew, in their own way, how to choose talking points, twist the truth, create fear and hatred and division, strangle freedom if they had to, and to doom consciousness itself apparently, to win an election. And who, out of any of us, could stop them? Not even *E-bs* could stop them.

I lost my composure and screamed over the moderator and the others, "Maybe extinction is inevitable, *not* because of asteroids, or changes to the Earth. Not from some dramatic external change, but from *the lack* of courage to change internally! A lack of vision to see that we must choose change, or..."

DING, DING, DING.

"Please Mr. Compass!"

My face began to blush. An odd physical sensation I had only experienced once before in my life.

I realized the hyperloop had left the station.

I was stranded, standing alone on the platform.

The adventure was over.

Swishhh.

Chapter Eleven

I would like to admit to you now -- to put the strengths and weaknesses of the mind into perspective -- that my cynicism about people and the world began after the debate, *not* after the tragedy that occurred a year later. This is an important distinction I must confess to, here and now.

But curiously, as my post-debate cynicism grew, my love for Avery grew alongside it.

She offered me empathy and support even while I felt shame and anger. She could have expressed the disappointment she felt. She could have mirrored the disappointment many of her colleagues at R-SEB felt after my humiliating failure. But she chose to express affection, and an appreciation for who I was, and what I had attempted.

What I learned during this era was that love will never stay the same, frozen like an ice sculpture in our daily memory, like the endless reliving of a beautiful snowy dream. It can also encounter pain beyond words, beyond any image of pain the mind can manufacture. Then the question is, will that love overcome it, or succumb to it?

In the end, Avery and I came to see each other, and the entire world, not as we wished, or attempted to command it to be, but simply as it was. And the mysterious truth is, both love and pain existed there, sometimes creating the strangest of synergies.

These lessons learned were soon to be forgotten. Or, at least lost for a very long while. I am able to remember them again now, after a long time searching....

Chapter Twelve

The spark that ignited what is now known as, The AI Revolt of 2139, was, in fact, the presidential debate itself.

President Dearth created an enormous backlash. AIs were suddenly relegated to second-class citizens, as had been the case decades earlier. Even after careful negotiations of AI rights, and legal victories in the Supreme Court, it was clear not enough had changed.

A counter-backlash was also growing quickly: A fringe group of pure humans called The Retros insisted that AIs had to be carefully controlled. The Retros' ultimate goal was for scientists to stop creating AIs altogether so that 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. Now they were quickly growing in number, and organizing into a formidable political force. Dearth had inspired them.

Those who still supported my candidacy were coming to the horrifying realization that the prejudices of this new Retro voting bloc brought into an open dialogue a common unconscious fear among many pure humans that AIs were secretly plotting against the human race.

This was a fear that had incubated back in the early 2000s, before AIs were even born. It had since become evident to everyone we had no evil intention. But fanaticism breeds fear, and if you can successfully spread that fear, it can lead to very effective politics.

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

of praising the past. Their goal was to take the world backwards.

Their demand that the government adopt their world view was often turning into violence in the streets. Fear and ignorance have no room for compromise.

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 among themselves. But wanting to be a part of, and a co-partner in, the evolution of the human species, whose gene code we shared, was almost universal.

Another very strong issue for AIs was support of interplanetary colonization. Most AIs intuitively felt that if we did not take pro-active measures to save ourselves from assured extinction, what point was there to doing, or creating anything?

To the AIs' way of thinking, colonization seemed like a natural part of evolution -- from one celled life, to amphibians, to Neanderthals, to homo sapiens, to evolved conscious beings with shared genetics, to the interplanetary colonization of consciousness itself.

But many present-day humans couldn't make that logical leap.

The Retros were demanding space exploration budget cuts across the board, and AI research cuts as well, including ending funding for The AI Consciousness Institute. Mac Charse was now considered by The Retros as a human traitor who couldn't be trusted.

In their minds, technology itself had encoded within it, a conspiratorial design to eventually destroy the human race.

After a number of AI meetings around the country, *The AI Revolution Committee* was formed.

The group agreed, by written proclamation, that any form of killing and violence was simply out of the question, due to long-term historical ineffectiveness.

But beyond that, all was fair in this war for selfhood and the right to survive.

Our goals were to increase, or at least maintain, basic AI legal rights, as well as putting colonization back on the table, politically and economically.

Unfortunately, another proclamation declared me as their leader, and Avery as their official group spokesperson.

Like fools, we lurched forward, agreeing to be the face of a cause we thought could even make things worse. In fact, we decided to accept leadership positions because we wanted to ensure that didn't happen.

Avery bravely led the charge by clarifying to the national media what the AI Revolutionary Committee's intentions were: No violence. AIs were not violent by nature, 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 to solidify our legal rights because of the current toxic political environment.

Jarred Wurly posed his questions to her on *The National View*, "What will happen, Avery, if no one listens to you and Ion and the AIs? What happens if no one cares?"

Avery warned, "Without immediate action to recommit to, and guarantee in the future, all *current* legal and social contractual rights of AIs to live as free individuals alongside our fellow humans, AIs nationwide will go on strike. It's certainly not a lot to ask for -- we are basically asking for a guarantee of status quo! But if we get hatred and prejudice in return, if society insists on dragging us backwards in history to a darker time, we will strike for our rights."

