

The Shut-In Writer

The Shut-In Writer



If patience is a virtue, then he's been the best person there is on this world. Though, it's hard not to be when there is no one around here. Not even a thing.

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7:00pm. Aaron's eyes shift away from the monitor towards the door. He silently counts the seconds until his mother enters. He sighs as he slowly realises that the door stays shut. Aaron reminisces about their past encounters...

In his imagination, she enters with his food in her left hand. What it is depends on the weekday. Today's Saturday, so he pictures a staple from his childhood: self-made burgers with chips on the side. Each time, Aaron admires her punctuality when it comes to this. He never asks her why or how, since it isn't important enough for him to interrupt her from placing the food on his desk. He skips thinking about her mother kissing his cheeks as she leaves the room with the older dishes. Often, their interaction ends there. Luckily, he upholds complete freedom in his imaginations, so he properly thanks her.

These are the only times when his mother sees him. Not to misunderstand. She did try numerous times to get him out of his room, to no avail. He always fought back, unwilling to find a new job or do a redo of his school grades by going to the night school. Not even socialising. He grew increasingly annoyed, once loud enough for her to get scared. She lost count of how often she tried. Then, it stopped. After that, Aaron saw her quietly sigh or shake her head to herself a couple of times. And then, it stopped too.

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When he's bored, he subconsciously listens to her mother talking on the phone next-door. He picks up on some of the sentences but is mostly distracted by his thoughts about work or upcoming plans for his games. Still, one snippet of a conversation stays on his mind.

"I've already looked through numerous guides, okay? I just- I don't know."

"... "

"I'm aware, but there is like a part of me that keeps telling me otherwise. I used to be so much around him and now... I can't even say anything anymore... I feel ashamed. I could be doing more than this..."

"... "

The clock quietly ticks. Seeing no point in staring at the door for minutes, Aaron looks around his familiar bedroom. A bed, wardrobe, shelves and a desk. The standing shelf and desk leave no space on their side. About two steps into his room, one could easily tap the desk with their right elbow and, at the same time, use the other elbow to tap the edge of the wardrobe. The other side, opposite of the wardrobe and the main door lies the bed, window and then the standing shelf again, taking up all of the wall's width. To allow Aaron to be in close proximity of the window, nothing stands in front of it.

Tissues lie around on the floor, dirty clothes in every corner of the room, and the blanket resting with one of its halves on the bed – the other warming the floor instead. The so-called "collectables" catch dust on the shelves. Three hanging shelves are placed above the bed and another two above that are aligned to the left. They're just a singular

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wooden piece each, so there isn't a way to have an item lean on either side.

Normally, a person would gravitate towards establishing standards such as “books”, “accolades” and “toys” on each shelf, while Aaron completely disregards it. One board has a mix of both washed and unwashed underwear, important papers, awards from his kindergarten, a couple burned CDs and other useless items like a scrambled cube, which he can't solve, or a pen he got when he got advertised to. Another board had a broken mouse (perhaps someone needed the electronics inside it?), used tissues (he was too lazy to get out of his bed), lip balm (buried and unused since years), a lunchbox with dinosaur stickers (luckily emptied and washed) and a decade old smartphone with its screen cracked (it's a surprise he continued to use it for a year). All the other boards have the same mess, with other “collectables”.

One would be surprised that all the trash is still holding up. Although, when Aaron was still a newbie in his “collectable”-stacking game, the trash fell down on him in his sleep. Luckily, he refrained from putting his dumbbell on it, afraid that the shelf would break. Not everything is filled with “collectables”, though. Aaron reserves a special place in the standing shelf for his grand amount of candy.

There is a bathroom directly connected to his bedroom, the door in-between the bed and the wide wardrobe. One would have to climb over a copious amount of trash (including dirty clothes) to get there. He tries to make the piles of trash look less bad by leaving his lights off, but the light emitting from the desktop screen isn't helping at all.

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Reminded once again of the fact that he should be tidying his room, Aaron faintly shakes his head and seeks for a better view. He looks out of the window. A street market points directly forward, branching off the main street he lives at. Regional souvenirs, cultural restaurants that are foreign to this country, a phone repair shop that looks like it's been established for money washing and many other attract tourists each season. The city's influx is at a high, typical for the summer. The sun sets as the shops turn on their outer lights.

