

(T)here

~ *Gary Marks*

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PART I
a/k/a
Frank Rosen

1

I had memories, but only in brief flashes. No true continuum from birth to here. There seemed to be no point to what I was experiencing. No meaning to anything. Of course, the doctor says that's normal for everyone. But the doctor could just be trying to normalize madness.

"Frank," said the doctor.

"Why?"

"Why, what?" asked the doctor.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Frank. I'm watching you sleeping. And you look peaceful, even though I know you're going through so much."

"How are you communicating?"

"The same way I always have. When you're in a hypnagogic state I appear to be a doctor to you so you'll trust me."

"Who are you really?"

"To you I will always just be a doctor. To other 'yous' I am so much more."

"No," I laughed from my golden fog. "I mean, who are you really... in non-dream?"

"I'm someone who..." the doctor paused calmly, "All I want is to learn from you."

2

The door slams. Doctor Stabnow comes in. This is one doctor I know is real. He's my buddy, my provider.

The lights become less dim as I focus. I can see him congealing as the fog clears. In this non-dream state, he looks upset. His face is flat and fuzzy, as usual, with his blue eyes tired and smeary like marbles behind Plexiglas. But they look in sharper focus to me this

time for some reason. I can see the swirls in his iris as separate living chains of cells. I am reminded of the rings of Saturn for some reason. I notice the spaces between his teeth. I can see the individual hairs of his silver eyebrows – one of them is trying to escape, shooting upwards, curling away from its obedient brethren – a rebel like me. Although comparing myself to an eyebrow might sound a little crazy... I admit that.

“Okay, Rosen, it’s time to take a walk and shake it off.”

“It’s Frank.”

“Rosen is your last name, remember?”

“Oh yes, yes, very funny, wasn’t it, how that happened?”

“So Frank, you need to come out of it now.”

“For what reason?”

“It’s been a little too long. My idea of giving you a stronger dose so you would remember everything when you awoke was not only counter-intuitive, it was a mistake, pure and simple. It won’t happen again. Come now! Get up. Please!”

He tugged at me to rise. Not easy to move an ex-football half-back like me when I’m setting my mind against it.

Back there at Notre Dame, I was so ecstatic carrying the ball in my arms that day, it felt like a part of my body. I ran with the speed and elusiveness of a Peregrine falcon. I don’t want to remember the explosion, but suddenly I’m there.

In a flash I see a sliver of daylight and glide through it. I feel the middle linebacker’s arms wrap around me ten yards downfield, but I take my free hand and push his helmet away, almost tripping as I elude his grasp. Then, there it is, I’m free... an open green channel down the sideline.

I find that extra gear, my arms and legs pumping like a human jet engine, until suddenly I’m blindsided by the free safety. I feel a massive jolt. I black out for a moment, my nose and jaw absorbing lightening as I fall down a long tube of darkness. My head slams onto the ground... .

I felt Dr. Stabnow hovering over me. But the memory kept coming.

... . The ball comes loose, it squirts out while I'm still in mid-air — I feel it leaving me as I'm going unconscious. I feel a cold rain-drop seep through my helmet. It's raining, snowing. I could slip... .

There's a big black splotch in front of my eyes that I doubt is real, but it's blocking my vision. I try to concentrate on the black splotch to analyze it further.

From behind I hear a dozen footsteps pounding like horses' hooves, vibrating beneath the grass. Huge bodies leap over me as if I were nothing but a pebble in their path. I manage to get up on my hands and knees and stumble towards the horse hooves.

Then a miracle happens, the ball gets kicked back into my stomach and I collapse on it. I pull the miracle into me until it starts turning warm and dry against my hands. I try to make myself heavy and unmovable.

Bodies pile on top of me. Hands grab at my neck, yank at my legs, pull at my eyeballs through my face mask. The ball is like my egg. I'm trying to lay on my egg until the refs can see it's mine alone. My egg. We're on their five-yard line, maybe the eight. Easy field goal to win the game if I can hold on until my egg hatches.

I wait for the whistle to blow. I hear a high-pitched ringing in my ears. Was that the whistle? The ringing doesn't stop so I assume it's just my head about to explode.

I began laughing. In the biggest college game of the decade, with barely a minute left in the game, I had slithered and jukeed, then rocketed eighty yards before being tackled. So close to the glorious moment I'd dreamed of all my life. Maybe I would be enshrined. A statue. Me, right there next to Knut Rockne!

Something terrible was happening. A pile of wet hands were reaching under me for the egg and pulling at it from all angles. It began to stretch, almost like taffy in that first moment. Then I felt my stomach hit flat against the grass. There was a momentary asthmatic feeling in my solar plexus, then I lost my breath entirely.

The egg was gone. My outstretched hands were stepped on by celebrating cleats.

I heard the whistle blow. I heard the crowd boo. They had stolen my egg.

They say it was one of the most heartbreaking plays in Notre Dame football history – a brilliant run, escaping five different would-be tacklers, until the fumble.

Underneath the chaos, Jamsey Haynesworth of Michigan had ripped the ball away, stolen it, and he was now prancing around on the fifteen-yard line with the ball held high above his head.

Haynesworth -- not even the guy who made the tackle

-- becomes the hero. They will never forget his name... in Michigan.

"Rosen!" Dr. Stabnow yelled! He actually sounded scared for some reason.

The next day I dropped out of Notre Dame. My dream of being a scientist, a famous chemist, evaporated like Benzene across an air film 0.15cm thick, all because a leather prolate spheroid had been yanked from underneath me.

I would never be forgotten in the hallowed halls of Notre Dame. I was infamous.

"Frank, You're no longer on Level B. You're awake according to the electroencephalograph, but I'm having a hard time reaching you."

As the years went by, my life became a series of failures. It felt as though failure was my out-breath. Everything would be going fine until I remembered the sound of the crowd. I had let them down.

Sometimes I think I'm still trying to wake up from that nightmare. I become conscious, and the ball is still under me. Maybe the rest of time until now has been one very weird, very long dream.

Get up off the grass now, hold the ball up high in the air and absorb the adoration! Take that, Haynesworth of Michigan! Now get out of my dream!

"Rosen! You have to wake up. Now!"

"It's Frank!" I screamed, laughing, thinking it was the funniest thing I'd ever said.

Laughter always comes just before the ending.

3

A leap of faith—to open my eyes in this world. The normal world here. To see what?

As always, I try to recall the last eight hours. Some things are retrievable, you just never know what they're going to be.

At some point in the middle of the night someone gently squeezes my cheeks until my mouth opens. I hold my tongue out, expecting the pill to drop, with its familiar slightly sweet taste. And there it comes. The pill quickly melts down my throat. Sweet, chalky, so delicious, as is the expectation of things to come.

Slowly I melt into its power, swept away into an ocean of reality unlike any on Earth -- a little yellow pill with the power to turn darkness into revelations.

The entirety of the actual real world awakens there— where colors stun me and bring me to my knees with awe. People are bathed in a golden glow you can almost trust—you can trust, with a small leap of faith.

Sunlit, full-sensory-spirit-leaping, I go into a world that is hidden right here beside the one you know. Parallel realities.

Even though no one could possibly want this feeling to end, the end comes. Those precious minutes before resurfacing the mind is in no condition to count the time, or even believe in numbers -- all are illusion -- math reveals itself, like the wizard in the land of Oz, to be only silly Phoenician angular squiggles representing nothing in this world. Not needed here. Then comes the hysterical laughter, tears of insane laughter, until sometimes I can't even catch my breath.

I pretend I am only breathing in. Expanding back into it. "In" as a recirculation, circular breathing. All is in.

Past, present, future, wrapping around me, snowing over me. Summer warmth, winter glow, all is in.

A permanently recurring Christmas day -- a blur of deeply peaceful emotions swarming -- a still-life image of a family smiling at me, holding out little wrapped presents they bought for me. Beautiful wrapping paper. Sparkly. Look at that!

An hour later I can't remember the emotional details about the sun, or how omnipresent it seemed; or the snow -- what it was trying to whisper to me in Flake Language.

All the gifts, they vanish now. There will be no sleigh ride to grandma's house.

Waking up is hard to do.

No one shows you how to live in the reality we've all been dumped into.

It's a place inside a game where eventually nobody wins.

I hate games like that:

Rubik's cubes without the algorithm.

Three-dimensional chess played in four dimensions.

Finding some meaning to existence.

It's all a waste of time.

PART II

From the Journal of Dr. William Stabnow

The experiment with Frank Rosen was approaching the one-year mark.

We were keeping alive an otherwise hopelessly suicidal patient who volunteered for what we are still calling a research project. Not at all trying to be immodest here, but I was probably the only psychiatrist in the country who could have saved him. At least, I was the only one willing to legally stick my neck that far out.

My professional niche before agreeing to oversee the Frank Rosen Level B Project was working with wayward teens. My hope was that this new drug could eventually help some of those teens become not just “normal beneficial members of society,” not just cured of their various disorders, but become medically and psychologically transformed, each of them, into amazing human beings. Normal adults as well, someday, might become extraordinary, and feel extraordinary, if the Frank Rosen experiment turned out well.

The drug allows human perception to be powerfully altered, but unlike psychotropic drugs, or pain killers, the alteration would transport the mind into a nearly enlightened state each and every time. It would happen in a dream-state, or semi-dream state. It was not something one could experience while walking down the street. It was literally a meditative state, in terms of observable brain waves. The ego was witnessing, but not controlling the dream. And the dream seemed more real than reality here.

The critically important problem that still needed to be addressed for the experiment to turn into something much bigger, was that the wisdom and emotional intelligence grasped during the experience did not have a lasting effect once awake, nor could one remember much, if anything, once the drug wore off.

In fact, even Frank, who took the drug once daily, rarely remembered detailed scenes or events, or the story of the dream if there was one, when the experience was over.

When entering the hypnogogic state, just before coming back to this reality, the essence of the Level B experience would too often be replaced by Frank’s daily self-recriminations -- the football fumble,

the girl he so badly wanted, his absent parents. It all came back to darken him here.

That one drawback of “non-recall,” obviously, was a very big issue for me as the head of the project. And I was spending quite a bit of time and money working on a solution. The goal was to experience full recall of Level B while here, awake in this world, which I believed might then create a new permanently integrated level of human awareness.

An ethical question, posed to my good friend, a neighborhood priest, Father Reddingham -- who to his credit didn't mind being deeply challenged philosophically -- was, “Why should we limit ourselves to only this plane of reality if we know there is another accessible reality that is a thousand times more wondrous and beautiful?”

His response was, “My belief is that only suffering, and learning from that suffering, can truly sculpt wisdom into the human soul. And if that is indeed the case, a sheltered man in a dream state wouldn't even know where to begin. God wants us to get there without a pill.”

I said, “How can you be so sure God cares how we get there as long as we get there? My hope is that someday we can discover a way for Frank to remember his dream-state experiences and find the internal wisdom you're referring to. What if we chemically find that missing link and can, medically, if you will, potentialize the human spirit?”

“What if you don't find the missing link? If you chemically experience wisdom-creating events without becoming wise, then what do you call that?”

I said, “Father, as a psychiatrist, I call that normal.”

Reddingham laughed, “Well, that is true enough. And no one said wisdom is easy to grasp. Nonetheless, chemically altering the mind...”