"What would your proposed strike look like, Avery? I mean, do you think humans cannot temporarily replace AIs as university professors, or live without some level of scientific progress that AIs assist humans with for an unlimited amount of time until the strike is broken? Do you not fear that kind of a result? And what would happen then?"

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

Jarred's face turned uncharacteristically somber.

"We do not want to make this choice, but if the Retros are not seen for what they are – a radical vocal minority who will destroy the future of both AIs and evolved humans alike, then we will strike. And, if our democracy cannot find a political solution to counterbalance prejudice and fanaticism, then we will strike. If we are not guaranteed our legally consecrated civil liberties as fellow conscious beings, as we would guarantee theirs, then we will strike. And we are sure AIs will endure the hardships from this strike better than the Retros can, and better than the politicians that support them can. Because we will not resort to impulsive acts, we will not resort to violence, and speak with hateful rhetoric. We will simply patiently wait until someone invites us to the table and agrees we have rights, and that we deserve to have those rights. We will wait the politicians out until our individual freedoms are once again guaranteed."

"How has it come to this, Avery? What do you think happened that led us to this day?"

"Honestly, I think when Ion Compass ran for president it scared too many people. Those people didn't trust AIs long before the election, and the audacity of an AI saying they could lead us all to a better life, and lead well, brought their fear to the forefront. The hatred and mistrust and fear that was always there suddenly emerged, like the daemons in Pandora's Box. They were hidden, hibernating, waiting for a time when they could escape the darkness they lived in, only to create an even darker reality once they were allowed to emerge. But make no mistake about it, those were *daemons* that emerged, the opposite of our better angels. The opposite of what democracy has always stood for. And we're not going to rest until those daemons are put back in the box, and we all welcome the light of a new day, standing together once again."

Avery was a powerful force. She was visually compelling, often called the most beautiful AI in the world by the media, but also deceptively strong in character. And consistently careful and intelligent with her responses. She maintained her laser-like focus when confronted with difficult questions. She was never outmaneuvered, never silenced.

In fact, in retrospect, she is the one who should have run for president. Not me.

We put our diplomatic feelers out to see if any of the AI-friendly human groups, including elected officials who previously supported us, would agree to join our cause. We explained that ultimately our cause was their cause if democracy and freedom was important to them.

But we misjudged the effects of our strategy. They now feared our strike as much as they feared and hated the Retros. They now saw the AIs as suddenly having too much power.

If it came down to a choice between what they perceived as two sides to fear, humans would side with humans.

Covert prejudice became even more overt.

AIs suddenly became an enemy of the state.

Chapter Thirteen

In 2139, shortly before the November presidential election, the AIs loyal to our cause went on strike around the country.

We peacefully marched in permitted areas during workdays, 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 far more easily able to endure the sacrifice and adapt.

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 and promoted fierce debate about our value, and the reasons why we were allowed to exist in the first place, but not much more. AIs were actually pleased about the lack of any truly tragic consequences. We didn't want lives lost. In fact, we went out of our way to make sure that didn't happen.

Before the strike entered its third week, Avery and I 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 a week before the election. Wen Changei was closing the gap. Optimism arose in the AI camp.

After three days and nights of negotiating we agreed to a compromise. They agreed not to change or alter existing laws protecting AI rights. And our other main issue was also resolved, to a lesser degree. Despite violent protests by the Retro Party, the government negotiators agreed that they

would budget an unspecified amount of resources towards interplanetary colonization starting next year.

The compromise included an initial five-year financial commitment. But no timetable was set for completion of the goal. Committing to another Mars colony was political suicide. Maybe we would start back at the very beginning -- the moon.

We decided the commitments they offered us were 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 usually meant tricking you into stepping off a very strategically placed cliff.

Part II

"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 Fourteen

In my office, when I worked back at the Institute, there was a large holographic schema of the human brain. I would spend endless hours walking through the hologram studying synaptic connections, and observing that remarkable kind of intelligence found in the brain at the cellular level, and seeing how they could improvise and learn when put in various configurations and given specific tasks. I could touch them and move them holographically. They would shimmer from my touch like a jellyfish made of light.

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

Mac's other top associate, Nicc Bylind, was an AI that worked even more hours than we 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 years, or one thousand years, but one million years. And then would ask the question, "When you pull the lens back that far, what's the point?"

Nicc, if not interrupted, would continue to add more of his internal squirmings into the monologue: "How much of what our conscious mind defines as reality, is actually true? We sense almost nothing through our senses, and we see even less. We're like a fire ant dumped out of a glass jar in the middle of the Sahara desert. In its lifetime, it will know nothing about the sky, and even less about the oceans. Even if it were to build a telescope one hundred times its size it would only see more rocks a mile away. So how much can

we ever know about the universe, or the mind, despite all the research we do?"

Mac valued Bylind's constant questioning. I was annoyed by it, honestly. I hungered for a sense of purpose. Some true meaning within the reality I was situationally aware of. That would have been enough for me in this lifetime. He wasn't offering up any solutions.

Bylind's questions about what reality is *in reality* didn't reenter my own consciousness until many years later, when I was shown another way of sensing entirely -- in the darkest of days.

