

# The Choice

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## I.

Once, a long time ago, I went to a fortune teller who told me she could divine my future simply by looking at the lines imprinted on the skin of my palms. “Only for a small fee,” she assured me. Initially, I declined her offer, certain of the fraudulent nature of her wares. How could one predict the future when time was in flux and forever changing? A student of physics, I was a person of logic, of mathematical equations and scientific formulas — I understood the possibility of predictions, but only up to a point. Even the fractals of chaos theory could not predict the entirety of the universe without using a limiting parameter, a blind spot. How could the grooves etched on my palms provide the key to discerning my future?

“No,” I told her as I moved away, but she held out her hand and caught me by my fingertips. She insisted that I stay, despite my protestations. If palmistry did not interest me, then she would use her cards. “It is what you like, yes?” She smiled knowingly. “Your numbers and your shapes and your counting — always the counting with you. How many dimensions now? Four? Nine?”

I blinked, surprised. “M-Theory says eleven but there’s a new theory, F-Theory. It posits that there may be twelve.”

She laughed and shook her head, “Wasn’t it easier when reality consisted of just three dimensions? You have your up and down, and left and right, and backwards and forwards. Now it is all jumbled up. Come inside, come inside...” She ushered me off the quad and into her small tent. It was dim and smelled of incense. I hesitated at the threshold, wary.

“Come sit down,” she said.

I shrugged and stepped inside.

She seated herself behind a small round table covered in heavy brocade and gestured for me to take the seat on the opposite side. I was pleasantly surprised at the plump softness of the cushion beneath me. Nothing inside her tent looked cheap or vulgar and a part of me could not reconcile the potential earnings of her profession with the apparent luxuries to be found around us. It bothered me, this incongruence. It was impossible for the cloths to be actual silk and the threads used in the embroidery of the tapestries, glinting silver and gold, could not possibly be genuine. I told myself it was a trick of the light and perhaps the perfumed air.

“You are very mistrustful.” She gestured to the tapestries, the throw pillows, the tassels and various accoutrements that went with her trade. “These things they do not put you at ease. They are meant to. It is to help you enter a different state of mind, facilitate a belief in a different type of world, not so hard, not so cruel, not quite so isolating. Ah, but then you already know of such a world with your multiple strings and their vibrations, don’t you?” She rummaged underneath her table and took out several decks of cards. “You know about this already, the perfect symmetry of these cards? They are just numbers, these decks, and they will unlock the future for you. Now, what to choose? The Rider Waite is a crowd favourite, feel the energy in the deck, touch it with your hands.” She withdrew the cards after I touched them. “Or how about this one, the Tarot of the Old Path, very popular with those drawn to white magic and nature based religions... or how about this Cosmic Tarot? Very few symbols, easier to understand if you prefer...”

In truth, as she prattled on about arcanas, wands, and fools, I was gripped with a desire to stand up so strong that it made my calves ache and my toes curl. I shrugged without comment. I wanted to leave but I knew instinctively that she would not let me until she deemed it was time for me to go. Somehow, I felt no real trepidation despite this knowledge. I was

more put-upon than afraid.

“You do not understand me, do you? Very well, shall I speak your language then?” She shook her head, voice petulant. I stared at her, not remembering her to be quite as beautiful as she seemed at that moment. It was the same face, and yet different. I squinted at her and she laughed at me, like a child. Had she always been so young? “Yes,” she said. “Now pay attention! These are the tarot cards, yes? Do you see? And the reading of them is the reading of a pattern. You like patterns, don’t you? The golden ratio, remember? The sum of the quantities to the larger quantity is equal to the ratio of a larger quantity to the smaller one...”

“1.618.”

“Clever girl! It’s the divine proportion, the fingerprint of creation. You’re very smart; this is why you were chosen. Now listen, patterns emerge when you shuffle the cards, and in the dealing of the spread, the paths to your past, and your present, and your future are opened. These patterns in the change, the difference between the final and the initial, they are just mathematical functions calculable with differential calculus — static images interpreted, projected into the past and the future.”

Her smile was self-satisfied when her eyes met mine. She told me she could map out the entirety of my existence thus far using only her cards. She chose one deck and fanned out the cards on the table, all seventy-eight of them. “With Rahdue’s Wheel, I can lay out your past and your present lives; give you a glimpse of what your tomorrows will bring.” She tilted her head to one side and studied me. “But it is not the future you seek to see, is it? And no interest in your past lives either... Oh! I see!” She put away her decks and placed what looked like an Apple iPad at the center of the table. “Here we go. This is more suitable I think. This is a tablet.”