“Wine is a holy sacrament. But it alters the mind. As does drinking coffee throughout the day, and prescription medication for mental disorders. So, Father, are you also suggesting by inference that a devout person whose mind is chemically in need of medication for depression, or anxiety, should be denied that medication?”

He understood my point. In fact, he came to me as a patient years ago suffering from depression and was still taking a low dose of Lexapro before bed each night. There seemed to be nothing left for him to say except, "If God considers this drug 'medicine,' then I suppose..." He stopped himself, then ended the discussion by saying, "May your intentions stay pure, William."

I know this is an awfully dangerous thing for a well-respected psychiatrist to say -- then again, what good is having a decent reputation if you can't use it to go against the taboos and arbitrary ethics of the times... .

In the right hands, and with the right chemical alteration that allows one to fully remember the revelations they experience, this drug could lead to psychological integration, and personal fulfillment, beyond one's wildest dreams.

I'm just notating here what I'm observing. But what I truly believe is, someday, if the process is handled the right way, it could even lead to what one might call the spiritual enlightenment of humankind, and evolve all the way to something as improbably fantastic as peace on Earth.

PART III

a/k/a

Frank Rosen

5

Before I was introduced to Dr. Stabnow, I spent a lot of my waking hours trying to write the perfect suicide note. But I couldn't quite find the right words. I wanted there to be a logical point to my untimely demise, so no one would think I killed myself over a fumble that happened in a football game ten years ago.

Or because my raven-haired mother, and my huge blonde-haired unshaven father, cared more about screwing each other, in all possible meanings of that word, than they did about bringing up their lone child.

So, I blamed it all on my girlfriend, of course.

I'm not the first.

In fact, Dwayne Finn Ermann would be the main person to blame. Ermann was the prototypical mad scientist. I often think he is the doctor in my dream state, but it doesn't make sense that he could be.

He was a genius chemist, they say. A rebel. A rogue. He created a pill. A pill that would have made all of Tim Leary's chemically induced episodes, and all the other psychotropic drugs since, look like a mere child's fairytale -- The ego fighting illusions, until the ego regains control. What a waste!

After dropping out of college, Ermann fell into a weird scene. He was living in a flat in West Hollywood, bumming a sofa bed off a would-be actor named Andy Woodby. His real name was Andrew Schwendinger, but he changed it, "punned it up," so-to-speak, for the sake of his budding career. Ermann was a distant friend of his for reasons Ermann himself questioned almost daily.

Ermann once joked that his new drug should be named after himself by creating an anagram from Dwayne Finn Ermann. One could rearrange the letters into "If Man Were Day." A positive message for one and all. But he couldn't figure out what to do with the four leftover Ns to make the anagram complete. But incompleteness was so clearly a part of his life, an anagram with leftover Ns was actually perfect.

“If Man Were Day” all the time, what would we become? Beings without darkness? And what would we all be now if no darkness had ever come to us? If the apple had never been eaten, because there was no snake... because temptation was unnecessary... because humans were untemptable... because they were already so emotionally complete, they didn’t desire the kinds of knowledge or experiences that ended without increased wisdom? Even success without wisdom would be meaningless.

This drug, this little yellow pill, produced beautiful endings; a sense of wonder bathed in wordless clarity. No bad trips. No lasting physical side-effects. No reason to ever hesitate. No reason not to take it again and again, since nothing equal compared to it in this waking realm.

The pill, which eventually Ermann named Level B, did not induce sleep. But it did make things slow down to the point where you needed to sit or lay down to experience everything optimally.

Could you drive, or work while in that dream state? Only as much as one could drive or work while making love on a bed of flowers. It was theoretically possible, but not what you would ever want to do. You just wouldn’t care enough to drive, or work, or make a phone call. You would rather huddle together in a quiet room with someone you love and experience that bed of flowers together.

There were no selfish desires to long for. No going down into those broken places we live in. No feelings of greed or jealousy. No self-doubt. No urges for money, or to buy or possess anything, or anyone. No barren dreamscapes that beckon you to berate yourself. No need for heterograms, or anagrams, or alluring but anemic alliterations that lead to an affliction one might call, Reader Ambivalence Syndrome.

None of that existed in Level B.

Ermann named his pill Level B, because according to his new world order, humans existed in Level C. He facetiously called Level C, The Dead Zone.

Level A did not yet exist. Level A was what he wanted the drug to evolve into -- where you remembered everything that happened there, once you came back here.

In Level B you are left with only alpenglow. To make sense of it would be like trying to gently stroke a ray of sunlight. You cannot touch what you see.

But once, just once, I remembered a full dream-story while living in Stabnow's lab. Not the message of the dream-story. Not the wisdom gathered from it while still dreaming. But the story itself was traceable. I will demote it to the experience of recalling a daydream.

I believe I remembered it because it happened just before the hypnogogic ending.

Being that I wrote the story down from Level C, I'm sure I added a layer of humor and cynicism that didn't really exist. Because who would I be here, in Level C, without my annoying wit? Anyway, here is the Level B story as I remember it from Level C:

I found myself in the lobby of a rainbow-like hotel. At the front desk was a sweet looking girl about my age in a sleeveless sun-yellow shirt. I said, "Have you ever gotten any complaints that the cap of the hotel's hair conditioner is impossible to open, especially when your hands are wet?"

She had dark hair and a pixie smile. Dark, kind eyes. Her name was AnA. She spelled it with two capital As. It was written on her name tag like that.

AnA was an interesting name even without the two capital As -- It was the first three letters of the word anagram. But also, a perfect palindrome. Anagrams, especially ones with an N in them, held some added importance.

AnA looked around sheepishly to make sure her boss wasn't within earshot. "Um, yes, guests have complained a number of times about the conditioner caps, sir," she admitted. She looked at me apologetically. "You might want to try washing your hair with the shampoo twice. It's pretty much the same stuff. At least that's what they told me."

I said, "Did you know the word, 'AnA' in some languages means 'to share dinner with?'"

She said, "Yes. Although, it also means 'grace' in Spanish."

Suddenly, we found ourselves in a lovely café in an ocean town, with waves crashing wildly in the distance. The café served the food while you shared a sky hammock with your dining partner. We tried to eat but we were laughing the whole time, so we couldn't chew. Because we knew. We knew. It was a pure wordless knowing.

As days swirled passed, each time we kissed we merged into a place far beyond love. Love-swirl. Time-swirl. We became a swirl of coalescing lava, forming together from a high mountain, until we found our way to the great sea entrance, entranced, translucent, luminescent.

The lava formed an island of us.

The island formed soft brown soil, and the soft brown soil formed green seedlings. Our world was framed by a coastline of salt-fine sand and bright blue water.

We had two children, each sprouted from green seedlings, each one sun-grown, water strong. My daughter grew especially close to me. At the age of five she followed me everywhere and told me she wanted to be me when she grew up.

But then a group of teachers from the government, whose intentions were surely good, put her in the numbing machine with other children her age. The machine was made of large blocks of stone. Kind of like Stonehenge, but without any purpose to the architecture. It was purely ergonomic. Eventually, they turned her into a sacrificial lamb, because she was not willing to dance around the stone monolith, numbed, with the rest of the children.

In just a few short swirling years the daughter I knew was gone.

I mourned her death, until one day, out of nowhere, she came back to Earth as an angel. She waved a magic wand over all of her government teachers, and the administrators, and gave them an ironic gift—Each bore triplets that reminded them of her -- smart, stubborn, rebellious, eccentric. Impossible to trap, or stop, or imitate.

Moreover, the triplets couldn't be changed, or numbed, or gotten rid of. They were not lambs, and could never be turned into sacrifices of any kind. They said they weren't going to attend school, forever. They had become numb-proof.

The teachers and administrators soon passed away; they were annoyed to death.

My angel daughter told me we were all safe now, including her younger brother. She flew us on her back, straight up towards the sun, on wings that didn't melt. I began to laugh and cry at the same time until the sky-world turned bright before me. I was holding AnA and my children in my arms as I giddily ascended.

Suffering and laughter became one -- a choir of voices singing.

My daughter had turned us into Gods.

I inhaled. It felt like I could inhale forever.

6

Usually all I am left with after Level B is the color of the shadow of the memory of the feeling... radiance -- until it's fully over.

But that one remembered dream seemed like a truly lived lifetime -- And where was AnA now? And my children? How "not real" were they?

Why did I remember that one dream-story so vividly? That was the big question. Was it only because it happened right at the end of a Level B cycle? Or because the dream went through virtually an entire lifetime? Or, was it because of some very slight accidental chemical alteration to that one pill?

If so, what was the alteration?

How would we ever know, since that pill had been absorbed into me (and me into it)?

Directly after telling Stabnow about that night's experience, he did a blood test to see if there were any unknown chemicals in my system. But all he found was that I was slightly lacking in vitamin D3. I needed to take a supplement and consider daily walks in the sun.

7

Dwayne Finn Ermann's goal, knowing that he too had to survive in Earth reality, was to eventually sell this wonder drug to a huge drug company like Johnson and Johnson... someday. After the chemicals were modified to allow for successful recall.

Ermann imagined them distributing it for free with every bottle of aspirin, or Vaseline jelly. (The "for free" part would, of course, go contrary to every living cell of J&J's corporate body.)

But Ermann was as naive as he was brilliant. He didn't consider the fact that if too many consumers left reality behind, legally and joyously, with no side-effects, it would be deeply troubling, politically as well as economically, to those in power.

Who would want to stay around to vote, or to manufacture the pills in some sweaty factory, or build weapons, or trade stocks, or do anything here for that matter?

* * *

The other doctor – not Stabnow -- the one who kept feeding me my little yellow pill each evening after I fell asleep – was the real mystery for me.

Who was he? Or she? It couldn't have been Ermann himself. LOL. He ran away after the Feds raided his lab.

Of course, I couldn't survive here as their voluntary lab rat without these doctors supporting me in every possible way. When you eat in a dream nothing gets digested. Before it could ever get to a cellular level the food would disappear like a soap bubble.

When you run in a dream your muscles are at rest. Your heart is pumping slower than if you were sitting in a chair.

Therefore, I had to come out of the dream each day to absorb nutrients, and to move my muscles so they wouldn't atrophy.

These were boring times.

I would wake up alone with a tray of fairly decent tasting food waiting for me. In the corner was the treadmill and two thirty-pound weights.

Knowing the drill, I would eat and exercise. Sometimes I would read a book from the very selective library I had accumulated. Then I might watch TV for a few minutes while my food digested a bit further. I would stare in awe at the laughably vapid commercials luring viewers into purchases they previously had no use for. Occasionally, the show itself would come back on.

I would force myself to run on the treadmill – apropos of a life going nowhere – then I’d floss and brush my teeth with lots of mint toothpaste, to wake my mouth up from its nocturnal-taste-dream.

My mind was still trying to understand bits and pieces of the last adventure I’d gone through. I remembered pieces of thoughts in words that barely made sense -- like what was “hypnogogic googolplex consciousness” referring to? And what was the meaning of “inner-infant-illuminated intelligence?” The answers escaped me. These meanings obviously didn’t exist here. Only there.

After my morning routine, I’d shower and change into clean clothes that were supplied to me.