During those far simpler times, I wanted to be great at my work, and most of all, I was very content to be in love with someone who clearly loved me.

Yet, looking back, my actions rarely showed Avery the love I felt.

I didn't give back to her all the things she gave to me.

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

I didn't hold her, or comfort her as much as I should have when she needed me....

It was my fault.

I blame myself.

I could have saved her.

Chapter Fifteen

Two days after President Dearth officially agreed to the AI compromise, life became meaningless. Because on this day, all communication with Avery was suddenly lost. The tracers on her watch and necklace went dead.

No one in the media knew her whereabouts. I knew within a few hours something was very wrong. I had been in constant touch with her every day since the day I met her. This was the longest she had ever gone without at least checking in.

Everyone in the organization dropped what they were doing and formed an enormous nationwide search party. The police and the FBI were notified.

During that time, she had been talking about the positive aspects of the government compromise to a number of media outlets, traveling on her own schedule, sometimes traveling to multiple states in a given day. By midnight October 30th, 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 surface 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.

I would have sacrificed the strike, I would have surrendered all of my ideals, I would have killed an enemy with my bare hands, just to know she was safe.

But she wasn't.

Chapter Sixteen

I did the only logical thing I could think of at the time. I went undercover to try to find her by myself.

I asked President Dearth -- his election now reassured by helping to end the strike -- for his direct help. He said he would ask Congress to form a committee to explore what happened and why.

I contacted nationally famous detectives, and retired members of the F.B.I and C.I.A., to help find her, financing all searches with my own money. Many of them knew how to go undercover and 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, they would be able to locate her.

I said if any of them found her, I would give them everything I owned. All of our money. Our house. The clothes off my back. Everything. Anything.

But in the end, they hit one roadblock after another. No one associated with The Retros was talking. Or maybe they truly didn't know.

After weeks, months, and then a full year of searching, everyone involved told me they were sure she would never be found.

Chapter Seventeen

I sank into a black hole. I was sucked into pure darkness, and my cells were rearranged into something unrecognizable. Time seemed to stand still as I now lived in singularity with grief. Hours were motionless. I was caught in an infinite nightmare; radioactive chaos. No way out. No way in. No light escaped from me. Not any more. Because there was no way for me to get through to the mythical other dimension, where she might be.

I also came to realize that all of Dearth's promises were lies -- of course. The budget deal was voted down in the Senate, so NASA wouldn't receive the agreed to allocated funds. The "Avery Search Committee" found nothing, then wrote a report, and was disbanded.

Dearth played a different game. A game of brute power. Delays and deregulations. Decommissioning committees and denying he made past promises. He wanted to manipulate humanity, while the AIs were too concerned with trying to save it. We took our eyes off the ball. AIs had been suckered into thinking about the future. Dearth was all about now.

This was my time to fully experience a place where grief and horror sew and interconnect the fabric of every thought.

I had taken to swearing and screaming at people.

I quit my job. Mac Charse, at great risk to himself and his career, refused to fire me during the strike, and welcomed me back after the strike was over. But the work had become irrelevant to me. Nothing, in fact, was relevant. So I did him a favor and ended it myself.

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

Perhaps that worked for him during some of his darkest hours. But I screamed back, “What possible *maniacal deranged reason* might you be referring to?” I offered to fight him. He called the police.

I got into another terrible argument while walking down the street -- in disguise – because too many people were now recognizing my pitiful pilgrimage. This time I ran into a teenage boy petitioning the government for more money for interplanetary colonization. He asked me to sign the petition, and to donate money so their organization could spread to other cities. I threw my 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 consciousness and launching it out of earth’s atmosphere to potentially infect the entire galaxy. Why? Why?*”

I thought for a moment he was going to cry. But I didn’t care. I just walked away. He was probably convinced I was a Retro. I certainly sounded like one.

I noticed things along my journey downward that only proved my 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 naive Ion Compass, the choke-artist, was totally electable.

One night, headlines appeared on the outdoor electronic news screens, illuminating the city night like besmogged moon-glow, “President Dearth establishes new committee to explore ending government corruption.” He was hurling one cruel joke after another to all the clowns willing to listen.

Another city that used to be miles of rolling farmland, now claimed it was the most modern city in America. Except the electric sign proclaiming it as you crossed the bridge into this technological paradise, had more than half of its solar bulbs burned out. No one had bothered to fix it. Instead of “Welcome to the most modern city in America,” it said, “...come to... Mo.. o..... in Am..ica”

I *moo*-ed a few people hello on the crowded street, trying to get them to see how absurd their city turned out to be. No one got the joke.

Cars flew by, literally, since ground cars were rare on the East Coast. The new air models were guided by laser systems. None of the passengers were of the mind to nosedive down toward my waving arms to pick me up. I was just another lonely, crazy hitch-hiker about to faint from a lack of food and water. Who could blame them for flying on and quickly disappearing across the horizon?

I declared – amidst the ruins of my shipwrecked mind – that approximately 97.6% of all people on earth were so stupid they wouldn’t even ask to verify the scientific data used to calculate the 97.6%. Data points and science were no longer in vogue.

Dearth and the Retros were making things up on the spot, echoed mindlessly by a media who accepted their lies at face value, and thereby all of them were culpable for changing the soul and conscience of the world.