“That’s an iPad.”

“No, it’s a tablet. With a windows application.”

“Oh. China made?”

She reared back a little, as though my question affronted her, which apparently it did. “I’ll have you know this was forged with the stringent howls of icy winds and the most forlorn sighs of the fire mages. Alloys were bent and stretched on the forge to craft this! Elements not naturally occurring in nature came to be in order for this tablet to be formed!”

“I see.” I fidgeted. “Is this going to take long? I have homework and I really must go. I’ll just pay you and be on my way.” I started to rise but the force of her glare stopped me. “Look, you said you were going to tell me my future, but then you said you don’t think that’s what I want. You’re perfectly correct. I don’t want to know my future. All I want is to get out of here.”

She smiled. “Exactly.” She tapped her index finger on the surface of the tablet and it lighted up to show, as it was initiated, a whole black apple that slowly became red. “It’s from Snow White. Not the first witch to use surveillance but she is the first one to use semi-sentience to fulfil that task. Usually they send out birds or small animals. Very difficult. They have small brains you know. Tiny. No real cognition. It’s very uncomfortable trying to get into the mind of say a squirrel or if you want it closer to home, a cockroach or a rat.” Before I could call her insane, she grinned and beckoned me to look at the screen. “Look, it is open. This is the windows application. It taps into the nodes of the strings in your universe, even the unfurled dimensions and the possibility spaces.”

I saw an infinite number of strings vibrating on the screen, arranged with an intricate geometric balance that was nothing short of beautiful. It reminded me of the night sky with the millions of stars all connected with bright light.

“I thought you might like this theme,” she said and I looked up to see that her eyes were trained on me. “It’s beautiful isn’t it? Very elegant.”

I nodded. “The theory of everything.”

She smiled. “There are other templates of course, should you desire a different view. Would you like to see them as branes? Fantastic things. Or would you be more comfortable with little soap bubbles floating in the dark? How about slices of bread in a loaf? I can show you a weave of quantised loops if you prefer. No? All right then, we’ll stick with this one. The window is only the frame after all, doesn’t matter as long as you get to look...” The fortune teller tapped on one winking point in the tablet’s interface and it expanded into a bird’s eye view of the world. It was like Google Earth and the more she tapped, the closer the view, until the tops of the buildings became the view in the street, close enough to see people’s faces and hear them speak.

“You know how each choice you make is the fulfilment of one possibility? Parallel worlds are thus created, a multitude of them, reality split-

ting again and again. Come closer and take a look, this is a universe where you were born a boy, would you like to be a boy? No? How about this? In this world you are a dog... or how would you like to be a model, look you are taller and your face is more angular, more beautiful, oh but then you die very young. Sexually transmitted disease, who knew you could be so promiscuous?" Her chuckle discomfited me more than the image of my model-self dying alone in a hospital bed. I hugged my jacket tighter against my body. "Would you like to be a doctor? A lawyer? A surgeon? A teacher? There's a universe where you're the Miss Universe and there's one where you're a meth junkie with no lower jaw. Would you like to be a mermaid? A fairy? A narwhal falling down from the sky? Would you like to know the feeling of living on the snow-capped Alps or would you like to be on the FBI's most wanted list?"

On and on, she presented me with all the possibilities, both fascinating and terrifying scenarios, fingers flying on the interface of the tablet, showing me all my different selves in an infinite succession. I wanted her to stop talking but I couldn't help but listen to her speak. It was as though her voice and the images flashing on the tablet's screen held me in thrall. I could neither leave nor look away, like matter caught within the radius of a black hole's event horizon. Her voice pulled me forward, all voluntary motion ceased, and I was only aware of her voice, my other lives, and the rapid beating of my racing heart. Caught as I was within this invisible sphere of no return, this space wherein time stops the closer you get to the center, a place of singularities where all known laws of the universe ceased to matter, my reality splintered, time dilated and I felt myself become fragmented as the strange woman's voice, slow and steady, somehow kept abreast with the nimble movements of her fingers flying over the tablet's interface. I panicked. "Stop it!" I said, half-rising from my chair, hands gripping the table's edge, the brocade scratchy on my palms. "Why are you doing this? Stop it! Please stop!"