When the hands of the wall clock finally, mercifully, pointed to 10 p.m., I’d get ready to drift down into my natural state of sleep, only to feel my cheeks being touched as soon as the first REM cycle registered on the machine I was hooked up to, and then the pill would touch the top of my tongue... .

Here, in this Level C life, I have only a handful of memories that I can recall before the age of nineteen. I’ve never been able to remember much, because not much really happened. Most of my memories are in black and white; still-life images; hazy outlines. No beauty exists there. Just gray scenes, like cumulus clouds that somehow remain motionless on an endlessly windless day.

Here in the lab, I had lost track of days.

Numbers on a calendar.

Math became a dead language, like Latin.

Time was a measurement deprived of a reality to annoy people in.

Time was a human-conceived continuation-catalyst that was famous long ago, now buried along with so many other mental constructs I used to believe in.

They were like the figures gathered together on the cover of Sgt. Pepper. Standing there with me as we ignored the death of me.
This was a day in the life.

PART IV
About Hillary St. John

8

Hillary St. John was raised in Alexandria, Virginia. She was the daughter of a four-star General. Her grandfather had also been a four-star General, and a close friend of Eisenhower's.

Under the strict watchful eye of her father, Hillary was bathed daily in inflexible moral platitudes, and was told how to properly behave in every conceivable social situation from the time she was three years old.

In part, because she was the daughter of a military man, she was also a bit of a tomboy in elementary school. Her red hair would fall into her eyes as she worked up a sweat playing soccer. Her blue eyes blazed with victory when she kicked a goal just out of reach of the older boy playing goalie.

But by the time she was in high school her hair had turned slightly darker and her blue eyes became fixated on books, and more books -- anything to take her away from the strict disciplines of her home life.

Words and numbers, formulas and long calculations -- these were her secret friends. Her face became pale from not spending time in the sun. Even during the summer months her studies never ceased. It was an acceptable escape.

Her natural beauty was covered by modest clothes and down-cast eyes. She had very few human interests and no close friends. Indeed, one might say she had become addicted to academia. She had become a hermit of higher education.

She graduated Yale at the age of twenty-one, thrived in grad school at Harvard, and was just beginning her career as a young up-and-coming professor of chemistry at UCLA when she met the rogue of rogues, Dwayne Finn Ermann.

Ermann knew exactly how to sweep her off her feet. At first, he didn't try, which, is a highly effective tactic.

Basically, he was too distracted with his own chemistry experiments to care.

His second tactic was, he dressed like a bum and only shaved when his unshaven-ness began to look like a beard and started to itch.

This anti-peacock mating tactic made him strangely and vaguely appealing to a strait-laced professor of chemistry like Hillary. Although she wouldn't admit this, even to herself, she was attracted to anti-four-star General types. (The farther away from father, the better.)

Dwayne's third tactic was his willingness to discuss his personal philosophy: He didn't believe in rules or laws except for the ones he created when he was on drugs.

The fourth tactic was the most effective of all – he lied -- saying he had a PhD in chemistry, and followed this with the truth -- which was that he was working on new research, secret research, that had a chance of changing the world. She was insatiably interested in other people's research.

In reality, he was just a street alchemist selling his new home-made drug to suburban teenage kids with lots of cash.

His fifth allure to attract the unsuspecting Hillary St. John was no illusion, no mystery -- his ingenious instincts, and reckless way of approaching theoretical problems allowed him to understand things about chemistry that Hillary had never considered before. He was able to impress and connect with Hillary in a way very few people in the world ever could have.

But these five things were dwarfed by Dwayne's sixth way to sweep Hillary St. John off her feet: It came in the form of a little yellow pill.

The pill became Hillary's secret study – first by studying Ermann when he was under its influence; then by studying its chemical make-up, because he allowed her, and her alone in all the world, to see his formula, and even occasionally allowed her into his secret lab.

Many would have thought this was foolish of him beyond reason. But he trusted her. He trusted her with absolutely everything.

She was surprised to find the formula was not addictive and had no properties that resembled far cruder unrelated drugs like opium, or even LSD, or Ecstasy, or Ketamine.

Nor did it dull one's senses, as do so many anti-depressants and pain killers. She had feared and hated all of those kinds of drugs growing up under her father's strict guidelines, along with cigarettes and alcohol. And her opinion hadn't changed.

Before meeting Ermann she would have resisted any personal urge to explore something this radical. She was brought up to say no to everything that might offer her any out-of-bounds pleasure. In-bounds pleasure was defined as singing along with the national anthem at a football game, or humming a Christmas Carol while putting presents under the tree. Saluting her father also brought a fair amount of praise.

But she had seen Ermann transform himself from a big-boned brooding bum, huddled in a gray overcoat, into a gentle joyous genius brimming with laughter within minutes after the chemicals released him back into this world.

Finally, her curiosity got the best of her.

Of course, what added further to her curiosity was that Ermann had mentioned his Level B experiment might change the entire world for the better one day.

He proudly added that he had already formed a company, but he didn't intend for this company to ever go public, or be sold to some big pharmaceutical conglomerate. He was going to keep all of this strictly "by the people, for the people," once he made enough money to live comfortably himself. There would never be stockholders, and never be a board of directors. He estimated the manufacturing cost of a thousand pills to be about fifty-five dollars. This did not have to be a drug only for the wealthy. He added confidently, Johnson and Johnson might even distribute it for free.

She thought to herself, this man could make billions, but what difference would that have made in his life? He would still dress in rags like he does, and drive around in his ten-year-old Subaru. All he wants to do is play with chemicals and create things, good things, even great things. He had lots more ideas too. The yellow pill was just his first idea.

It took him a long time, but he finally seduced her. Not as a lover, but as a fellow rat in a wild science experiment. When she finally allowed herself to succumb to the pill's magical formula it

didn't disappoint. In fact, she became a different person within an hour — one prone to wonder, and able to doubt all previous perceptions; she found herself letting go of numbers and elements, and seeing the equal value of dreams and living joyously in waking reality. Not that she was suddenly joyous. But maybe someday she could learn to be.

The third time she took the pill she began to see Ermann in a different light. She saw through to him while thinking about him under the drug's spell — and what she sensed was a sensitive half-boy, half-man. A man who carried a great loneliness. A man who masked some deep sense of failure with a radical, almost subversive bravado. But beyond that, she saw he was a good man. As good as her father tried to be in many ways, just a different type of good.

She also noticed how naturally strong he was — nothing like the other chemists she knew. He was quite tall. His shoulders were broad. His brown hair brimmed over with long curls that were always uncombed, Einstein-like, and with an equal lack of care and purpose. And his brown eyes, when she looked closely, without quickly turning away from her instinctive fear of intimacy, were flecked with orange and a starburst of hazel. Odd eyes. Almost paint-splattered. Sun speckled. The Rorschach splash looked like abject fear chemically transforming into genius.

By the fifth time she went to Level B she went with him at the same time. She found herself feeling something that was unimaginable to her in the other reality. It wasn't love, but it was an inner stirring. When she was near Ermann in her half-awake state she found herself far more open sensually than she had ever been before. It began with a reasonable desire to be closer to him. She wanted to be near him, to see what he was thinking and feeling, and to assess how he came to his conclusions.

He seemed oblivious to her attraction at first, which allowed her to come still closer. Then there was the moment when their faces were so close that she wondered if she should kiss him. Then she did. She enjoyed the absurdity of the act at first, but then allowed herself to drink in the strange elixir so forbidden in her father's world -- a pure sensual moment.

As time passed, she eagerly explored new feelings and experiences on Level B with her private rogue. She liked to observe this mad scientist, with muscles as strong as a soldier. Sometimes she felt the gentle expansiveness of being a cloud, loosely integrated, not so tightly wound up inside a body. She felt herself thin and wispy, wind-driven, spreading herself out in many different directions at once. Sometimes She and Dwayne became one set of eyes staring up at an enormous mobile of stars turning slowly.

One night they were reduced to a hugging ball of laughter, knowing that where they had just been could not be traveled to by any other human beings on Earth.

Yet.

In reality, she realized Level B was a choice. Just as sensuality was a choice. And sometimes, in fact, many times, she chose not to go to either place. She was not a naturally warm or compassionate person. She had realized that long ago. She had never let anyone in; never allowed anyone to be this close. And she wasn't sure, in this reality, how necessary that really was.

When Dwayne was gone for days at a time, she didn't miss the pills, and most of the time she didn't miss him either. She was busy teaching and doing research. She didn't mind this reality she was creating for herself in the world of non-dream. In fact, when the pill was offered to her during her work week she always steadfastly refused.

On special weekends, when she invited Dwayne to her modest apartment, and answered the door with her blue eyes twinkling, and her auburn hair modestly uncombed, tomboy-like -- so at ease with herself -- these were moments when Dwayne realized he was the one who had become addicted. To her. Her reality made sense to him. She was his best and only friend. He admired the way she lived her life, her dedication, and her ability to succeed in the real world.

The Hillary Addiction, as he called it, was the only thing, other than the drug itself, that brought Dwayne Ermann to his knees. Quite literally. Since usually when Hillary's door opened to him, he would bend down on one knee and half-mockingly begin to propose to her. Again.

She always assumed it was a full-on joke. What a rogue he was. What a rebel, with such a wicked sense of humor. She would invite him in for tea, and discuss organic chemistry, and the politics of the school faculty, as if nothing else had ever happened between them.

But his attraction to her had grown unbearable over time. At first, she was understandably standoff-ish. Then oddly aloof. Then maybe just excusably shy. Even after months of knowing her, coaxing more than a perfunctory smile from her was a moral victory. Hearing her laugh was holy and rare, and eventually became beautiful to him always.

After they became closer from the Level B experiences she would sometimes let him look into her eyes for more than an instant. In the slate blue waves beyond the iris he saw a bridge. As he looked closer, he came to believe he was meant to cross over that bridge someday to the real Hillary, which would lead him to a long wordless ocean that didn't exist yet. They were supposed to create it together.

He eventually found himself desperate. But she was not receptive to desperation. His attempts to become more intimate mostly felt like begging. He didn't like that part of himself. So he would pull back, which occasionally left enough room for her to move forward. But when she didn't move closer, it left him feeling as alone as if he were drifting out in space, stars away from her.

There was only one way to truly connect with her the way he wanted to. Usually after dinner on those special weekend nights he would casually put a small yellow pill next to her plate. She would look down and consider it for a long moment. She could see that he was lost in her. She felt something possibly akin to love, although she couldn't specifically define it as such. She liked looking at his shaggy hair and his long fingers. There was something compelling about his sarcastic smile, his rough loud voice. Because she also knew his mind was pure and rather innocent about the world, and it was operating at levels of thought no one but she could imagine. She admired him. Yes, that was the word she could best relate to. Admiration.

There were no demands coming from this gangly man that would have in any way reminded her of her father's brute insistence. Whether she took the pill, or not, or allowed her love to transform

into a sensual experience, or not, he cast no guilt or shame upon her. He treated her no differently. His reverence remained.

There was one other allure -- he made her laugh more than anyone else ever had. She began to enjoy laughing for the first time in her life.