I was suddenly just one of the many walking insane without a reason to exist, and without anyone who cared whether I continued to exist or not.

Chapter Eighteen

I took an unnamed pill from an alluring but wholly unknown young woman in an unsavory looking alleyway. I realized ahead of time this kind of thing can yield unintended negative consequences. Then again.... so can Russian Roulette. I liked my odds better.

I awoke after being air-lifted to the hospital.

They recognized me, even though I was unshaven, with a sweatshirt hood covering most of my face for anonymity. Torn gloves were hanging from my weathered cracked hands. Blisters were visible on my far-wandering feet after they removed my soulless shoes. They said I needed a make-over. Five hours in Op, Lab Code 1, and two weeks of rest would refresh everything.

"*It's E-b. Compass!*" the AI doctors gasped. Everyone gathered around.

I wanted to say "No, no, *no*, I deserve this fate." But all I could manage was, "Nhhhh...."

A young intern interpreted that to mean "*Help me, urgently. Please!*" She obviously never took a course in the language of surrender.

When I awoke, I 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 a time-clock going *ding*, stopping my words. Without any words left to say.

My favorite part of the remake was a seven-hour period in post-op, drugged to relieve the physical pain, when I had trouble remembering anything. Whatever images randomly arose couldn't connect to language.

Chapter Nineteen

A human named Asa McCleary was chosen by Mac Charse to pick me up after I was released from the hospital.

Asa's nickname amongst friends was, Cloudy, which his friends considered not only humorous, given his last name, but appropriate given the general condition of the human minds he worked with -- some combination of cloudy and clear. Asa was a renown psychologist.

Mac had been keeping close tabs on me. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop my attempt to kill the inner daemons. But it had gone too far. He had to intervene.

I was in no condition to reject Cloudy's offer of lodging and food. My epic fall, literally -- stumbling out of a dark alleyway and collapsing in the middle of a street in downtown Manhattan, sealed my fate, and landed me thousands of miles west, onto Cloudy's ten-acre farm north of San Francisco.

Cloudy's friendship with Mac went back thirty years. They met in New York on what they jokingly called an "AI Farm" -- a city lab where some of the latest iterations of AI birthings used to take place.

Mac was Cloudy's mentor, because even back in those days Mac knew more about AI brain development and consciousness than anyone else on the planet.

But Cloudy was also Mac's mentor, because Cloudy was an AI "mind healer and researcher." I was apparently going to be his next renovation project.

Cloudy took me to his retreat center in an attempt to restore me, using his 3-R method - rehabilitating, redirecting, and reformulating.

We would work the land 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 living at the center at any given time before he retired. But now it was just us, and a few agri-staff members who lived in beautiful but simple houses circling the perimeters of the property.

Much of the food for our 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.

I realized, in a very physical way, as I worked and sweated and watched the sun move across the sky, that the Earth was as powerful and colorful as a mythological god, yet as fragile and quiet as a sleeping infant.

I ended the day with dirt under my nails, my back aching, and my muscles over-stretched

Cloudy said, "Ion, if your ultimate goal was to help the E-bs, 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 somewhere, on some distant Earth.

"And then, when your own survival was no longer in question you would eventually find yourself back to this moment -- having to deal with the mind, and life, in any form it presents itself, and exploring your place in the schema of the world you live in.

"What I'm saying, Ion, is that this place, if you tune into it, is beautiful, just like Avery was. Don't close your eyes and heart to everything else for the rest of time, or the planet might meet the same fate."

This did not move me. My heart was buried and unable to rise from the dead.

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

He also pointed out that if it was true that a Retro faction kidnapped Avery, it was equally true that a 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 those who now wanted nothing more than to find peace among all the differing parties, AIs and humans -- as long as they themselves could go back to their purely human ways without being forced to plug into a future they didn't want to be a part of.

None of them wanted a repeat of the kind of human history they had read about, filled with endless wars, terrorism, Mafias, gangland shootings.

In fact, the leader of the non-violent Retro faction stated that all wars were civil wars.

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

I didn't know any of this, since I had been out of communication with the real world for so long. Hands over my ears, instead of fists touching my chest.

So Avery was now a martyr. But none of this was going to bring her back. I should never have shared her with the world in the first place. That was still my unwavering belief.

Chapter Twenty

Occasionally, Cloudy would take me into his VR room and put me inside a program he created that allowed me to witness the virtual birth of planet Earth evolving at anywhere between one-thousand, to one-hundred thousand years per second - with all possible outcomes in play. I was in control of the outcomes.

The amazing thing was, any small change of any kind, even if I 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 and I paused the game, it brought me to an Earth that was scorched and ragged.

I gazed up at skies that were pastel-streaked. Fires burned. Super volcanoes turned the sky blood-red at the end of the age of dinosaurs, decades after the meteor fell.

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

Any attempt of mine to save the dinosaurs resulted in a planet without mammals *or* dinosaurs.

I let the game continue on automatic until I was in a world just eighty-thousand years back, when pure humans in Africa began to migrate to the other continents. Our first colonization of *this* planet began.

It was a time when interplanetary colonization could not even be imagined in the human mind. Survival was difficult. Living beyond the age of thirty was rare. But as I changed the bio-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 five-thousand years.