She did.

She gazed at me intently, all the manic energy gone. She kept very still, as did I. I couldn't move. There was something almost predatory about her gaze, as though she had anticipated everything that had transpired thus far and was set to make the final move. I should have run out of there then. It would have been the smart thing to do, certainly, but I couldn't bring

myself to leave. Anomalous occurrences of such a degree rarely happened, and to have it happen to me of all people, how could I turn away? It was not in my nature. I sat back down.

She straightened in her seat after what seemed to be an eternity. Her face wore a look of concern, her voice gentled. “What’s wrong Maica? Why are you so terribly unhappy?”

Of all the things she could have said at that moment, I had not expected that.

She showed me my life, a sequence of disjointed events. I hated looking at myself from the outside. I hadn’t realized I walked with such a defeated gait or that I have a groove, faint but deepening each year, right where my eyebrows meet whenever I frowned — and why am I always frowning?

“You’re a healthy young woman. You’re smart. You have a family and a future. No deformation mars you. You wanted for nothing during your childhood. No extravagances of course, but you were cared for, loved. Again, why are you so unhappy Maica?”

Her tone rankled. It was mild and reasonable yet I couldn’t help but feel as though she had accused me of something, judged me as wanting. “You have no idea about my life. Those are just random slides. You don’t understand anything about me.”

“I understand you have ambition. I understand you have your goals and your dreams.” The woman smiled. I felt uncomfortable at the sight. It looked strange on her face suddenly, too wide and with too many teeth. “You have a lot of potential energy, but you do not harness it and it stagnates inside of you. Right now, at this moment, you are almost past the point of your ripeness. You will begin to decay soon, if you do not do something about it, and that would be a real shame. I propose this. Let me show you something.” She motioned to the screen of the tablet between us. “Look.” It was a bird’s eye view of a house with a red roof and a garden with a mango tree on one side. She tapped on the interface of her contraption in order to zoom in on the picture. My breath caught when I saw the girl seated on the same bed, in the same room as mine. “Looks the same as you, doesn’t she? She’s the same age, lives in exactly the same place. She’s at the top of her class and has a good family, the same as you. She has a boyfriend though, and has lined up an internship in a large company. She’s going to go abroad to study, enroll in CalTech or MIT. She’s not sure yet, hasn’t even

applied yet but she will, and she'll get in."

I drank in the fortune teller's words as I stared at the image on the screen. It was everything I wanted. I leaned forward, fascinated. She looked like me, but different. I watched as she got up, arranged the bed, and bounded downstairs. My brother, no, *her* brother greeted her as she sat down to eat breakfast with the rest of the family. It was like watching a rerun and I experienced a strange sort of *deja vu*. Everything that had happened at the breakfast table with my family that morning recurred at this other table. It was all replayed, the conversations, the motions, even the silences. Like me, the other girl remained quiet all through the meal. The only difference was that halfway through breakfast, the doorbell rang and the other me stood up to see who it was.

"It's the boy you like." The woman said. "They've been together for a while now. He asked her out last year during the school dance. The one you didn't want to go to."

It wasn't any of her business that I didn't go because nobody had asked me so I kept that knowledge to myself. I watched the other me open the door and true enough, there he was. He smiled and their fingers twined as she pulled him inside. I felt a pang. No matter how alike we seemed, she and I were leading very different lives. I turned to the fortune teller. "Why are you showing me this?"

"I could give you her life, for a price. I told you, only a small fee and I can give you what you desire. Think on it. You have energy inside of you, enough so I could send you to that reality and pull the other one here."

At first, I declined her offer. The idea was tempting, should it prove feasible, but there were too many unknowns, too many variables to consider, too many things that could go wrong. I made to stand up and leave but she held out a hand and bade me to wait and to listen.

"Haven't you wished constantly, fervently, to forget yourself for a moment? This is your chance. She is who you are, in the same way that you are who she is. You can lead another life without losing yourself. I can give you a week to decide," she told me. "A week to live her life, to experience your every desire fulfilled in her shoes. After the seven days, should you wish to return, everything will go back to the way it used to be. You need not stay in that reality, merely experience it."

My eyes strayed towards the tablet's screen as it displayed a montage

of scenes featuring the other me as she went about her life. We went to the same school, had the same classes and classmates. “It is almost the same life isn’t it?”