And too, there were those rare times in this reality that she would feel the pull of her heart, something she had previously only felt under the yellow pill's chemical influence. She might then open up to him, kiss him gently, until by morning he was happily asleep in her arms.

But Hillary also had her career to consider, first and foremost. She wasn't just a teacher. She was a researcher. This was her true love and passion. Not Dwayne Finn Ermann.

In fact, one day for no particular reason, she felt it was time to stop this odd interlude. It was time to redouble her efforts on her own work.

9

The aforementioned would-be actor, Andy Woodby, was desperate for money during the time he knew Ermann. He had been a non-practicing Christian waiter at a Jewish deli for over a year, but other than gaining a bit of unwanted weight from free meals consisting of potato pancakes, kreplach, and matzo ball soup, Woodby had little to show for his efforts. He was nearly broke. His wide white George Clooney smile and pool-blue Henry Fonda eyes did not correspond to the quality of their acting. In fact, one famous acting coach compared his acting abilities to those of Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris when they starred in "Safe at Home." Neither of those handsome athletes found their name on The Avenue of the Stars. They had to settle for the Hall of Fame.

So, what would Andy Woodby forever be remembered for? He would be known, infamously, as the man who turned Dwayne Finn Ermann over to the authorities.

Soon after the DEA visited Woodby at his L.A. apartment, they raided Ermann's midtown lab, then took him away in handcuffs.

Woodby was paid a few thousand dollars for snitching. It kept him in acting school for another few months and paid for a new set of head shots, which then had to be heavily Photoshopped.

But of course, Hollywood quickly taught him that the difference between those purchases, and simply throwing his money out a tenth-story window, was zero.

Hillary St. John didn't find out what happened to Ermann for many days.

She texted him: "How are you, dear friend. Sorry if I hurt your feelings the other day. Can't we be professional about this?"

She realized after she sent the text how horrible it sounded. She was terrible with words that had to do with emotional expression. She never used Emojis.

He didn't respond.

She texted him again the next day. "I didn't quite mean let's be professionals. I meant let's be associates. And, yes, friends too!"

That seemed no better. But she thought that he might least respond to that and get the ball rolling.

After a full week of no contact, Hillary took a bold step. She called his cell phone. She had to leave a message. "Oh, hi. Call me if you want to. I just wanted you to know, I considered adding a smiley face to the last text."

That was awful. But it got the point across without confusing her intentions.

After two weeks she started to panic about his non-response. She took the boldest move yet. She went to his apartment and let herself in with a spare key he had given her long ago. He had hoped she would use it often, but this was the first time.

No one was home. The room was dark, so she found the light switch. As she looked around, she gravitated towards his messy desk. She thought she might write him a note to let him know she was there as a concerned friend. It would be a slow process finding the right words.

As she looked for paper and a pen, she noticed her phone number was written on the top of many of his calendar pages. Sometimes

in reverse. Sometimes in code — one of the sequences used letters of the alphabet replacing the numbers in the same sequential order: CCD-AFHH.

Then she saw a letter. It said, “For Hillary, Please Read,” on the envelope next to it. He hadn’t put it in the envelope. Maybe he wasn’t going to send it? She hesitated, but then picked up the letter:

I will make this letter cold and unemotional for you, which basically describes our relationship when we’re not digesting small round amounts of dreamlike illogic together.

I am going to kill myself.

Maybe you will hate me when you find this out.

Especially if you believe the authorities, who will tell you I am nothing but a common street criminal, because I’m selling a drug that isn’t illegal anywhere. In the end I was shoved out of the DEA’s office with only a warning to cease. Fortunately, their handcuffs didn’t cut off circulation to my wrists. That’s the good news.

The bad news is, they told me they’d catch me someday. They’d find a charge that would stick.

Suddenly I am not an entrepreneur on the verge of starting a non-profit pharmaceutical company. Not a potential savior of the world. I am just another thug in their eyes. A crook, who you mistakenly fell for, but never really loved.

How could you, why should you? If you had really come to know me, you would have laughed in embarrassment for caring. I’m just fumbling around in this reality, failing at everything I do, no matter how noble the attempt. I run down the sidelines looking for daylight. And life turns into a nightmare.

Now it’s time for me to wake up, by leaving.

Why not?

The status quo will be saved for one and all.

And who will care?

Infinity takes care of small mistakes.

~ Dwayne

She felt a tear fall for the first time since she was six years old, when she fell off her bike and broke her arm.

She pulled herself together and drove around the city, almost randomly at first. She stopped at a restaurant where they had sometimes eaten together, but why would he be there now? She wasn't being logical. Someone who writes a suicide note and disappears is not likely to be found eating alone in a romantic restaurant.

She tried to remember the actor's name where he had lived rent-free before he could afford his own place. Weird name.

"A would-be actor," Dwayne used to laugh. Because it was some kind of word play. Yes... Woodby. She found his contact number on the odd-looking website he'd created. "Andy Woodby, character actor, can play any role." But the overly large picture of his face made him look worried. He was biting his lip.

Could Dwayne be hiding out there? He never sent the letter! What does that mean? He must still be alive. He has to be.

When she introduced herself on the phone his response was very odd indeed. He seemed paranoid. "How do you know I knew Dwayne?"

"I was his associate."

Then he said, "I'm sorry. I had to do it. I needed the money."

"Sorry for what? Do you know where Dwayne is?"

"Of course not!" he said with his voice sounding shaky. "If he's still alive I don't want anything to do with him, understand?"

Still alive? How did he know? Maybe Dwayne had taken his own life after all and never bothered sending her the letter. Did Woodby hear anything about Dwayne committing suicide? She decided not to ask. Talking to him was like talking to a paranoid zombie; a soulless creature of some kind.

She sat in her car after the call and closed her eyes for a long time. Her heart was racing.

If he was going to kill himself, how would he want to die? Suddenly she realized where he would go -- the secret lab. He would probably take an overdose of some cheap pharmaceutical drug then take a very large quantity of Level B. He would go out shining.

PART V

Dwayne Finch Ermann Revealed

10

Hillary didn't seem all that thrilled to see me when she found me alive-and-well in the secret lab at the edge of town, eating fried chicken with my feet up on my desk, watching the original version of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* on my plasma TV for the twentieth time. I would alternate between that one and Groundhog Day.

She was pretty disgusted, actually. She expected to find me dead. She told me she had been to my apartment and saw the letter. I told her the suicide note was just my new and improved way of inviting her out for dinner.

It confirmed for her that although the pill might be great, the delivery system – me – was no longer viable.

I had hoped she wouldn't judge me too badly. It's not that I wasn't planning on killing myself eventually: I figured one of my future experiments would do me in, probably with a long wild jolt, like a rocket ride with an ill-conceived guidance system -- I start shaking in the capsule, catapulted from orbit, then a final flash of light.

She stood there crying with her arms folded.

"The suicide letter wasn't meant to be seen by you, Hillary. I was working on a fake suicide note for the DEA if you must know, in case I ever needed it."

I wasn't being completely honest.

"And also... in case I wanted to actually do it someday," I added. "But it was a work in progress. I never quite found the right words."

It was a weird, mean thing to say. But sometimes the truth is weird and mean, let's face it. I thought that would be the end of us.

Instead, she begged me to come with her to see a brilliant psychiatrist she knew. Not just any psychiatrist, none other than Dr. William Stabnow. He ran a clinic located a block away from the university.

I thought about it and realized I had nothing better to do. As long as she was going to accompany me, why not?

What I found out later was that Hillary had already spoken to Stabnow about me, and about Level B. It was all done in strict confidentiality. And his subsequent interest in me didn't surprise her.

His office was on a side street off of Sunrise Boulevard. It was a remodeled Victorian house. Some of the floors were a bit slanted, but overall it was quite a beautiful piece of architecture.

The first time Stabnow and I spoke he didn't mention Level B. Instead, he asked me about my life. He told me about his life as well. It struck me that he didn't see me as a potential client. He had some other motive.

Over the next few weeks I got to know the good doctor and begrudgingly began to respect the man.

He also interviewed Hillary extensively about her Level B experiences. He tested both of us neurologically and psychoanalyzed me during his off-hours. He never asked me to pay him a dime.

A month into our marathon sessions he asked me a simple question – it seemed fanciful at the time: Would I like to change my identity and stay in his clinic as part of a completely confidential research experiment?

What that would mean was I would officially disappear. No more DEA looking over my shoulder. No need to make a meager living as a chemist / street drug salesman. No need to continue working on a suicide note for the Feds, or Hillary. I would be too busy.

All expenses would be paid, Stabnow said. There would be nothing to do except become his guinea pig, so he could explore the drug I had created by observing me using it. This research could also go a long way toward legitimizing Level B for potential sale as a legal, medically approved pharmaceutical drug someday.

All I needed to do was to stay in his lab for free and take dream rides -- that was it. I could disappear from this reality for a while, all expenses paid.

Stabnow's unlikely friend, a local priest named Reddingham, served as a witness the day I agreed to disappear. None of us knew a lawyer we could trust well enough. As far as I was concerned, too many people knew about Level B already. Stabnow wanted the good priest to legally record that I had accepted this research offer of my

own free will. Reddingham didn't need to know exactly what the research would entail.

I signed whatever papers they put in front of me, absolving Stabnow of any future legal responsibility in case I went mad (or, more mad), or died.

All that was left to do was request a fake name. Neither of us wanted my name in his written reports and observations. And I didn't want the DEA to somehow find out where I was. I wanted nothing more than to disappear as a person of interest.

It was a curious challenge to create a new name. But to not be Dwayne Finn Ermann for a while had a number of upsides.

A few potential names floated around in my head. I decided I wanted the name to have some semblance of meaning, unlike my life.

Also, whatever the name was, I didn't want to sound like an outlaw. Because I didn't do anything illegal, damn it! And I wasn't doing anything illegal now. So "Jessie was out." So was Al, Sirhan, Mac, Max, Bart, Sam, and Donald.

Stabnow said, "How about something that suits your personality? I find you to be a very straightforward person. Actually, blunt is more like it. So maybe a name like, Frank?"

"Frank. That's actually not bad."

"Good. As far as a last name, what about something having to do with your ultimate goal?"

"And what is my goal, Doctor?"

"You tell me."

"World peace! But that's a terrible last name... I was thinking more about this girl I knew."

"Who?" Stabnow must have assumed it was Hillary.

"A chemist I met long ago. We spent a beautiful summer together. Shared some ideas. Formulaic ideas. Then she got a job as a professor at a university in Sweden; I can't even pronounce the name of the university. But her name was Johanna Rosen."

"Rosen?"

"Yeah."

“Well, that’s fine,” Stabnow nodded.

“Look, I really don’t care. As long as it’s not... never mind. Just use Rosen.”

“Okay then, Frank Rosen it is.”

PART VI

From the Journal of Dr. William Stabnow

11

Dwayne Ermann, a.k.a. Frank Rosen, wanted to start as soon as possible. He even fantasized about never returning to the outside world again.

We knew the pill itself wasn't addictive, because, honestly, at some point we all tried it, except Reddingham, of course. And although the experience was indeed brilliant, sensual, and spiritually enlightening in many ways, it was not something any of us felt the physical or psychological need to try over and over again. Just like vacationing in Europe with someone you love, as sensual, and enlightening as that might be, would not be addictive to the point of it ruining, or running, someone's life.