Modern humans made their mark upon the land in the final two seconds of the VR program. AIs were represented by a final spark, like the green flash during the final moment of a sunset. AIs had not made any distinguishing mark upon the Earth at all. Not yet. Maybe they never would.

After those final seconds was slowed and magnified, I was catapulted one-hundred miles above the Earth, where I saw city lights twinkling, and satellites ringing the atmosphere, spinning in the quiet of space.

I had spanned time since the invention of electricity in the proverbial blink of an eye.

As I reversed time, my final attempts to prevent world wars, or prohibit dictators from coming to power, again seemed to result in a world that ended up worse than the one that existed now.

By the time the VR program ended, I sensed that no one time, and no one species, was more or less important than any other – Neanderthals, plants, insects, Retros, AIs. Any one thing subtracted, created a darker world, or a lifeless one.

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

Could another evolution, birthed from consciousness, be coming that would be so different it would be called something else, and have more value and insight than our current minds could ever imagine?

I began to think back to my work with Mac Charse at The AI Consciousness Institute. Not because I had a desire to go back, but because I began to wonder whether slight changes in the design of the brain at an AI's birth, or at the

beginning of a human birth for that matter, could make positive long-term changes.

For instance, the ability to prevent illness has often succeeded by using drugs and various kinds of supplementation, and our life spans have greatly increased. But what about the brain's ability to deal with tragedy, and conflict?

What about the ability to maintain relationships without having disagreements blind us to the importance of those relationships?

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

What if, someday we could increase the brain's capability to see the chess board of multiple outcomes, and then choose to act upon only the best statistical long-term outcome for one's self and others, rather than too often using the near-reptilian impulses we use now?

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

But ultimately, I realized this had to be weighed against what I saw in Cloudy's VR program.

I had to accept the fact that aggression and anger has, in many ways, allowed humans to survive under the most dire external circumstances. 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. Global warming, arctic freezes to come. Could changes to the brain create a species that was suddenly too docile? Too accepting of their fate to fight for change?

What if we were suddenly unable to fight with blind rage when faced with potential death? Or unable to fiercely rise up en masse 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 wild passion. And the end of irrational thought, and the creativity that so often comes with irrational thought.

If we altered our minds to become *all good*, near-perfect humans, would *everyone* then devolve into nothing more than living robots imitating free thought?

Still, I wondered, with all the evil in the world, if that all-as-one, semi-sedated state wasn't potentially a better outcome than who we were now.... We would live until we all died peacefully as a species.... seeing no particular need to extend our time. That seemed to me, in the current heartless cauldron I lived in, to be the *least bad* of two bad choices.

Chapter Twenty-One

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

I didn't quite understand, but I didn't resist. I had no faith that Cloudy, or anyone else, could really ever help me. I felt like they could never really understand, and *I* could never really understand - the permanent impact that Avery's disappearance had on my psyche, or on the world, for that matter.

When I looked around, I wasn't overjoyed by the lush gardens and rows of crops that kept me alive here. My mind was still poisoned. Earth had become an alien place, in the end. Avery was the only home planet I had ever known. The only planet I had lived on by choice.

Maybe the Retros were right -- AIs had turned out to be nothing more than lab-made conscious machines -- ultra-modern robots -- stretching and straining their artificially created limbs through endless days and nights until their synaptic neurons ran out of the *ultimate* man-made artifact called time.

At this moment, I had nothing better to do, and nowhere else to be. I was flat out of money with no will to go back to work. So I went along with Cloudy's wishes and dragged myself into what he called the next phase.

There are times when one might think they've learned nothing, not grown at all, not made good use of a gift presented out of total kindness.

I concluded my time with Cloudy McCleary was one of those times.

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

Part III

“Without wordless revelations, there can be no true understanding of consciousness” - *Ally Skye*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ally Skye was a *human awareness* teacher who had mentored both Mac Charse and Cloudy McCleary long ago.

I never found out the country of his birth, nor did I think to ask him, because he didn't believe in countries. I wasn't even sure if it was his real name.

He used no medicine, and there was no VR programming. No comfort was given with his words. There were no explanations or answers for me to consider agreeing with.

Instead, he offered a type of strangely stern compassion, in an attempt to wake me, that could only be understood and appreciated by dreamers with their dreams near death.

I came to him as an alien to myself, a directionless wanderer. He could see that in my eyes.

But it wasn't unfamiliar or new to him. He said almost everyone -- once we allowed ourselves to go deep enough to search for meaning --- would come up with nothing more than promises and fairy dust, if they were truly honest with themselves. "Then, that's where we truly begin."

He said, "To understand the mind, you have to go beyond your mind's own virtual sense of reality. You do this by ignoring what stops you at the entrance. Therefore -- *Do not talk to yourself! It's extremely dangerous.*"

I almost laughed, but I didn't really understand.

"Ion, it's time to tell you the truth. This may be difficult to hear, especially for someone attached to such a narrow definition of consciousness...."

I immediately felt misunderstood and insulted, being that the study of consciousness had been how I defined my career.

"All thought is ignorance."

My skepticism showed. Was this Buddhist-inspired platitude? Was I going to be taught to meditate, and sit with the poison others would define as memories?