Aaron's view is slightly blocked by the droplets clashing against the window. Their sound akin to white noise eases his mind, the mumbled crowd on the streets adding on to the ambience. The rain is always there to comfort him, regardless of if he were to be ever outside. It's as though he is finally empathised with, as if the rain is telling him that it's fine to feel melancholic. Looking through the water resting on his window, he watches people in a jog trying to find cover. His gaze stops at the families and the worst of all: Couples.

He hastily looks away in disgust and lands on the main street. The manhole covers are busy as some of the water bypass them and flow down the asphalt instead. He lampoons.

"I'm glad I don't have to come back from work. Even with an umbrella would I be drenched."

"Work"... His mother will always snap back if he mentions the time spent on his computer "work". He exhales deeply. Both in slight annoyance but also in resignation.

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A black-suited man runs along the street, right to left, with a briefcase over his head. He's soaked. It seems like he has no means to drive by car, like him and his mother. Unlike them, he probably has a reason other than being too poor for that. Maybe his car got broken in and the wheels got punctured, who knows. Aaron scuffs.

"I bet he's going home to a 'loving wife'.

"The heavy rain makes her worried about his 'dear lover'. Then, she will proceed to ready up a hot bath for him. To make him relax even more, she probably will make him his favourite meal to make him feel most satisfied.

"And finally, the cherry on top in bed..."

Aaron groans as he rubs his eyes with his palm. He speeds up in anger, as though he tries to put out the fire in his eye sockets. Finally, he leaves his eyes alone as he turns around and checks the time. The clock above the main door turns its hands. He struggles to look more closely, now that his eyes hallucinate colourful spots.

The minute-hand seems to be quite past its zenith, which would mean that his mother is unfashionably late. He raises doubts about the validity of the clock for the first time ever. To be sure, he takes an additional look on his monitor. 7:04pm. Well, that's odd. He checks if there were any messages from his mother sent his way. None, not ever since he got up from his bed in the midday. No sign of hers, as if she suddenly disappeared.

Unwilling to build up any stress, Aaron attempts to quickly find a reason. Yes! His mother must be avoiding the heavy rain! She might not want to get soaked and get ill. She needs to be consistently available

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for both her job and housework, after all. As to why she isn't sending any messages, it is probably because she is panicking so much about being late for Aaron's meal. The first time in years! There is nothing worse than the feeling of breaking a good habit. It likely isn't a satisfying explanation for any other person, but for Aaron, it is good enough.

Content with his answer, Aaron takes a seat and his hands take control of the keyboard. He strictly follows the advice by the self-acclaimed keyboard experts. The left- and right-hand rest on the middle row, quickening his typing speed. The fingers only move to their assigned spots. Is it actually better than anything else? Probably not. On the screen are sentences describing what he witnessed yesterday and the former half of today. The cursor blinks, waiting for him to continue writing. Everything but creativity is occupying his mind. The new words spell out the events of Aaron's evening; he types that he took a look around in his room and outside the window. Aaron describes his resentment towards the black-suited man. He writes down that his mother is experiencing difficulties returning. What else is there... Aaron tries to think of anything else to say. His hands slow down to a halt. Unfortunately, there is nothing more to say. He breathes in and pinches his glabella.

"I should probably pick up a hobby or two."

Aaron half-heartedly acknowledges his current life as lacklustre. Considering the entire autobiography he has written so far, people already go through the things he does, just on a healthy basis. They would read only one day of his, if even. Reading in shame and, for the few, with pity. Yet he continues biographing. Each day, with the same familiar

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words for waking up, eating, consuming entertainment, writing and sleeping.

Aaron has a special reason for being persistent with it. It's the only bit of motivation to get up out of his bed. An example: A person who would spend all day consuming pornography, watching reality shows and read about a new online drama each hour would lose track of time. They would start to forget what they did in a specific month, with each memory intertwining and forming into a big incoherent mess. Aaron wants to distance himself from this. Not from the former, to be clear, but from losing the ability to distinguish the days. Thus, he continues spending time with pornos, shows and dramas each day but with writing about this on top. Ah! There goes another train of thought to type out. His writing continues.