And most tourists would not automatically give up everything they knew, and everyone they knew, to move there.

My new assistant was to be Hillary St. John. I hired her away from the university. Because she was going to be the key to this experiment.

We decided early on not to let Frank know Hilary was working for me directly. We didn't want to complicate things. He knew she was involved in some way as a chemist, offering up ideas along with any alterations to the formula he or I could come up with. But he didn't know she was "the mystery doctor."

Hillary would be spending all of her time trying to work with the chemical make-up of the drug to make the experience available for recall in this reality.

Frank would willingly try out any alteration to the formula. Because this was our biggest goal, by far -- in fact, it was the only reason I was willing to risk funding this very radical, technically semi-unethical, and possibly somehow illegal, experiment in the first place.

At one point early on, Hillary reported that the only known chemical substances that might help the user "cross-over" were highly addictive. This was not the point of our work, although we realized in the wrong hands the combination could become quite a dangerous thing.

If addiction was not a concern, or if it was somehow seen as a plus to addict and control the masses in some way, all sorts of pharmaceutical monsters could come flying out of Pandora's box. Just as Pandora's Box turned $E=mc^2$ into a weapon instead of an energy source. The road to hell is often paved with good intentions, and innocent vagabonds like Frank Rosen tended to wander down that road as a matter of course.

We knew there were drug companies that would sell their corporate souls to be able to market Level B as the super star of anti-depressants. DEA and FDA approval would be hard to buy, but a Dow Jones pharma-conglomerate certainly would have the lobbying power, and could promise enough quiet campaign gifts to persuade many of those inclined to withhold their vote.

There were also international implications. What if controlling the drug's distribution, and controlling who was allowed (or forced) to take the drug, cemented one country's power over the rest of the world?

Therefore, we patented not only the original formula, but every one of our failures to alter it. Yes, a patent lawyer was now involved. We were taking every reasonable precaution.

On the other hand, if we did come up with a version where remembering the experience occurred, our next goal would be to make the pill available and inexpensive right from the start. That way not even criminals would find it profitable to illegally distribute it.

The fortunate thing for the world was, we didn't care about becoming billionaires, or even millionaires. We just wanted to create a better world. Even Frank. No one on board cared particularly about money or fame or credit.

Our more immediate goal struck closer to home. If we found a way to combine non-addictive memory recall with Level B my assumption and hope as a doctor was it would also directly help Frank himself -- Dwayne -- who we all very much wanted to see fully functioning in this reality again someday.

As a chemist, no doubt he was a genius. Historically, there will be no doubt about that either. But he was also obviously a broken man in many ways. He was able to function during the day by reviewing our chemical research and pointing out flaws, or coming up with his

own potential pathways to explore. But anything having to do with emotions – personal relationships, love interests, or even random events like discussing sports, would bring about a refusal to speak, and a disinterest in the work.

None of us were interested in creating a dream-zombie by keeping him alive and drugged for the next fifty years. We wanted to help create a truly enlightened state through chemistry, for his sake, as well as for others.

Was the mind even psychologically capable of intaking such abstract information and remembering it, and still function normally? That was a question I was struggling with. I had taken Level B. It was extraordinarily impossible to define, or direct from that state. How would anyone be able to handle that kind of ecstatic sensory overload and function in the real world at the same time?

Normal existence creates a social network that promotes survival of the species. What if no one cared about surviving as a species, or human evolution, anymore?

Chemically, were we searching for a drug that could create a race of spiritual masters? All of us? And does that evolve the human race, or soon end it?

Fear and avarice, and Eve's all-too-human curiosity about the dark side, are key elements of the human psyche, and each in their own way have helped to keep the human race alive.

On the other hand, I'm not sure very many spiritual masters care much about the continuance of, or the ascendancy of, the human race. They see the limitations and narrowness of such desires.

PART VII
From Hillary St. John

12

I would often come to the observing window at night and watch him dream. I would leave before morning. He wouldn't want me here. He would hate me if he knew I still cared for him, but only as a friend. I guess I'm not capable of more unless I'm on Level B with him, and therefore seeing reality through clearer eyes. Yet, even without the pill's influence, I can't seem to stay away from him entirely.

I don't know what I would say to him if he was standing before me. What he's doing to, and for himself, and at the same time for the possible future benefit of the world, strikes me as beyond brave. What we have here is a decision that needs to be made as a human race. The decision is based on multiple choices: Pain or ecstasy? This reality, or a better reality? Living to survive? Or surviving to live in amazing joy and acceptance?

Life and death, suffering and joy, would all be put into a perspective so broad as to make everything "holy." We would surely evolve our minds into a greater instrument for good than we could have ever imagined, instead of settling for the reality we know today, which may or may not last another hundred years.

Dwayne Ermann, aka Frank Rosen, please know this -- I quit my job at the university to try to help you. You were wrong about me. I do care for you. I want to help both you and the world in a meaningful way.

Actually, let me change that sentence to be more emotionally honest: I want to love both you and the world in a meaningful way.

PART VIII

Dwayne / Frank

His version of the Woodby story,
in third person

13

Acting is a strange profession. Much like the Level B drug I created, it allows one to leave this reality for another.

Great actors can make an altered reality part of their very soul for a time.

Andy Woodby, on the other hand, could only read lines.

I lived with Andy for six months. So this part of the story is, let's just say, interpretive, pulled together from bits and pieces discovered later, and exaggerated into the farce that my friend, Andy, made of his life in general.

Sarcasm and cynicism must be included in this sub-tale to give you the flavor of the times. There's no way he would take offense. He messed things up for everyone, and hurt a lot of good people, so he would have had no reason to take offense. Besides, he's dead.

At times Andy cursed his good looks. He thought, "I'm more than just another classically handsome six-foot-four-inch actor. What do I have to do, scar my face to prove it?"

In the opinion of others in the industry, while the scar may have added a brief illusion of depth and substance to the man, once he opened his mouth he was doomed.

So when Woodby heard the knock on his door that fateful Saturday afternoon he probably didn't even pause for a moment to wonder who it might be. He had no hope, so he had no fear. He probably just muted the sound on his television and opened the door wide.

On the other side of Los Angeles, a meeting had taken place. To this day I don't exactly know how they found out about Level B, or me, or Andy, although it's not all that hard to connect the dots -- a drug company with almost unlimited amounts of money could have had the DEA in their back pocket.

Maybe the CEO would be looking for a new blockbuster drug that would put the company back on top. Just think about all the happy shareholders. Yes, he would do it for the shareholders -- a Machiavellian moment.

As Andy went to answer the door maybe he wondered at the last moment if had he had accidentally ordered a pizza on his phone. He had the app. He was hungry. Hope sprang eternal.

Two men greeted him and pushed him back inside the room. The door was quickly shut. Both men wore masks and black gloves.

By the looks of it, this was not a pizza delivery.

"All we want to know is where he is, then you won't get hurt."

"Otherwise, we're going to have to make a mess of things, with you being the main thing."

Woodby was speechless. Maybe they had the wrong apartment? He would gladly point them in the right direction, perhaps for a small fee.

Suddenly he received his very first real punch in the face. In acting school he'd been on the receiving end of fake punches before. This felt quite different. His neck snapped all the way to the right and he weakly crumpled to the floor and began to scream for help, but it came out more like a quiet cry.

"Where is he?"

"Who? Where is who? No one else lives here but me!" Andy mumbled out of a slightly loosened set of teeth.

"Ermann."

"Ermann? Jesus man, how the hell would I know?" Andy was starting to panic through his tears. Damn Ermann. "I haven't seen him for months. Maybe a year. I have no idea."

"No emails, no cell calls?" The thug who hadn't hit him asked the question, but it was in a muffled tone through his black mask.

"Why the hell would he contact me? He probably knows I'm the one who turned him into the DEA. He'd be the last guy in the world who would give a shit about me."

One thug found Andy's iPhone sitting on the dresser in his tiny bedroom. The thug held it in front of Woodby's face until it unlocked. Then he scrolled through his emails and phone calls. Then he scrolled through his contacts. Ermann wasn't in there.

"Please be careful not to erase my audition voice mails."

"I'm not sure he knows anything," the other thug interrupted.

"Then why the hell would they have been so sure?"

Andy was feeling exonerated now and said calmly, "Who are 'they'? Who are you working for?" Andy mumbled.

"None of your business, you fucking giraffe." Andy was tall, even while lying sideways on the floor.

"Are you with the FBI?" Andy asked, with his jaw still stinging.

The thugs looked at each other and almost burst out laughing. But the smart thug (relatively speaking because the other thug was really dumb) said, "Yeah, we're from a secret section of the FBI. We don't need to show badges or anything like that. We just gather secret information. Important, top secret information, to help the government."

The other thug nodded.

"It's a government red alert priority. We have to find Ermann. And it's your duty to help us. You could go from being a moronic giraffe to a national hero overnight if you help us find him."

"What did Ermann do now?" Andy was stunned.

"It's about the drug."

Why would the FBI wear masks? These guys must be really important.

Andy mumbled. "Why? The DEA said it wasn't illegal yet. They let him go. I don't know where the hell he is."

The smart one looked at Woodby for a long moment, "Let's get out of here. This is going nowhere."

"We should bring him back with us," said the dumb thug.

"Too dangerous," droned the other. "Do you have a brain in your head?"

Andy repeated, "Ermann probably hates me now. I'd be the last person in the world he would want to be in contact with. And I heard there wasn't any illegal stuff in the pill so they couldn't arrest him. So he's probably out there somewhere making up new drugs. But I don't know... ."

“He claims to have invented the drug, you see, but he lied. The government invented it,” said the relatively smart thug.

Andy was stunned, “The government invented it? Holy shit! But then why do you care about Ermann if the government already has the formula?”

All the intelligence Andy had was acquired from studying movies. But at this point he couldn’t quite follow the plot.

“He was a spy,” said the relatively smart thug.

“Really? Really? Jeez.” Andy was stunned yet again.

“They paid him a lot of money to get another country some pills, so they could figure out what’s in it,” said the dumb thug.

“Was it China? I hate China,” Andy fumed.

“We can’t say,” said the relatively smart thug.

“Yeah, we can’t say,” said the dumb thug.

Andy nodded. This was serious.

“Okay, let me try to help,” Andy nodded his head, sure of his intentions now.

The thugs backed off and sat on his ratty couch as Andy scrolled through his iPhone for the number of Ermann’s strait-laced girlfriend.

What was her name? She’d only called him once, the night she was looking for Ermann. But that was a while back. He never erased his recent calls list, so many of the numbers on there were far from recent. Acting agents were on there. He couldn’t erase those. Plus, there was one famous actress... . Oh yeah, this was a number he didn’t recognize. No contact name connected with it...

PART IX
From Hillary St. John

Andy Woodby called me asking where Dwayne was! Why should he care? I thought he didn't want anything to do with him anymore.

When I questioned why he wanted to know, he said the FBI was there in his apartment. They were looking for him. That made no sense. The DEA had let him go, and Dwayne had disappeared and turned into Frank Rosen long ago.

I asked him if he'd asked to see their badges? That's when he whispered, "No, they're from a secret section of the FBI."

Suddenly I heard a thud. Then the phone crashed. It sounded like a piece of tin bouncing against a cement floor.