“*Almost, yes.*”

“The only real difference between that reality and mine is that...” I watched her stop to talk with one of my few friends. Then she went on to join a group of people I did not know. She laughed. There were so many people, so much laughter and merriment. I narrowed my eyes at the scene. “I’m happy there aren’t I? Successful...”

The woman inclined her head.

“What would you get out of it?”

“Your leaving would leave a vacuum in this reality. I told you, you have potential energy inside of you. What you are now, is not what you were meant to be. With the creation of this vacuum, energy will be expended. I will harness that energy. That will be my fee.”

I told her to send me to that other world... and she did.

## II.

I cannot describe exactly what it felt like to crossover. There are several theories about inter-dimensional travel, most of which end up with matter being crushed by the gravity of a black hole, long before it could reach the wormhole at the heart of these dead stars. The Einstein-Rosen Bridge Theory stipulated that though these bridges, these wormholes existed, they were impossible to get to and get through due to the gravitational force of the black hole. But Einstein and Rosen were thinking about stationary black holes and not spinning stars. With Roy Kerr’s black hole as a spinning star, a dying star could collapse into a ring of neutrons which would remain stable due to the intensity of its centrifugal force pushing outward thereby neutralizing the inward force of gravity and enabling matter to pass through safely. In through the black hole, sucked through the wormhole, out through the white hole into an entirely new dimension of reality.

Was this what had happened to me?



The instability of Kerr's ring is problematic as light getting pulled into the black hole could cause the entire balance to shift, preventing anyone from passing through unscathed. And then of course there were the traversable wormholes by Thorne and Morris which use exotic matter to hold the bridges open. In fact, considering the changes wrought in general relativity by the Gauss-Bonnet theory, exotic matter is omitted entirely as wormholes are seen as natural occurrences in brane cosmology.

I've had some time to mull things over but I am no closer to comprehending the manner of my transition from one world into another. I cannot even accurately describe it. The sensations, the sights, the sounds, how does one explain what one does not understand? If there are words to describe the experience, certainly none of the languages I know have a vocabulary sufficient enough to capture clearly what had transpired as I traveled. Suffice it to say it was a non-linguistic experience. If there is a language in the world that would enable me to describe it; I have not learned it yet. Perhaps it hasn't even been invented. For this, I invoke Newton's *hypotheses non fingo*.

One thing is clear though. The world I found myself in — *this* world — is a chiral world, enantiomorphous to mine. Though my past and current realities mirrored each other, they were not the same in every respect. For example, I had met the fortune teller because the school I had been attending had set up a carnival in the quad in order to celebrate the centennial anniversary of its founding. As a member of the student body, I had been enjoined to attend. The school grounds in my world had teemed with people, most of them milling around, going on rides and partaking in the general festivities. I had been on my way to find my adviser and have my attendance noted when the fortune teller had caught my attention. She had spoken directly to me, picked me out amidst the tumult that had surrounded us. In this world, I found myself standing alone in the school quad. There was no carnival to celebrate its founding. Unsure about how much difference existed between the worlds, I wasn't certain if the currency I carried would be accepted. I walked home.

The fortune teller let me keep her tablet and assured me that its signal would never fail and that its battery would never bleed dry. "There's an application that searches for the nodes where the strings of the universes intersect. This is the coordinate of your world. If you wish to view how the

other you is faring, all you need to do is to tune into this coordinate.” She reminded me that after the week was through, she would consider our arrangement permanent. I agreed.

To spend a week living a life where my every desire had been fulfilled, to have this experience and suffer no consequence — how could I turn the chance down?

I wish I could say that from the moment I landed in this world I have lived a charmed life but the truth is, like most every wish that sees its fulfillment, the reality of it did not live up to my expectations.

Oh, it had been wonderful in the beginning, yes. The symmetry of the two worlds amazed me. History, science, celebrity, the news, they were the same. Our families were identical down to the most intimate details, like the scarring on dad’s eyebrow or the mole on mom’s back, the type of food each one liked and what drove the rest of the family mad. The first few days, I found myself poring over photo albums and marveling at the familiar photographs stored within them.