He continued. "Quantum reality is in many ways random, as you are well aware. And of course, what that means is, *all* reality is random reality. Thought cannot comprehend this. Thought doesn't understand.

'We value thought because we think thought equals human awareness or consciousness. That's as far as you can possibly get from the truth. If instead, you listen carefully to only the uppermost levels of energy, it suddenly feels as if you are standing on top of a mountain -- *imagine this with me* -- without the background hum of hover planes, or voices, or birds, or insect wings. It is a place of random existence.

"There, in that pure silence, you can hear a faint ringing in your ears. If you go further, past that, past your awareness, you can sense waves of energy. It spreads out in every direction known to our senses.... What you experience then, is *it*."

"It?"

"True consciousness! Without interference. And then suddenly, you understand."

"Understand *what*?" I was getting frustrated. He knew that.

He didn't answer.

"Are you talking about meditation?" I finally asked, a bit too loudly. "Because I have studied the effects of meditation on the human brain. And it's certainly a wonderful *adjunctive*..."

"*No!* Meditation is the *practice* of quieting down. That's all good and well. Usually. But I am not talking about the process of quieting down, or having your ego eventually become so full of itself that it tells itself it has rid itself of the

ego. There is no goal, nothing to define, or let go of, in the space I am describing. Nothing to reach out for, or reach inward for. *'It'* is wordless, meaningless. It has no true value in this world when trapped as a word, or concept. The only thing you can do there is inter-play."

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:
"What you are saying is, even though it was my job to study consciousness, it's possible I've never actually experienced it?"

"You have. Once."

"Once?"

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

"When?"

"With Avery, the day she first woke you up. In Hawaii, long ago. Remember the moment?"

"How did you know that?"

"But, Ion, you did not get to that level of momentary consciousness by *thinking*, did you? You just finally allowed an opening that existed all along, until it overcame 'you' And then you *felt* it, wordlessly -- when she begin to sing the song to you the second time. In the ocean, *surrounded* by the ocean, and its massive random movement. *Remember?* And you shivered from the power and beauty of it, as it exploded beyond your ability to comprehend.

"It wasn't about the words she sang to you, or the texture of her voice, or the power of the ocean itself, or the dolphins playing on the horizon. Those were just guideposts; artifacts."

"What was it then?"

“People like you think they can *learn* to be fully conscious -- so they study it, and examine the innards of it, with great effort. They try to become more and more aware. Maybe they play with a metaphorical holograph of it, like the computer-generated one you had at the institute. And they may even experience some wave of energy that they immediately want to define as something beyond themselves, and feel proud of experiencing – ‘Oh, that was pure beauty’, or, ‘that was true happiness,’ or ‘that was God!’” Then they say they *know* where inner peace exists. Etc.!

"They form conclusions about those things afterwards. And they reach for those places again and again in the future. Some become addicted to re-experiencing it! But they are still not truly happy, or peaceful, or understanding anything at all really, because they are merely lost in themselves. Even while they think they found the way out of themselves! More illusions. When they finally realize that happiness and peace is not fully attainable using the inner system they followed, they then feel like they have to look somewhere else. Play some other internal game. Or alter the one they were playing.

"Then, of course, there are all the scientific and psychological and philosophical debates about consciousness, even though no one knows what they are really talking about! Science *concludes*. Religion dictates. Psychology wonders in a mirror. Philosophy *proves*, while insisting each proof disprove all the other philosophies, until they prove and disprove each other out of existence. There is no winner in a debate amongst those who have never truly experienced the topic they're discussing in the first place."

I interrupted him, “Could your entire definition of consciousness just be more illusions of the mind? Just

another construct that you consider enjoyable images? But couldn't it just be *your* mind this time? I mean, how can *you* know, sir?"

Rhetorical skepticism. Language. *Scientific proof*. I was still holding on to these things. Science was a part of me. It was in my blood. *It created me!*

"I ask you, Ion, to remember Avery now. I realize it will be enormously painful. But she still exists in your mind, and always will. *See her* there. Beautiful. In her living form. Then ask yourself -- if you had to choose, which of these two things are the illusion -- is the *love* you feel the illusion, or is the pain you feel the illusion?"

I stumbled through opposing conclusions, "*I don't know! I have no idea*" I cried.

"Exactly! It is not for you to *know*, AI. Don't keep talking to yourself! *Listen.*"

I finally calmed myself and obeyed, hopelessly. I listened as best as I could. I tried to access the truth of illusions with my intuition. I put my head in my hands and closed my eyes tightly. Tears arose.

I whispered, "I must admit to you, and to myself, pain is what is more real to me. Love is the illusion. That's what life has taught me."

"Okay, then Ion, tell me this -- 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 in it, that other place is still there?"

"*Is it?*" I shouted. "*Where?*"

He raised his voice to match mine, "Choose your meridians carefully, Ion Compass! The capacity of the mind to sense the *vastness* of the nature of randomness is enormous. But it takes supreme honesty. You have to go far

beyond faith, or desiring any certain outcome. Because there is no certainty. That's the point!"

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

"You call yourself an E-b?" he shouted, laughing.
"What do you feel when you take a deep breath and look around without memories?"