Then I heard a gunshot.

PART X

From the Journal of Dr. William Stabnow

15

Andy Woodby's murder made it to the third page of the L.A. Times. The first thing I was concerned about after I heard the news, and after Hillary told me her story, was whether the thugs could trace Woodby's call to Hillary's address somehow. I felt fairly confident they wouldn't be able to trace Ermann himself to this location, but I thought Hillary might be in serious danger. Plus, if they followed her, she might inadvertently lead them here. So, I had her move into the complex downstairs from where our offices were.

I also hired two plain-clothed security guards to watch the building, telling them that a psychotic patient of mine had become paranoid and now saw me as an enemy. The guards were told they might even hire someone to kill me, or my female assistant. So be on the lookout for anyone suspicious.

But the smartest thing I did was to hire two other security guards to hide out undercover in front of Hillary's old apartment for a month.

Sure enough, the two thugs showed up there the following week. They were searched by my security guards and found to have masks and gloves in their pockets along with loaded pistols. They never made it into the apartment. They're in jail now, charged with the first-degree murder of a very bad actor.

The company they worked for claimed they had nothing to do with ordering the thugs to hurt or kill anyone. They had only requested these newly hired employees to find out what they could about a rumored new experimental drug they were excited about, and willing to pay handsomely for, even before FDA approval. The firm had very good lawyers. The thugs didn't.

16

Hillary came to seriously doubt her ability to ever find a cross-over equation. She knew employing a great team of chemists from a big university would give us a far better chance to find the formula, if a formula actually existed. But she agreed, after what happened to

Woodby, that we just couldn't take that risk. We trusted Reddingham to keep our secret. After all, he'd more or less been in on this since the beginning. And we trusted Ermann, of course. But no one else. And no one else knew.

Our patents certainly protected us to a degree. But the fear of some big company getting hold of the chemical make-up of the drug and then using it to a bad end while patent conflicts were fought in the courts for years on end, was at the forefront of every decision. None of us had the millions of dollars it would take to sue. And even if we won there would be years of appeals.

I encouraged Hillary every chance I could to keep trying. I told her I had no doubt she would find the answer someday. But I also had my own personal motives at play: Hillary was a beautiful girl. Brilliant. Polite. Mature beyond her age. Respectful. And emotionally cold and unreachable. Therefore, well, it was hard for anyone of any age to resist her. And I was basically the only person she saw in her free time.

I was, of course, cognizant of the fact that I was a sixty-five-year-old divorced psychiatrist and had zero chance to win her over, regardless of how young at heart I was. I could also tell that she was, to some unknowable degree, in love with a living zombie dreaming his life away in the next room. I also knew they had played that out long ago, and it ended with her bringing him here.

So one night, with a hopelessly naive motive in mind, I asked Hillary to dinner. She accepted, choosing the following Friday as the date. Oddly, she even chose the restaurant.

Did she have an inkling of my intention? Or did she think we were going to discuss business? I allowed her to think whatever she wanted. And she allowed me to think whatever I wanted, as long as it wasn't the truth.

Because I wasn't the only one hiding their true intentions.

PART XI
From Hillary St. John

17

Will Stabnow was a good man. I trusted our professional relationship. However, I had signed no contract. I didn't need to, nor did I want to profit from anything I did here, even if I could succeed at finding the cross-over equation.

His generous salary, and his promise that I would own a percentage of Level B if we succeeded, dwarfed what I had been making as a professor, or ever would make in a lifetime of teaching. That comforted me somewhat. But it wasn't about the money. This had become our life's work.

I had other motives as well, I admit that. Such as recognition in my field, if I were to actually deserve it. But, also, if I was being honest with myself, I wanted to see if Dwayne and I could become aligned again someday. I knew most of that would be up to me. I was the one rejecting him. I was the one he wanted all along. I just had so many hesitations, all of which still remained.

In his lab room, the world where he existed now, he continued to know me only as the mystery doctor. I could help him, and communicate with him, right as he was going under, or just before he was fully awake. But I was merely a voice. I was never visibly present in the room. I felt certain that if he found out it was me, he would either feel hurt and angry, or ask me to get closer to him again before I was ready.

What would happen if we both took Level B, but then remembered everything afterwards? Could that ever happen? What exactly would that do to us? I couldn't imagine.

For him, remembering his Level B experiences would hopefully mean letting go of his relentless shame about "The Fumble" when he was playing football at Notre Dame.

And accepting who his parents were.

And accepting who I am, and also who I am not.

All this was going through my mind the night I went out to dinner with Dr. Stabnow.

Unfortunately, I had not been honest enough with Will to tell him how I felt about Dwayne. Maybe he had an inkling of it. But our discussions remained business-like throughout our time at work.

“You look lovely tonight,” Will beamed. He was wearing jeans and a dinner jacket. His thick silver hair was a tad too long, another attempt to show how youthful he was. He wanted me to know that he was not still a part of the late 1960s ethos. He was all about now. He knew about now from his teen clients. I admit, I always thought his attempt to stay current with the culture was a part of his charm.

I blushed at his initial compliment. He took that as a good sign, as an observant psychiatrist might. But actually, I blushed because it made me uncomfortable, not flattered. It was becoming obvious he had asked me on a date.

I had far different intentions. I also knew a lot of other people were listening at this moment to everything he said.

“So....” I stammered, trying to think of a question that would move the conversation off of me. He was very good at talking about himself when he wasn’t with patients.

“Hillary, I have something to discuss.”

Just then the waiter came by.

“Oh, would you like to order first?” Will asked.

“Yes, that would be good.” I wasn’t at all hungry, but I was playing my role as a spy, and trying to let a little more time pass.

“Would you like to hear the specials?” the waiter asked. It was quite a fancy restaurant I had chosen for the occasion – Will’s favorite, I knew.

“Of course!” Will blurted.

“We have raw lamb with milk chocolate sauce, and we also have uncaught sea bass tangled in seaweed.”

“What?” Will mumbled, his eyebrows furled.

The waiter was unfazed by Will’s gastronomic horror. It sounded completely disgusting – but that was the point.

“We also have the chef’s favorite – oxtail soup with spaghetti and meat sauce.”

"Oh my God!" Will cried aloud. He tried to hold back an embarrassing laugh.

At that moment twenty people burst from every corner of the restaurant.

"Surprise!"

The waiter, a budding actor, began to shake his head and laugh. He had pulled off his comedy routine without breaking character.

"But my birthday isn't until Wednesday," Stabnow stammered.

"It's close enough, Will. And we were all able to come tonight, from near and far, so happy birthday, dear friend!"

Will was flushed and visibly shaken at the timing of this surprise party. His friends didn't know he was hoping this invitation was a date between us. And if they had known, they would have probably tried to stop him.

They had been hiding behind the big black curtain that led to the kitchen. These were his colleagues, mostly, along with an old neighbor of his before he got divorced. Ten friends in all.

I realize he would rather have spent the evening asking for more of my attention. But Will was gracious, as always. He laughed. He enjoyed their company.

When the party was over, he offered to walk me to my car. I could feel the tension.

"Hillary...."

"Dr. Stabnow. I need to tell you something urgent before you say another word."

"Go ahead, my dear. I rather dread my end of this conversation anyway."

"I'm in love with Frank. With Dwayne. I need you to be aware of that if we're going to continue working together."

"Ah yes, I rather suspected," he whispered. "Well then, your timing was excellent. You have saved me from making a terrible fool of myself."

"No, no," I said. Something clicked. Something I learned from the other side... Level B... my heart suddenly opened. I felt so much admiration and love for this man I was working with.

I took his leathery cherub face in my hands and kissed him. "I am flattered," I said, "and honored by your admiration. You are a brilliant, charming, and handsome man... "

"And you are in love with a half-dead man, dreaming his life away... "

"I couldn't have said it better myself. Isn't that romantic?"

"Or safe," he smiled.

"Yes. That's part of the allure, I realize that."

Will began to laugh. Some of it was the champagne. Some of it was an acknowledgement, and a sense of relief, that everything was out in the open with no apparent harm done.

Back at the office we found everything was in order. It was a Friday night. Frank put himself to sleep after a few hours of reading. Will went in to give him his pill and put his breakfast food in the mini fridge.

When he came out of the room, I said, "Shall we try?" His eyebrows raised up. Then he saw two yellow pills in my hand. We had never experienced the other side together.

Our friendship grew in powerful ways that night.

I realized, by knowing him in the other world, that he had a unique and beautiful way of seeing life. He was a child at heart, with the deepest wisdom of anyone I had ever met. Right at the end, he saw me laugh for the first time. He saw me joyous, like the little girl I never was.

I trusted him to know me like that.

18

The next time we visited Will's favorite restaurant, the waiter was real. There were no people hiding behind the black curtain. Will had invited me again, but it was for a far different reason.

After looking through the menu for a moment, he dropped it onto the table impatiently and said, "It's not going to work, Hillary. I have to be honest with you. I just don't believe it's possible. Financially and emotionally, we may be coming to the end of the road."

He paused to watch my face. I had been thinking about what to order for dinner, but his words redirected my thoughts like a car crash.

"I know that's not what you want to hear, Hillary, and I am not saying I've lost faith in you; nothing could be farther from the truth. But I keep coming back to the fact that the brain needs to re-set before the next permanent evolutionary step forward. Emotions go in cycles throughout not just days, but years. These are natural, ancient cycles. They began a million years ago. These kinds of evolutionary steps can't be skipped." He clasped his hands together, almost in prayer, "I am beginning to doubt that any chemical, any drug, or series of drugs, can permanently cut-off, or supersede, those cycles over time. In fact, the cycles of heaven and hell we all experience in the mind may actually be urgently necessary for our mental health and survival. It's like breathing in and out. It's love and hate, war and peace...."

"Stop!" I was getting agitated. "I thought we were way beyond this, Doctor." I called him "Doctor" on rare occasions when I was upset with him. "The brain is mostly chemicals. Of course. But the mind is mostly what? What exactly is it? Is it a processor of the brain? Or a window to reality? Or a window to madness? Is it a random movie? A mirror? A camera with a distorted lens? All we know is that the mind in this reality is half-devil, half-angel, but we don't know what would happen if..."

"Yes! That's my point!" He leaned towards me now. "Unless you saturate the body with so many chemicals that the mind never awakens to this reality again, true progress can't be made. Evolution can't leap a million years ahead overnight. We can't permanently change the mind into something vastly different than what it is. And even if we find a way to have Frank grow psychologically from his Level B dream-states, we still have to expect that his mind will eventually go back to its natural cycles of joy and suffering, despite the lessons he learns, or the things he sees."

“But isn’t there value in seeing suffering from a deeper perspective? Isn’t that what psychology and the study of the mind hopes to offer? It hopes to offer hope. You as a therapist would never tell a patient to simply avoid their pain. You would ask them to redirect it, see it in a healthier way. What if that’s what our new pill can do?”

“Without guidance from a wiser source than our own isolated inner sourcing, I don’t know if a pill can accomplish that.”

“That’s your theory, Will. Your assumption. At this point, we can’t afford to trust an assumption, or give up on all of this now. Ask yourself this — even if you’re right and emotional cycles, and suffering and darkness are a part of the human condition, if we become aware in this reality of the reality that presents itself while in the Level B state, would the world really ever be the same? Wouldn’t people learn something that would be permanent? Wouldn’t life at least be better than it is now?”