After almost an hour, he copies all of the text he typed out and pastes it into a blog post. All of his posts get published on My-Life. Going along with its name, it's an internet platform for people talking about their life. Normally, if someone goes on My-Life, they will get to see the algorithmic feed one would scroll through on default. In the nature of attention spans and how the algorithmic boosts retention rates, these feeds are filled with short opinions. They're about 280 characters long, at maximum.

But in the past, it used to be a forum. They originally had boards of various topics, and people liked to write long texts in them. For example, there is a topic for people talking about their unique jobs.

There has been one who talked about getting paid highly for selling magical pendants with enchantments written in his self-made

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language. His community was deeply invested about his items. Not for actually believing in any of the mysticism, but for trying to learn about the language. Another post talked about how a user worked as a professional puzzle solver, with contracts asking her to give feedback. How good were the clues? How long did it take her to solve it?

“You don’t get paid a lot for this, but for being able to pursue my dearest hobby, I am very happy with it.

“And these puzzle boxes? Wow, I just want to say that everyone engineering them deserve my fullest appreciation! I love them!”

A problem about hosting these stories is the lack of funding. In a natural cycle of trying to improve their economical state, My-Life first implemented a subscription system, which forced members to pay money to write the same amount of content as in the past. It was a controversial decision. The major share of the users strook and forced them to revert the changes. That’s why My-Life removed the subscription again and introduced a sister site instead. The sister site, also called My-Life, grew to be a solid competition against other sites trying to commercialise the same concept.

My-Life (the company) thought it would be a good idea to have both sites be named identically, so that disoriented people would accidentally land on the feed in lieu of the financially worse forum. To combat the confusing terminology, users on both sites agreed to call the newer My-Life Your-Life instead.

After Aaron finishes copying all of his text and refining it, he submits it to My-Life and leans back. Looking back on his older posts, most of them received no comments and sometimes even no views. He doesn’t

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mind the fact that his rather ordinary work – perhaps subordinate even – is not going to receive any engagement.

Aaron thinks back about the latest comment on one of his posts. It was from a few months ago. The comment was written as if they forgot to turn off the Caps-Lock. It said that he needs to stop trashing the website and told him that it was not necessary to publish a calculation about his ‘pull per minute’ and ‘blast per day’, which was quite a friendly wording by Aaron for something this sexual. Aaron didn’t mind it much. If he weren’t to talk about his sexual life, then he could as well have gone on Your-Life for how short his posts would have become.

He switches to Your-Life, which coincidentally has a private messaging section identical to every other platform. Aaron notices that his only acquaintance is currently online. One hour into a conversation, he addresses the commenter from months ago. His acquaintance criticises him, asking why he would ever see the need to write something like that. Instead of telling his acquaintance that his posts would get too short, he comes up with a different reason.

“If there’s a historian from the year 4430 and wants to figure out how a boring life used to look like, my autobiography would be the perfect place to look for!”

“Right? Right?”

“And I wouldn’t want to ‘fake’ my life for this, would I? So, I should not hide my sexual preferences! I need to stay accurate for the sake of science!”

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The cursor blinks as neither of them continue talking. After a dozen seconds, Aaron adds on.

“At least I would be able to live on for longer after my death.”

He thinks of the quote and tries to recite it.

“You probably know it: ‘You die twice: First as your consciousness fades away and then as the memories from everyone’s mind about you fade away.’”

– II –

8:00pm. He writes the last sentence of the paragraph. He throws out a big sigh, as though he wants to blow away the stress building up in him. He tries to bend his back; he turns his body far to the left and then he turns far to the right. Somewhat failing in this aspect, as the spinning chair gives leeway and goes along the direction of his back. As per the usual, he reflects on his work for today. He looks for issues like where he might be lacking in exposition. After he finishes, he ponders about how to continue from this point forth. How should the story continue? After reining his thoughts, he writes short bullet points on his paper in form of a To-Do list. His mind ruminates on the same topic. Mainly to be proud of himself for how much he was able to write today. *You did great today, Seth.*

The entire document doesn't contain as much as one might guess. With the story at its start, Seth is currently in the process to slowly introduce the reader to his work. He obviously doesn't view it as his favourite part to write but knows that it is fundamental. It needs to be fantastic. Otherwise, no one will be deeply invested in the story as much as Seth hopes for. Even worse, he loses the reader before he could show the actual premise. The part which is supposed to make the reader more excited.