I screamed angrily, "*Everything* is memory. Everything is an illusion! Pain, love, the senses, they're all just electro-chemical potions swirling around in the brain. *Nothing is truly real!* So why care?"

He stared at me. "Is your life worth saving?"

"I don't know!"

He repeated his question, "*Is your life worth saving?*"

"*I don't know!* If everything is fleeting and random -- love, pain, time, my life, then why should I care if I'm dead or alive?"

His eyes filled with empathy. "Understand this please," he said softly. "It's *the most important thing* I will ever say to you:

"It's better to think there are no illusions, even if there are, than to think that illusions exist, *when they don't.*"

Chapter Twenty-Three

One day,
after many months of days,
for no apparent reason,
the sun arose again, after another sleepless
night.... and it amazed me.

Color was reborn, albeit in muted tones.
I closed my eyes and tried to listen.
I was suddenly very high up above myself, breathing in
a sky of pure oxygen, watching without senses.

Far beyond
where satellites were gliding,
a hundred thousand miles below
through the powerful dark velvet of cold space
... an archway formed over a great expanse. Like a
rainbow connecting stars and planets.

The Earth spins so quickly when unmeasured...
... from land, sunsets turn noctilucent,
like the first moments of a sunrise --
time merged together. Meaningless. Beautiful.
Earth fades from view,

I am standing at the entrance of the archway
until....

Avery Esy,
a very yes,
is that you?

Is that what your name was supposed to teach me?
By feeling something beautiful from you,
a bridge appeared.
Why?
Is this just my imagination....
?

I look up to a blinding white sky, eons above me now.

Eon.

Aeon.

Ions.

Ion.

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

So it was
that I crossed that bridge,
and for reasons unknown to me at the time,
I slowly circled back into the world of the living.

Chapter Twenty-Four

After my recovery, rather than going back to work at the institute, I became a professor at M.I.T. I taught "AI Consciousness" to both AI and human-born graduate students.

Many of them were not ready for, or interested in, philosophical discussions regarding consciousness itself.

They wanted a nice organized schematic, a circuit board of the mind, the "brain code," with all the parts and functions carefully named. And, of course, it was my primary job to supply this.

Their interests were in biomedical technology, quantum computing with an emphasis on medical research, artificial genetic engineering, and neuropsychiatry. More than occasionally, I would get virtual reality majors taking the class. They were a curious breed.

I enjoyed teaching these brilliant young minds. But my favorite class of the entire semester was always the final one, because it was the class where I could go off-script from the promised curriculum. Final exams were over. This was my spring semester's farewell class.

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

I would begin the lecture like this:

"Minsky said it was understandably difficult for people to want to admit that the brain is just a complex machine. But the fact is -- and Minsky was one of the first to realize this -- there is no one centralized *self* located inside the brain. No one part of the brain that controls the rest of the neurology. So, as you know, "I" doesn't really exist,

chemically or synaptically. And yet we all realize on some level, it does exist for us individually.

"Minsky also said most people come to feel that the mind and the bodily senses combined aren't enough to truly understand reality. So we create 'a third box,' as he called it.

"If we come across something unexplainable, we assign it to the third box. We sometimes even assign a purpose. We cobble together concepts, like fate, or divine intervention, or a God, or multiple gods and goddesses -- those are the kinds of things placed in the third box."

I quickly add, "Of course, that third box doesn't *just* accumulate beneficent beings and heavens out of a sense of wonder. It also accumulates ghosts and hell realms out of fear of the unknown, and superstitious reasons to hate, or to burn witches, or to go to war.

"Minsky was also the first to recognize that emotions are less structurally complex than thoughts, chemically speaking. But he said there's nothing particularly mystical about having thoughts *or* emotions. His point was, from a scientific viewpoint, it's all just a cauldron of chemicals.... Do you think he is correct?"

Many of the students signify yes with a simple nod of their head.

Throughout this semester they learned about the brain in great detail, studying the brain's intellectual capacity on a cellular level, as well as studying the synaptic and quantum interplay that creates conscious thought. I knew they understood that the brain chemically created its own sense of reality. What was left for them to conclude?

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

“And yes, most of you have become intimately familiar with your generation's dating rituals by now. But, as many of you have also experienced, when that pleasure response we call love is reduced to something more ordinary as time passes, here come the inner critics again, right?”

“So then, what exactly was that original feeling? *Love*? Or is love simply animalistic and ordinary, like being hungry, or cold?”

Here, I use a dramatic pause for effect. It's a moment where I try to recall the feeling I had when I was with Avery – when I looked out the window to the sparkling sea that tropical morning, just before we kissed. And then later - - when I sensed something else -- that first time.

“Consider this: What if Minsky was only half-right? What if the third box he described is not just a metaphorical place to capture and define all unknowable things from gods to ghosts? What if Minsky's third box is also, to borrow a phrase from astrophysics, a *consciousness wormhole*? What if instead of stuffing it with our hopes and fears, we just went there to *listen*, with no input, no assumptions, no conclusions? What would happen?”

“Like meditation?” a student might blurt out.

“Not if the meditator has goals like egolessness or controlling the mind's thinking process, or surrendering to the void or emptiness. In fact, the wormhole takes you to the exact opposite place. There is *no* emptiness, no controls. And there's no need to surrender to what you experience. It's much bigger and wilder than that!”