Remarkable as were the similarities between the two worlds, it was the minute deviations between them that fascinated me. They were not obvious, just minor things. It was quite easy to assimilate into her life with her family so willing to accommodate her “lapses,” and I had made lapses as I tried to become her in those seven days. Sometimes, there would be a false note, an experience lived differently, a person not recalled, and I would falter, fail at remembering and fulfilling what was expected of her. I found it a bit more difficult to deal with her life in school, though I enjoyed it all the more for its difference from mine.

I had always been keenly aware of my marked difference from others of my age group and I consistently failed at societal interactions, though how exactly to remedy the situation, I did not know. To find myself suddenly surrounded by so many people, so many friends, was a novel experience, one I greatly enjoyed in the beginning for it had never happened to me before. I was much in demand. Apparently my other self had a hand at almost every organization in school, from the student council to the school paper to the photography club. The phone at home would not stop ringing and my cell, a new one programmed with the numbers of people I knew but had never been friends with, would constantly be filled with their messages.

The seven days passed in a whirl of activity. When the woman called to ask if I would like to be pulled back into my reality, I told her no. Why would I? Here, I felt no isolation. People did not treat me with indifference. I mattered. I belonged. My life was perfect. Or so I thought.

I should have known.

Nothing remains in stasis. The universe is not a stagnant place. Nothing can remain perfect forever. Entropy will get you every time. I enjoyed all the attention and the accolades heaped on me, but soon the pressure got to be too much. I felt restless, hounded. People expected so many things from me, encroached on my time to the point where I felt as though I were being pulled in too many conflicting directions. I couldn't cope. I had no mechanism to handle that sort of pressure.

I found out that it was just as easy to feel isolated while surrounded by people as it was while alone. To make myself feel better, I watched the other me as she tried to acclimatize herself to her surroundings — my life. There is a function in the tablet that allowed me to replay recorded events as though I were watching a movie. In the beginning, she was as miserable as me, probably more, because at least I knew what had happened. She just woke up one day with a different life. I watched her approach people that she knew and was friends with only to be rebuffed because I did not know them, did not normally interact with them. When she tried to talk to the equivalent of her boyfriend in my world, he only looked at her strangely and walked away. That night she cried herself to sleep; I felt equal parts guilt and aversion. How could she cry over a boy? How could she permit herself such weakness? I liked him too, but never, not once, did I allow him that much power to hurt me. It was her own fault for being so careless.

Our lives paralleled in a strange way. When there was an exam in my school, there was also one in hers. When there was a play at her school, a play was also being staged in mine. I tried to make decisions according to how she did things. I tried to maintain her life, or at least a part of it. Most of the organizations she was a member of meant nothing to me, but I did try to stay in them though it took much effort on my part. She, on the other hand, did not live her life the same way as mine. Despite the difference in how other people perceived us in her world and in mine, she kept on as she was until, after a while, just as how her perfect life began to crash around me, she was gradually turning my life into another version of hers.

It took a few tries and a couple of months, but soon she began to thrive. My parents, initially surprised by the changes in my behavior, began to take the change in stride. I was left breathless with hurt the first time I witnessed my father comment on how much I had changed, how happy I seemed, and how glad he was for it. I felt gratified every time my younger brother grimaced when my other self behaved in a way drastically different from me. “You’re weird,” he would say with a roll of his eyes. I loved him all the more.

As for her boyfriend, funny how it turned out that I didn’t know him at all. He had always been part of my idea of a perfect life but as it was, I wasn’t as affected as I thought I’d be when he asked to break up with me. He wasn’t mine to lose to begin with. He was the least of my worries.

My relationship with her family was similar to the one I had with mine. It was clear that they loved her, and by extension me, the one who had taken her place. There were times though when *her* parents looked at me with concern, asked if something was wrong, because I was not performing as well as their daughter had. I was miserable. *Her* brother frowned at me all the time and asked me “What’s wrong with you?” every chance he got. I did try, but he seemed to sense that something was amiss. He even asked me one time if I was all right and the genuine concern in his voice made something in me ache to get back home.

It was one thing to be unhappy with my life, but to be unhappy living the life of another was something else. I knew I needed to do something to fix everything but I was at a loss as to what course of action to take. True the tablet continued to work, but whenever I tried calling the number that the woman had used to contact me, it was always out of reach, the signal too weak. I even returned to the quadrangle, at the same exact spot I had found myself at the beginning, hoping that the proximity to the point of spatial intersection would help boost the signal, but I still couldn’t reach the woman using her number. I tried connecting the tablet to a booster kit to help with the signal. I used a router and downloaded applications from the Internet. For all intents and purposes it was still a tablet after all and it allowed itself to be used as such. Nothing worked.