He has written plenty stories before this, although their theme being quite similar. If someone wants to summarise all of them into one

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short sentence it would be “The protagonist breaking the fourth wall”. The reader experiences how the protagonist interacts with whatever lays beyond it. Seth thinks back to his previously finished project.

In the tragic story of *Author’s Playground*, you follow the traumatised protagonist, Joseph. Looking at his dating life, romance playing a big part of the story, it is deeply miserable. It isn’t because he isn’t able to date anyone, but because his past girlfriends all have died in some kind of accident. He gives up dating, stopping at the fourth partner when he loses her by a car crash. Equally miserable is the situation with his family. His younger brother, for example, dies at the age of 12 when he falls from the second story of the house. A gruesome sight. His throat has been impaled by the spiky fence bordering the front yard and street.

Joseph suffers from great mental issues and isolates himself in his room. He has been convinced of an invisible power around him that causes fatal accidents. It was then, when the narrator in the novel unintentionally reveals itself, allowing Joseph to realise that he has been a mere narrative of the story. Joseph’s blood boil, with no means to an end. He masters the power of manipulating the pages. He crosses out words, adds new sentences and rips apart pages. In the end, he loses all reasons as he scraps the narrator entirely, unwilling to be played by the author any longer. As such, the novel ends abruptly, without an epilogue.

Due to the way the story plays out, the novel turns out to be a hard read. A reader would have to put in additional effort to understand what’s happening, and that is much to Seth’s intent. Fully knowing he would alienate many potential readers, Seth allows the same pages to appear multiple times, changes fonts numerous times – at some point being Wingdings – and misprints an entire chapter by slightly rotating

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the paragraphs. Only through that, he excuses, would it be possible to signify how strong Joseph would be getting.

Seth is still proud of writing it, solidifying meta-narratives as a part of his signature style of writing. Unfortunately, he has yet to find success as an author. Having made Author's Playground his most ambitious project, he would have expected to find more people that would be interested in it, but every site for his novel lack any reviews. Seth admits to himself that being a self-published author is making things a lot harder than if he were to reach out to acknowledged publishers, but he believes that he doesn't want to be restricted by any editors. Either way, he is convinced that there is bound to be people that will love his work. It just takes its time.

His stomach rumbles. It has expected to be fed an hour ago and finally files a complaint. Seth stands up and as he widely stretches, raising his arms up above his head, he looks around. When he thought of how the protagonist's room was going to look like, he opted to pick the easiest option and go with his own, though it's arguably less messy than the room in the novel. *"I should wash these clothes tomorrow."*

When he takes a step, his feet push away several crumbled papers. Those have been past ideas that weren't good enough. Around half of them have been for Author's Playground. He adds 'throwing away the trash' to his mental to-do list. These ideas aren't written down on his computer, because he doesn't want to clutter his desktop.

As he reaches for the door handle, small, deep violet sparks appear. They fuzz, sounding more dangerous than a tesla-coil. He panics, pulls his arm away and the sparks stop. Confusion arises. *"What in the..."*

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His hand slowly moves towards the handle for the second time. Sparks reappear as he moves away yet again. Seth sighs to himself as he denies what he sees, calling the sparks a hallucination. It must be the constant daydreaming as a writer that causes this. In an attempt to get over his fear of touching something obviously dangerous, he plans to open the door as fast as possible. Hopefully, he'll be faster than him noticing the sparks. Seth breathes out heavily. As though he were a Kung-Fu fighter, his torso turns. The right arm gets into position to yank the door handle.

In an abrupt move, the right arm launches forward, the flat hand aiming the top of the handle. However, sparks appear sooner than he expects, allowing them to send the shock through his index finger. His right hand first jolts awake, every single centimetre of the skin noticing how the current flows through it. The arm flails, the muscles forcefully contracting from the electricity. The current abruptly disappears, no further than the shoulder. His mind picks up the latent pain. Seth yelps at the stingy pain alike receiving multiple tattoos at the same time. Then, the whole arm turns numb in an attempt to recover from the sensation. Seth's sense of balance is lost. After a couple steps of stumbling, he falls against the wall and rapidly slides alongside of it. His heart struggles to regain a steady rhythm. He slowly calms it with controlled breathing and notices his vision being blocked by illusory blank spots. Undaring to accidentally do something wrong, Seth stays put and waits for everything to mostly recover. After half an hour, he stumbles while standing up and wipes his drool away.