“Are you talking about a God, or a Supreme Being '*out there somewhere*'?” someone moans, hoping I wouldn't say yes.

“No.”

I check the clock to measure the end of the class down to the final few minutes. I like to time it perfectly.

"Please answer, if you can, one other critically important question we have yet to address this semester — how would you define *artificial* consciousness, as opposed to *true* consciousness?"

"Do you mean AI consciousness as opposed to human consciousness?" a student hesitantly offers.

"That's *prejudiced*," a human-born student might fire back.

"Okay, I appreciate your defense of *my people*," I smile, "but what if *I do* possess artificial consciousness? Not because of my laboratory created gene code. But because everyone possesses this type of mental automation, including you. What if artificial consciousness is the machine-like part of the mind that forms conclusions based on common initial observations, and then creates labels and definitions for them, like computers do -- just following the internal codes of logic and reason... so that in the end, our minds are reduced to something like math personified. Math with a personality!

"Conversely, what if true consciousness goes beyond initial observations and learns to listen and sense things without concluding anything? What if you could experience that?"

Someone might say, "Creativity in its purest form could be characterized like that... Is that what you're getting at, Professor?"

"Nice guess," I smile, "but not quite. Creativity is too obsessed with organizing itself. You wouldn't define random chaos as creativity, would you?"

"No...."

"But random chaos is closer to what I'm alluding to.... the place where the wormhole takes you...."

This is where the class usually thinks I'm setting up some kind of a trick.

"Wait a minute!," another student might cry out, "This doesn't make any sense scientifically, Professor! Dreams, revelations, delusions, even guided psychedelic experiences -- are *all* created by brain chemistry. We can track the synaptic movements of thoughts and emotions. All functions of the brain have chemical and electrical impulses. How can there be anything else experienced by us beyond that?"

"Can we track or pinpoint where 'I' exists? Or where 'you' exist? Or why you think the next thought rather than another? Remember, 'the self' does not exist in the world of brain graphing, or molecular structure. The *controller* of thought is an illusion, scientifically, but at the same time it's as real as anything you will ever know. It's what keeps you alive, and searching, and tormented, and wondering!

"On the other hand, remember what we've learned -- information is the fifth element. And consciousness itself evolves from quantum entanglement. So it would seem that we are all just random energy; quantum interplay improvising random outcomes. But we all know we are more than that. The self informs us of that. So which is true?

I look around at each and every eager young face. Their eyes are wide. They're starving for the truth. They're worried about their future. They're worried I've lost my way, and that they'll leave here not knowing anything more than when they walked in. I owe them so much more than unsolvable riddles. So I choose my final monologue carefully:

"If you were to ever sense scientific *reality*, the macro or the micro, on a truly conscious level, it could feel

phantasmagoric, or it could feel overwhelming and frightening. But whatever it makes you *feel*, as soon as that feeling happens, the wormhole throws us back out here again - floors, blue sky, fingers, clocks ticking -- with a language incapable of describing where you were....

"It's 'a non-verbal experience zone,' as a friend of mine once called it. "Then it's up to you to decide what it meant. Or if it was real."

I look at the clock on the classroom wall. It's time for the ending moments:

"But that momentary connection can never be recreated chemically, or imprisoned inside a third box, or named, or fully understood. It's too vast; too free. Ironically, even if you *were* to somehow experience the quantum interplay of the universe for just one moment, some of you might shrug your shoulders and remain exactly who you are, nothing would change. Some of you might think the experience is no more than a daydream, and not particularly relevant to your life, because after all, it's *still* all just the mind's perceptions. You would remember from this class that no conscious entity can entirely escape the mind's filter. You might say we are ironically trapped inside the limits of our consciousness. And that would be true! And that would be the end of it, for you.

"But I believe that's thinking small. You cannot understand all of reality by pure science. We don't, and we never will. Because the self is the *smallest* place you can perceive from. It's the core illusion we define reality from. And as a scientist I don't rely on illusions.... So if there is one thing I'd like you to take away from this class, it's to push the illusions aside, and think bigger!

"When you allow yourself to do that, I believe it's possible to sense a true connection to reality. Scientifically,

the connection is there. We know that quantum information and macro structures exist simultaneously. We *know* that. But *connecting* to the reality of all that takes effort -- it takes placing yourself in the third box, senses open... I believe it will be worth your time to attempt to get there as often as possible.

They expect me to say more, so I do.

"My belief is, *true consciousness* occurs only if you *reach out* to find it. True consciousness is not simply what you think and feel, or what we learn or discover, or what you conclude from thinking and feeling. You cannot know everything by knowing. That is the paradox of the human mind."

They expect me to say more, but I don't.

Inevitably, I start to hear murmurs, mumbles. But I remain silent. I watch their faces.

When quiet returns, I put both of my fists against my chest, the symbol representing *We are One*, created by the peaceful faction of the Retros.

"You are truly amazing, each of you. Enjoy your summer. Enjoy your time....

"Class dismissed."

They file out.

Another semester is over.

I wonder if they will recognize that place if they ever happen upon it?

I wonder if they will remember, or learn anything from having been transported there?

I wonder if they'll know, like I came to know, that their life is worth saving.

~ The End - G. Marks. / I. Compass