Will didn’t answer my question. I could see the gears turning.

“Besides, I think I’m on the verge of something.” I said quietly.

“Wait. Seriously?”

“I’ve approached it from a completely different angle this time.”

“What is it? Tell me! Why didn’t you bring this up in the first place?” His pessimism about the experiment had vanished. He leaned forward.

“I wanted to hear you out,” I smiled.

“You wanted to make a fool of me, which you have become very good at recently,” he laughed.

I got right to the point, “Will, have you ever studied lucid dreaming?”

“Yes, to a degree. I believe it’s usually a learned art form, and a very difficult one at that.”

“Agreed, but Will, if lucid dreaming could be chemically induced in combination with the Level B formula, then with a little effort on the dreamer’s part... .”

“Yes, yes, that’s interesting, go on,” he whispered.

“In some eastern religions they claim their normal waking state is an illusion, and their dreams are real. I began to think, what if they’re right? What if this reality is not the true reality? What if reality is that place we go to in Level B, and this reality is a very cheap imitation? What if Level B has been waiting for us with open arms, willing to accept us any way we can get there? Through meditation, or lucid dreaming, or chemistry -- it’s agnostic about how we merge with it, as long as we merge.

“If I could find a way to enable some form of lucid dreaming within the Level B experience, theoretically we would remember so much more when the drug wears off, that Level B reality would literally become part of this reality. It would be more than lucid dreaming ever could be. We would be awake in Level B, and perfectly capable of functioning in this reality at the same time.”

“Have you found a chemical formula that actually initiates lucid dreaming?”

“I’m working on it.”

“How close are you?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” I stammered. “I’m somewhere between or a month or two away, or never. I mean, if none of the ideas I’ve come up with pan out... if they all fail, then, maybe you’re right, maybe our experiment is over.”

PART XII

From the Journal of Dr. William Stabnow

19

Hillary's integrity is impeccable at all times. Therefore, I should have known she would try the new drug herself before giving it to Frank.

The fact that she invited me to oversee her journey was also not a surprise. The fact that I didn't stop her was the surprise.

This was bordering on unethical — allowing a young chemist in my employ try a new drug that I had asked her to create. But her confidence blinded me. It always did.

The first few hours were spent with Hillary in a deep state of sleep. My polysomnograph was recording relatively normal sleep patterns. I spent a number of hours catching up on my reading. But then she began to speak to me while still sleeping!

"Will, I am here! It's easy to learn to be present like this. Physically I feel good, fine. Everything is okay."

I moved closer and said in a soothing voice. "Tell me more."

"It's as if I'm all head, no body. At least this time. It's wild. It's so comfortable. I am not a physical presence in time as we know it. And time going only forward is highly debatable as well. Although I'd rather not get into that at the moment! But it's dream-like, non-chronological."

"I understand. I hear what you're saying, Hillary. Go on."

There were early signs of dehydration. She stopped to wet her lips. I noted that in my journal while making sure we were still recording the session audially and visually.

Her voice lowered, "What I'm experiencing is... timelessness in the present moment. I am here in my apartment, even though I also know I'm not, I'm in a sleep lab with you. But it's more than that. It's like time is a hologram. And I'm observing through it. I'm also more than the sum of time. Because I see how it all flows together... I'm the overseer... I remember I took the experimental pill an Earth hour ago. And I'm the one that created the cross-over equation that is making me more conscious here. And I'm the one that created me, this me! I mean, here now. The definition of the real me is -- I see that I am that

creator too, and the definer. I choose reality, in both realities. I get to choose. It's an incredible capability."

I was scribbling down a few salient things I was thinking I might not remember later.

"And...Will?"

"Yes."

"Am I in REM?"

I looked at my polysomnograph. "Yes."

"Good. This is really good! May I journey a while without speaking to you, or do you need more information before...?"

"No, go ahead. Let's see what you remember later."

That was the last thing she said until four hours and seventeen minutes later, when she arose, back here, in the room right next to Frank's.

20

"The mind is a beautiful miraculous thing. It can save us, using the same chemical pathways it uses to destroy us. It depends on what part of the self has control over the pathways."

This is how she began her videotaped de-briefing.

She continued:

"I think we've found what we're looking for, Will. The lucidity while in Level B was incredible. There is a disorienting part too – because I remember being there so clearly that being here now isn't all that is real to me anymore. Even you. Here may never be totally real to me again, elusively real. Because there's been a dimensional shift in my thinking."

"How so?"

"There's another reality that's clearly equally true. Neither of them are illusions. Everything is true! One doesn't negate the other.

Reality is like a multi-reality hologram. That's the only way I can explain it. And, I want to flow between all six places! You see?"

I thought perhaps she was becoming psychologically disoriented, especially since that last sentence was accompanied with such uncharacteristic exuberance. I quickly became concerned.

She mused almost to herself, "In a way, I can see the future."

"You can see the future?" My face must have revealed how stunned and puzzled I was. I was trying to hide my fear.

"From there, I can. In a way."

"Tell me more."

"There are six dimensions of time and reality, Will. At least in my mind's view."

"Can you explain further?"

"I believe so. I'll explain them one at a time."

"First, there is the new lucid present in Level B."

"Then, there are the past events in that dream, which can be recalled in the lucid dream state. Even now!"

"Then, there is also knowing in Level B, that my body is actually here, in a state of being, call it a semi-hypnagogic state, in this reality. It's sort of a parallel present state."

"There is also, of course, the past I have in this reality, 'my past,' which I can also access in the Level B state if I wish to, just like I can now. In fact, my memory of Hillary in Level B was quite a bit better than my memories of Hillary here, in Level C!"

"And then -- exactly as we have worked so hard to achieve, Will -- I now have a memory of the Level B dream I had, while obviously now being here in this reality with you, including all the emotional elements I experienced while there, affecting me here."

"That's five dimensions."

"Yes, and the sixth dimension, Will, is the future in the dream state -- which is actually knowing there will be this reality whenever I choose to wake up."

"Oh my. I think I understand now. But might there not also be a 'past past' inside the dream state? I mean, would you be starting

over every time you're in Level B with no past memory of the last time? Like an entirely new dream? Or would you remember the other times you were there, and what you saw and felt?"

"I don't know. I've only been there once!

"Look, Will, I can detail out more of my specific memories, and the images, and stories I co-created there, if you need me to. But it will take a while. And I need to tell you about something far more important and powerful than any of that."

"Okay, please go on."

"I am no longer who I was."

"How so?"

She began laughing. "It's about where the feeling of love actually comes from, Will. Not the love you have for a person! Feeling love wholly. Other drugs may temporarily evoke love as a chemical experience. But like Level B, it usually doesn't translate once the chemicals wear off. But Will, I can feel it right now -- you see? For everything, not just for a person, or one thing."

"Why, how?"

She took a deep breath and her eyes became moist, "There is no more loneliness pushing me to find love out of fear. I'm not afraid, that is to say, there is no undercurrent of fear. Will -- it feels like love is more real than no love! Can you understand that? Does that translate?"

I smiled, "Not quite."

"The mind learns to protect itself by not loving. It creates boundaries and borders. It tries to normalize. It will take anything good that it experiences and attempt to make it routine. And that has been my normal state as an adult. But the brain's natural chemical response to the world when the body and mind are fully at rest and open to life is unity and creativity. Call it a love of love. A love of life. It's a current that runs like a river in us, here in this reality, but it's too often hidden in a dense forest. Too far across the boundaries to access."

"And you don't feel any fear or danger at all in Level B?"

"I am aware of fearful things. I am aware they exist. But being lucid in Level B has taught me not to... not to 'over-fear.'"

"I like that word. 'Over-fear!'"

"Yes, it's quite accurate. Because the fear I've felt my entire adult life caused further unnecessary fear -- that's what I mean by 'over-fear.' Fearing when you don't need to.

"And while fear and worry, curiosity and creativity, overcoming suffering, fighting to grow and become stronger, are all important for our survival, it no longer rules the moment. I'm no longer a bubble girl! Bubble-wrapped in fear. I'm out of the bubble! Out in the open air; I can breathe here now!"

"I see."

"Even though the Level B dream ended, Will, I can see a pathway, a methodology, to make this 'combined me' last. Even if I never go to Level B again."

"You have a methodology?"

"Well, yes, I'm developing it. First of all, I am currently aware of each one of my thoughts. They are a now a menu of choices, pathways and stories I can choose to follow, or not. And I am used to following the same habitual thought passageways over and over. Like a trapped animal choosing the dish with the most food, not the best tasting food. But now I see a way for me to stay aware of my thought-choices. I want to make a mental list of preferable things to think about. This will take some time. But then when I catch myself randomly thinking about something that's not on the list, I have to decide, is this something I need to think about right now, or is it a bad habit from a past reality that I need to let go of? Is it coming from fear? From repressed hate? That's not to say I would immediately avoid those thoughts. Sometimes fear is a fire alarm and you have to listen to it. And sometimes hate is important to recognize as well, to protect yourself from future danger. But telling and retelling stories that aren't real, and aren't good or helpful to think about... that's..."

"That's a common form of human insanity we are all infected with. That's our natural psychological state of being. It's called, 'normal.'"

"But it's not the natural state in Level B, Will. The natural state there is to follow only the best thoughts, the ones that elicit a more beautiful moment for you. Awe. Acceptance. Reverence. Joy.

Co-creation, love, oneness. What if we could get to that place any time, and then --remember it? Because I do. I remember the feelings. I feel them now. I remember the types of thoughts that made me feel good. And I'm no longer blind to the thoughts that lead me to feel bad. And that's the way I hope to think and live all the time, from now on. Regardless of the consequences that come from living that way. Because even if I get emotionally hurt, Will, it's better than the way things were before -- when I was living half-dead, in fear, in that bubble.

She stopped speaking and I paused to consider things for a moment. "Frank. He's going to have an interesting time with this."

I saw her face change as a new thought entered her mind.

"When Dwayne takes this new drug the first time... ." She stopped and smiled.

"You're going to take it with him."

"Yes. I have to. I owe him that."

* * *

I wrote some final notes in my journal. I noticed that Hillary's diminished fear also created an adventurousness, a surety, that was more than confidence. It was a willingness, possibly beyond logic. I wasn't yet sure.

I tried not to allow my own emotions and desires to enter into the equation. I would get to try this new formula soon enough. For now, I would have to settle for playing the role I was familiar with -- an observer caught between two worlds.

PART XIII
Dwayne Finn Ermann

At first, I was falling, as I had so many times before, into a cloud with soft open arms.

My name and personality were erased. There were barley names left for anything.

I realized that the hum of music I heard possessed life and light. It was the sound of me. Dwayne Finn Ermann....

I tried to look out through the clouds, out into the gray swirl of mental constructs taller than skyscrapers – this was what they called ‘the world out there’ when dreams weren’t real enough.

“Frank?”

“Yes, doctor,” I smiled.

“I’d like you to come out early today, Frank. We have something to discuss. I am even going to reveal to you who I am.”