Now that it's over, he instantly starts to wonder what has occurred to him. Flinging his arm softly, as if it would hasten the recovery of its senses, Seth glares at the door. *How could this be happening?* He

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walks in a circle, but due to the size of his own room, it's rather a rectangle. Suddenly, he stops in his track and snickers to himself. *"He's probably dying of laughter behind this door."*

Currently living as a college student, he would naturally have a roommate to share the apartment with. Seth appreciates him for sticking to the cleaning days, but there is a certain part of him that is nauseating. His roommate likes to play pranks a couple times a month. It's extremely irregular for when it happens, so it is even more unpredictable of Seth to say when his roommate is trying to be annoying again. Normally, the pranks are very harmless, never breaking anything. In many of them, Seth has to get out of his predicament himself, while his roommate amuses himself as he watches him. Once, he placed 100 plastic cups in his room filled with water to the brim.

Thus, his roommate probably rigged the handle to a car battery or something alike. *This is way more dangerous though. Perhaps he has too much fun this time and doesn't consider how much it could actually hurt.* Seth shouts out of his room. *"Ha, ha. Now get on and put the battery away!"*

No response. Unsurprised, Seth comes up with a method to touch the handle undisturbed. Taking the scarf out of the wardrobe, he makes a lasso out of it and swings it. But, as though somebody is whispering to him, he slowly stops and lets the scarf hang to his side. Even if he takes distance from the door, it doesn't prevent it from passing the current through the scarf to him. No way he would allow himself to try it, the previous shock almost put him to sleep!

Seth switches his equipment to the keyboard from his desk. Making sure that the impact would be strong enough to bring the door outside its frame, he raises the keyboard above his head. As he takes a

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swing, the keyboard defies physics and generates cyan sparks. They jump around frantically, travelling through it as if it was copper and eventually shocking Seth for a second time. He drops the keyboard to the ground. Fortunately, it seems to be way weaker this time. He massages his hands. His lips part and the brows tighten; a face that could only appear in utter confusion.

This can't be described as a prank anymore; it doesn't make sense! His feet stand unmoved. His mind churns, desperately trying to find an explanation for this. In a span of just a dozen of minutes he witnessed something utterly physics-defying that he doesn't even know what to feel right now. In the end, he caresses the back of his head and sits down on his bed. He takes his phone and searches. His finger scrolls several meters, unable to find a similar report. After dozens of minutes of researching, he gives up and types in the number for the police. If there is nothing to do, it's better to leave it to outsider's help. The finger taps the first 9. Sparks come out of the symbol. Seth first rubs his glabella in disappointment. Unprompted, he catapults off his bed, opens the window and lays his hands towards the sides of his mouth. He looks at the few drunkards reeling across the street market. The words are unable to move out of his throat, the neck tingling as it prevents him to scream. Seth coughs heavily, instinctively trying to spit out the sparks.

He quickly grabs a sheet of paper, writes down "HELP!", and prepares to throw the crumbled ball out as the whole window fills up with sparks. Before he can react to it, the ball leaves his hand and lights up at the touch of the illusory wall. He panics and retreats from the ball of fire. Briefly, he thought of stomping on it, but the thought of the sparks makes it unappetising. Seth is left without any other choice other than watching it burn. A minute passes, leaving a black and fragile pulp and

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a scorched floor. It leaves him enough time to calm down, allowing him to realise that he is stuck in his own room, with no way of bypassing these sparks. Like the former sheet of paper, he lays down on the floor and rolls himself into a ball.

It's past midnight, the lamp on the desk dimly illuminating his body. He hasn't been moving for hours, different thoughts occupying his mind. To allow himself to move on, Seth starts to focus on trying to apply logic to the whole phenomenon. He tries to apply logic to this. A scientific approach should be applicable. In the real world, there are specific rules it always follows. A ball falling from 1000m would fall as long as any other place. Therefore, Seth assumes that these sparks also have set rules. If this was not the case, then there will simply be no way of figuring out how to escape his room. He collects everything he learned of in the past hours with these sparks and notes them. For now, it seems as though the location of these sparks are arbitrary. They can prevent Seth from touching something, directly shock him or even be inside of his own body. He gets up and walks towards the window to learn more about them.