Then, almost by accident, I hit on it. The answers to the most complex questions are usually simple, elegant, brief, and beautiful — like Euler’s Identity and Einstein’s mass-energy equivalence, complex mathematics

reduced to barely an inch of solution. This is the principle behind Occam's Razor and this is what slapped me in the face one afternoon as I fiddled with the woman's tablet in the quad after class. There was a function on the gadget, the Contact Service Provider. I accessed it and the tablet initiated the communication. It was connecting! When the woman answered my call, her face appeared on the screen. She looked bemused. I informed her of my desire to return.

"Oh my dear, I'm sorry," she replied, not sounding sorry at all. "The portal has closed. I told you, once the days are done, our arrangement becomes permanent. You can no longer cross into this reality. That would be dangerous to the fabric of space and time. You might cause a rip and then where will we all be?"

I knew this, at least theoretically. Fissures formed when stretching the fabric of space and time. "But you did it once! You can do it again. You have to!"

"You've expended your potential energy. You know you can only travel from a higher energy frequency into a lower one. The reverse, as of now, cannot be done. There is nothing I can do."

"You can't! You can't do this to me..."

"Oh but isn't this what you wished for?" she asked me. "Didn't you say it was the exact same world? You were correct in that assumption. It is exactly the same world as yours. Each parallel is created from potential, remember? A choice not taken, a test not passed, a love never loved, even a sandwich left uneaten."

"I don't understand!"

"Whether or not you wish to continue lying to yourself is none of my concern."

"I don't want to be here anymore. I want my old life."

"And you do have it," she smiled. "You see my dear, in another world, we've never met." She bid me goodbye and dropped the call. I tried to contact her again several times but the CSP option had ceased to be effective. I couldn't even view my old world, my old life, my other self. That function too had been locked.

Determinism, they say, is a philosophical belief that each occurrence is based on the preceding action — it was Newtonian, Karmic, Heaven

and Hell, Crime and Punishment. It made sense. It was my decision and I found I could blame no one but myself.

By the end of the school year, people had begun to turn on me, thinking me a changed person. The only friends I was left with were the self-same people I had in my original world. I was astonished to find that this time around, I did not mind. Why had I been so unhappy before? This mirror world is almost the same exact place, populated by the same exact people as the ones in my world. I was the only independent variable, the  $x$  in the equation. I could be happy here, I knew that now, but the desire to go back home, to make amends, was a constant, nagging ache in my chest. I didn't belong here. I needed to find a way to get back.

To stave off the loneliness, I carried the tablet around, using it as much as I could and sometimes trying, though in vain, to see if perhaps this time I could contact the woman again — persuade her to let me go back. It never did work again though, not after that first time.

### III.

There are no coincidences. The law of large numbers assures us of this. Still, I can't help but describe the manner in which Professor Rilke entered my life as something of a meaningful coincidence. The first time I met her was on the third year of my study in CalTech. I entered the classroom and there she was, immaculately dressed in a charcoal grey suit. She was tall, blonde, and blue-eyed with not a hair out of place. She could have been the poster girl for Nordic superiority had she been so inclined.

I had enrolled in Hum/Pl 9, a class called Knowledge and Reality, because it promised to examine the nature of the world, knowledge and the self. The course description stated that one of the topics to be discussed was the quantum enigma which is a particular interest of mine — I've found that things always get more interesting when consciousness comes into play. Professor Rilke was the assigned instructor.

Initially, I thought we would get along as she herself had an MS in the field of Physics, but on the first day of classes, she had, upon learning my major, looked me over and inquired if I thought I had the gumption to fin-

ish the course. When I answered in the affirmative she smirked at me and rattled off the Copenhagen Interpretation, explaining to her non-physics students that “according to this interpretation, no property of a microscopic object exists until it is produced by observation.” She shook her head at me as though this was somehow my fault. “Reality explained away so succinctly. A pretty delusion all you physicists subscribe to in order to circumvent an inconvenient truth.” She raised an eyebrow. “How craven...”