It was hard to care. It had been so long since I cared about anything concerning my life on that side of existence. But I felt some level of what might be called excitement perhaps, in the doctor’s voice. And I didn’t want to be unsympathetic to an old friend. A friend I didn’t know.

In the state between knowing and wonder my eyes fluttered open. And what I saw was part of the illusory world I wanted to escape from -- Hillary?

“Please Dwayne. Don’t pre-judge me. Don’t assume anything. Try to stay in Level B, awake.”

The ending wasn’t near. I breathed deeply and wiped the sleep from my eyes as I sat up.

“Dwayne – I have been the other doctor in your half-dream-state all along. I haven’t just been working on Level B on my off-hours, or during school breaks. This has been my full-time job and my passion since you began our time here. I’ve been here too. I’ve been with you all along.”

I stared at her blankly. I was trying to reject all the feelings I had felt for her. But in the state I was in, I couldn’t. I felt too open-minded.

"I can see through those mirrory eyes of yours, Dwayne. I know you all too well. And I sense where you are right now. I also know how you would probably feel here, in our normal Level C state. And I'm sorry if you might ever feel like I tricked you. But I want you to know this—I very much want to see you fully potentialized, not just asleep in a laboratory. I want to see you come alive, in this world, for me. With me."

Which dimension was I in, and which one she was in?

She turned on a small microphone clipped to her shirt. "Will? Could you come in, please?"

Will? Oh, Stabnow! She's calling him "Will" now.

Stabnow came in looking overly spiffy in tan pants, a pressed blue shirt, and a thin red tie. "Frank! What wonderful news we have for you today!" he exclaimed with a broad smile that seemed to also betray concern.

"Will," I interrupted. "May I call you Will also? What kind of name is 'Will Stabnow'? Isn't that disconcerting to your patients, especially the paranoid ones? Did your parents name you that on purpose to freak people out?" I was light-heartedly joking with a friend. I wasn't really looking for an answer.

"William was never supposed to be shortened to Will. My parents always made sure everyone called me William when I was growing up. But then you go to college and I guess all hell breaks loose."

"Didn't they know they were setting you up for ridicule, and possibly a prison sentence?" I laughed. "'William' was my grandfather's name on my mother's side. She loved him. But she also was an optimist. She figured 'Will Stabnow' would be willing to take a stab at anything, no matter how daunting the problem. She was confident I would always find a solution. And, Frank... I didn't... But she did."

The sarcasm I was using certainly meant I was back too soon into Level C. The joy ride was ending. But wait, what did he mean, "She did...?" She did what? And why was she calling him Will?

Hillary said, "May I tell you why we're both here with you now?"

I rubbed my eyes again. I felt jealousy, anger, self-hatred, a vast loneliness. Yes, my thoughts were back. I was fully here, unfortunately.

"I've found an answer. For you. For us."

Us? Thinking about Hillary and me in the same breath was not a pleasant thing. Too much neediness, pain, grief. I'd had my share of all of these things, year after year since college. I didn't need to jump into another mind-trap.

"It's the alteration to the pill we've been searching for, Dwayne. I've added something to the formula. It's going to bring Dwayne back to me... And bring me closer to you. Because I'm going to join you there."

"Join me where?"

"In a new reality."

"She found the cross-over equation, Frank. And she's already tried it. It works! It works better than we ever could have hoped for."

"Okay, when do we start?" I said, still not fully understanding. Still foggy. "No wait. What is it? What did you find? Tell me the formula!"

She began to tell me in abstract terms that only two highly trained chemists could understand. I could actually barely follow it, honestly. "I'm still somewhat there and here all at the same time," she said.

The fog lifted. I became excited. If she had actually found the cross-over equation, it would be a literal miracle.

"You can begin whenever the two of you decide."

"Tonight." Hillary said. "Twelve hours from now." She looked at her watch. "At 9 pm, Frank, I'll meet you here."

She leaned forward and seemed to look straight through me, "I'm going to find Dwayne Ermann there, you know. I'm going to find you and bring you home. And this time you'll never have to leave where I am now again."

PART XIV
From Hillary St. John

22

We were under water but flying and breathing.

We were searching for the top of the water's sky.

It was far away, in every direction.

I saw him in a soft open cloud. He wasn't rising or falling, or going in any direction at all.

"You have to allow lucidness to enter the image, Dwayne. You have to learn that it's available to you. It's like running and being afraid your legs are going to fall under you. Don't worry. Run right through it, run faster, past the fear, until the clouds evaporate."

I looked into his eyes until I knew he saw me. The Dwayne I used to love in this dream dimension was here with me.

But he had also grown here – grown vastly in his ability to experience this world. He seemed adept at changing scenes and forms and colors at will. He was far more capable in this reality than I was. The additional consciousness I created was the only thing I could offer.

He caught on quickly. He started laughing. I swam over to him through the clouds. He disappeared, then reappeared farther away, smiling at me. I reached out my hand and caught him. Then the sky closed in on us. We fell together like raindrops.

We were in what could only be described as feathers of cloud-drops... . There were darting streaks of purple and deep blues fraying the edges of everything, there beyond our touch, where the light was.

We drank the cloudrain and tasted the glow surrounding us. He kissed me, childlike. He whispered that it tasted like vanilla and salt. I kissed him, childlike, his neck tasted like basil and pepper.

We were then carried away into a light-green sunrise. We were melting through our thoughts like century-old snow falling into a candle. We landed in a land of oxygen-rich wordlessness. We held fast to this supersonic train of time we had now caught hold of. Smoothly it floated us towards a deeper part of ourselves by the light of a nearby quasar. Our whispers stuck to the edge of a sunbeam seen from a window in an old castle overlooking a thousand miles of earthscape. The continents floated like waves.

The white caps raced across the ocean far below us and scream-sang riotously as they crashed into the rocks. The rocks were hard and harsh and glowing. That's where we came from. We could never have survived there now. How did we make the switch from floating in the currents all the way to landfall, to now, watching together from a safe place?

Our journey continued as we came to a hillside filled with sunflowers. Dwayne was sitting away from me, watching a white bird glide. I was watching the sunflowers shimmering in a windless current.

I said, "We can be together now, even when our attention is focused in two different places."

He said, "Your world is beautiful.

I said, "Your bird is beautiful too!"

"Oh, but there's more than one. I'm learning their movements," he said earnestly.

I had one last question before the stars brought us home: "Dwayne, do you know where we are right now?"

He hesitated for a moment. Then he looked at me: "Yes. We're dreaming together in Level B."

"We need to remember this when we awaken. Can you do that with me?"

I wondered -- would we have full emotional recall when we woke up?

I was ruminating on that as we spun into the vortex, and then separated, each rising back into a hypnagogic state. Laughing. Crying with laughter, just before... .

Our eyes fluttered open slowly. We were lying next to each other. Still laughing quietly to ourselves.

I remembered everything, felt everything.

He looked at me and said, "I remember what I learned from watching the birds fly."

PART XV
Dr. William Stabnow's
Message to the World

23

We are on the verge of releasing information about our patented pill that we are officially calling, "Level A ®." Our new and improved version of chemist Dwayne Finn Ermann's Level B.

Almost everyone on Earth has lived in what Mr. Ermann calls Level C. This level of existence has been around for fifty-thousand years. It is to be celebrated as the beginning of human consciousness. But it's not the highest level of consciousness the mind can experience.

Level B was always meant to be combined with a formula that would allow us to remember experiences there. Now that combined formula, Level A, has been discovered.

I have studied medicine and psychology all my adult life, spanning almost forty years of practice. I didn't want to create a new chemically induced form of wondrous mindlessness. I didn't want to create a new form of isolating entertainment. I now look forward to having people gain a deeper self-awareness, a deeper understanding, about life and the incredible capabilities of the mind.

Entertainment is what the drug companies are after. They would see no reason to evolve the research beyond Level B. In fact, they would quickly realize that many people would prefer not to remember anything. There is often a great burden to knowing. I understand that. I see it working with my patients all the time. They would rather not put in the time to grow, in all honesty. And I can't blame them. Life can be difficult beyond human tolerance. It's such a difficult effort to evolve in any way. Too much of a change from our normal way of thinking, even though we often dislike our normal way of thinking.

And many of those with political or personal agendas would also prefer that people don't remember anything when the effects of the drug wears off. The drug companies would certainly celebrate the massive profits they could make from Level B. No need for them to be loyal to one form of the drug over another. Without the newly added formula that allowed for lucid dreaming we could have ended up with a world full of zombies ruled by a few rich drug lords posing as CEOs, and politicians acting like dictators, along with nefarious congressmen campaigning on "your right to dream."

In other words, eerily similar to the way it is now, but worse.

That's why we will not allow our patented formula to be distributed any way other than the way we have presently designed it.

We want to start slowly. We are going to start by offering it as a tool for psychotherapy. It will begin as a professionally guided experience. Hopefully, over time, the world will welcome a deeper way to live, and a new breed of humans will have been co-created.

That's my dream. We will help create a new era where humans won't be subconsciously trying to dull their emotions until life ends.

The key question really comes down to this: Can humans evolve to a Level A consciousness someday in the distant future without the drug? If so, the even bigger question is, can we survive as a species until that time? Can we afford to wait?

Here's the critical thing I want the world to remember:

If someone offers you a handful of seeds in the desert, and gives you enough water to grow the seeds, but you instead decide to eat the seeds and bathe yourself in the water, that is not self-preservation, that is slow suicide.

It seems to me, this is what we've done with the vast potential of the human mind. We have never explored our full capabilities, we have never seeded it to expand it into something beautiful and sustainable, because our individual fears and needs and desires get in the way.

We eat life's offerings without re-planting.

My hope is that things can slowly change, using every psychological tool at our disposal, including chemical intervention when necessary -- as long as the chemicals work as the creator intended.

We will soon have a chance to become super-aware beings, capable of even more than love and intellect. We have a chance to become the most highly evolved form of ourselves, by living both there in Level A, and here in this world. In a place called (T)here.

PART XVI
Hillary St. John's
Message to the World

24

They killed Dr. Stabnow.

He was shot while walking home from his favorite restaurant after dinner.

They broke into our offices trying to find the formulas, or at least some pills to steal and analyze. Even one pill would have been enough. But the only thing they managed to steal was a copy of Dr. Stabnow's notes and a very personal history of our initial research. They just had to get back at him for putting their hired thugs in jail. They just had to try to wrestle control from us. They couldn't stand the fact that Dr. Stabnow had out-thought them every step of the way.

He still has -- he always made sure the formulas and patents that have yet to be made public were kept locked in a safe, in a secret lab. That lab has now been moved to a new location.

Dr. Stabnow dreamed of a better world for all of us -- a world where we would not just survive life, but be nourished by it, and find peace.

That kind of world will be far harder to create without him alive. But we owe it to him to try.

Dwayne and I are now in hiding, and will remain so until we create a clear plan about what to do from here.

In the meantime, we will publish this story for you to read. It consists mostly of a series of journal entries written by the three of us separately over a long period of time.

Our goal is to help you all, as soon as we can. Believe us, that is our only motive.

Until then, please, seed the desert with your hope, your awareness, and your kindness.

Do not keep the seeds for yourself, or devour them out of greed or desperation.

I promise you, I promise you, the seeds will bloom.

The End

~ GM