Imagine my surprise when a few days before the end of the semester, I found myself summoned to her room. The reason behind the summons was not clear, only that she wanted to speak to me. She had been unaccountably antagonistic towards me since the beginning of the semester, always teetering on the brink of being unprofessional but knowing just when to rein herself in. I had considered dropping her class after the first day but had decided to stick with it instead of allowing her to run me off. I had a goal to fulfill and I wasn't about to let her stop me from attaining it. I missed my family. I wanted to go home.

It's been five years, nine months and two days since the last time I spoke to the fortune teller. I've moved from Manila to Pasadena, built a life here for myself. My surrogate family has been supportive and loving, but my awareness of the true state of things has prevented me from assimilating fully into their fold. In Pasadena, away from the life I had stolen, how difficult it had been to finally own up to the truth of it. But now I feel more at ease. Here I have more freedom to be myself.

The tablet still worked. I carried it around with me all the time. People often inquired as to why I bothered with such outdated equipment when there were newer, more powerful ones available in the market. I have those too of course; I needed them for my research. My friends surmise that it's a part of my idiosyncrasy, for every scientist and mathematician has one. How quaint, they say. Not really. It simply afforded me a modicum of comfort.

Sometimes, during my more philosophical moments, I would think about what that woman, the fortune teller, had said about attending CalTech or MIT. Had she been talking about the other me or was it me she had been referring to all along? I had applied to both schools and had been accepted into both. I had chosen CalTech because of its strong theoretical physics department and its smaller, more intimate campus.

If one were to subscribe to the belief that time was not limited to a linear state of causality then could she have known that it was I who would be fulfilling her predictions? I took up Professor Rilke's class thinking it might help me come to terms with this conundrum. The thing about Newtonian Law and Determinism — it's so obvious I can't believe it had slipped my mind — is that they are mere estimates. What is real, on a molecular level, is quantum mechanics. Einstein and Schrödinger knew better. Newton had been debunked. His universal laws are only approximations for the movements of large scale objects. They don't hold true in the microscopic world and it is this world, the world of sight unseen, that I needed to be more familiar with.

I found that the deeper I delved into the quantum world, the less logic had to do with reality. If I depended too much on logic, I would doom myself to the same flaw the Greeks had succumbed to. Not everything that is true is logical. Heisenberg once said that "the experiments about atomic events deal with facts, phenomena as real as any found in everyday life. The atoms themselves however, the elementary particles, are not real but form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts." I like that description, a world of potentialities and possibilities. I held on to it, made it my mantra. The thought of a photon and an atom in a superposition state that gives way to all possible positions after the photon bounces off an atom and becomes a probability wave moving in all directions gives me comfort. Following this line of logic — if the world is then reduced to wave functions and probabilities — then the possibility existed that I would be able to find my way back. Going home ceases to be an impossible notion.

I rapped on Professor Rilke's door and it opened after a moment's pause. She ushered me inside. I had never been to her office before but the décor, with its sleek lines and minimalist feel, was exactly like I expected her office to be — austere.

"Sit down," she said, gesturing to one of the chairs placed in front of her glass-and-metal desk.

The chair was sturdy and was as comfortable as it looked — which is to say, not at all. I forced myself to keep still and avoid squirming, despite the fact that the metal and leather contraption brought to mind a streamlined electric chair. I placed my messenger bag on the floor and it rested



against my leg. The familiar feel of my ancient tablet through the ratty canvas was a presence I drew comfort from.

Professor Rilke did not sit down. She stood behind her desk and continued to loom over me, her arms crossed and her demeanor cold. I had never felt her to be a comforting person, and her flinty blue eyes, as they stared me down, did nothing to disabuse me.

“You’re a mole from the Blacker House aren’t you Miss Mendoza? Do you enjoy living there?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“The House of Fucking Geniuses, am I right? Tell me, do you still have the letters HOFG running along the tunnel walls?” She held up a hand. “No, no, never mind, I don’t really care.” A sigh. “You are a physicist, yes? Well, you want to be ... you’ll be pursuing graduate work?”

I nodded.

“Have you thought about which group you’d like to join for research? You work on quantum gravity yes? The Particle Theory Group I think will be particularly suited to you,” she smiled. “Before you decide though ... I’d like to know: what did you think of some of the subjects we took up this semester? They weren’t at all very scientific. More metaphysical perhaps, certainly not the science you know. Not the kind of physics you are used to, in any case. Have you retained anything or did you simply accomplish the course work to get it over with?”

“I’ve learned many things. And they were very helpful in broadening my understanding of...” A curt motion of her hand cut me off. She was being rude and her line of questioning was strange but, so far, as in countless other times before, she hadn’t really said anything that would warrant a complaint. I waited.

“I hate pandering, Miss Mendoza. It’s undignified and a waste of time, don’t you agree? Why don’t you explain to me please, what an odic force is, if you really did retain as much as you claim.”

I started. “I’m sorry, Professor, am I being quizzed?” I could feel the furrow between my brows deepen in displeasure. I endeavored to smooth it out and attempted a smile. I failed at both.

A slim, blonde eyebrow flew up in response. “I suppose you are at that. Any objections?”

I shook my head and reminded myself that the end of term was only a couple of days away. I had tolerated her thus far. I could do so for a little while longer. It would have been easier had she shown the same degree of antipathy towards everybody else. However, it seemed as if she had singled me out.

“Any time now, Ms. Mendoza.”

“I’m sorry, Professor. Odic force... from what I remember... it is said to be the universal fluid, the vital energy that pervades all of nature.”

“Give me an aspect of this force.”

“Objects charged with this force can influence each other at a great distance. The force itself is said to show properties similar to electromagnetism.”

She smiled. “Does this remind you of anything Ms. Mendoza?”

“I’m sorry, Professor...”

She tutted. “I dislike mindless apologies. Think, Ms. Mendoza. What you said about odic forces. Does it remind you of anything?”

“Quantum Mechanics,” I said after a pause. “Because the same holds true. The theory states that observation of one object can greatly affect the behavior of another distant object, despite the lack of any physical force connecting the two.”

She nodded her head in approval. “Very good. That is correct. However, it must be noted that unlike the case in magnetism, those charged with similar odic polarities are *attracted* to each other and not repelled.” She smiled again. “An interesting facet of this force is the inherent paradox in its behavior — that it can be both particulate like fluid and energetic like light waves. It echoes the wave-particle paradox of light. But what you have to understand, really, is what the odic force is. Put simply, it is energy. It has as many names and elucidations as there are cultures and belief systems in the world. Knowledge corresponds despite the separation due to physical location. It’s inevitable — the human brain trying to make sense of the world it inhabits — though it doesn’t always do a very good job.”

I nodded.

“You must be wondering why I asked to meet you. I must admit that I did not expect to be impressed by the paper you submitted for your finals. Consider my expectation thoroughly subverted.”

It took a moment for her meaning to sink in, and when it did, it was so unexpected that I found myself unable to speak for a moment. When I managed to force a few words out, they sounded like a garbled yelp. True to form, Professor Rilke cocked a derisive eyebrow my way. She gave me an amused smile. “I like what you wrote about the correlation of the Earth’s ley lines and vortices to the chakras of the human body. It’s a paper that has been written before of course, but I enjoyed your take on it. I commend the effort and thoroughness of your research.”

“Thank you, Professor...”

“I give credit where it is due. In your research, could you reiterate, off the top of your head, what you learned about vortices?”

“Vortices are high energy spots on earth, supposedly caused by the planet’s electromagnetic field. They are said to be connected by ley lines. NASA research has proven that our own energy fields, human energy fields, are attuned to certain earth waves that oscillate between seven to eight cycles per second.”

“Hmmm... I’m curious. Why did you choose to work on this particular topic?”

“Because of the connections formed, because of the coordinates and the geometry formed. The representations of some of the chakra types remind me of Calabi-Yau shapes.” I began to wonder what she was trying to get at with her line of questioning. I tried to keep the suspicion from my eyes but I could feel the furrow forming in my forehead again. I squirmed in my seat, the hard metal in the contraption discomfiting me further.

“Did you encounter vile vortices in your study?”

“A little, though I didn’t dwell on them too much.”

“What can you recall?” she asked as she walked over to stand next to the 50-inch screen mounted on her wall. “If there is anything at all?”

“I know that there are twelve of them. Also, that they are called the Devil’s Graveyards.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she said with a nod. I watched her initialize the screen to show a map of the Earth. “The twelve together form an icosahedron.” The map folded to show a rotating globe overlapped by a twenty-faced polyhedron. “Ivan Sanderson, the founder of the Society for the Unexplained, was quite involved in investigating ship and plane disappear-