To his demise, he lives far too high to simply jump out of it. First, he wants to make sure if all objects are prohibited from exiting. Seth takes an empty pen out of his trash and throws it outside. He doesn't check for any pedestrians, as it's around 3am or 4am. The pen successfully reaches the ground without hitting anyone. Nodding to himself, he binds multiple cloths together to create a self-made rope and then throws one end of it out of the window. The other is secured to the bed. While the rope falls, sparks increasingly appear from every corner of the frame, filling the empty space in-between. *It's like when the crumbled paper was thrown.* Despite the interesting fact that Seth could touch the

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rope, unaffected by the sparks, they still prevent him from exiting. He reflects on this matter.

Actually, Seth never really considered climbing down with the shabby self-crafted rope. It could tear apart, accidentally killing himself by the attempt. Still, the sparks seem to understand methods of escaping and interfere in the process. *“These sparks are not random, to say the least. They appear as soon as I am able to get out.”*

Seeing how it aligns with everything that has happened so far, he takes a seat in front of his desk and names a sheet of paper Spark Theory. With this, he writes down everything he knows about the sparks.

-
- a. Sparks contradict the laws of physics.*
 - b. Sparks prevent me from going through it, zapping me if I get too close.*
 - c. Sparks keep me within this room, with the goal of not letting myself outside.*
-

After he drafts his last point, Seth realises one major issue... *Then, how am I supposed to get out?* Reading the notes gives him the feeling that there is no escape at all. These sparks are clearly way stronger than him, and they are always aware of everything he tries to do. Tired, demotivated and depressed, he climbs into his bed. The instinctive fear of never making it out alive creeps up. He strives to shake it off, considering that he should attempt to experiment to see if there are any loopholes. *Maybe the sparks need to go to sleep at some point?* And with that, he slowly falls asleep.

- III -

7:00pm. It's been over a full day since he left the room. He is incredibly hungry. Somehow, the stomach feeling even less empty than nothing. It grumbles, with no end in sight. Seth tries to calm it a bit by giving it little snacks from the standing shelf. Luckily, thirst is the lesser problem. Seth can easily access the bathroom, using water from the sink. Fortunately, this also means he can go to the toilet. It seems like sparks are friendly in this regard, or at the least they don't deem this way of leaving the bedroom as a problem.

The idea of being imprisoned left him with little sleep. Between this morning and now, he already experimented with all sorts of escape methods. He went through all sorts of social media platforms asking for help, tried to throw out multiple shirts out of the window and even pretended to not care about opening the door right before executing a surprise attack. Unfortunately, each attempt failed in the appearance of the sparks. Seth failed to discover any loopholes. He defeatedly returns to his bed and loathes. Turning back to the present, it's obvious why he has been waiting for the arrival of death.

After many hours of laying on the bed, halfway believing that he should try to make the best of it, he decides to live as normally as possible. Struggling to move away from his bed as though he had to do his third rep of sit-ups, Seth arrives on his feet and turns to the bathroom. He takes a shower and throws his dirty clothes to a new pile. Adding to

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the atmosphere, a harsh rainstorm ravages outside. It feels as though the window is fighting the urge to explode into pieces. Seth pays no mind to it though; it's not as if he could go and repair it.

Watching the water rush downwards, he reveres about the afterlife. He imagines a sudden growth in popularity, the common phenomenon of being popular after your own death. These fans gossip which of his stories are the best, always knowing that there will be no more coming. Each year, in celebration of his birthday, they come together in form of a book club and look at fanfics of Seth's stories. To him, any writer believes that his worlds always provide a lot of potential. His face draws a clear smile. Seth's dream is interrupted by the vibration of his phone. After blocking the spam mail, he turns on the computer.

He decides to return to writing. He could be joining a call and play games with his friends, but with death looming on him (and the idea of turning popular post-mortem), he prefers to finish one last story.

While Seth waits for his computer to turn, his gaze turns back to the rain. Along the street market, he watches some groups eating inside. He notices some people watching the rain, like him, and others simply engage in a conversation. Many seem to have noticed the rain early on, so they were able to seek shelter soon enough. Unfortunately, the workers would only finish their day this hour, so they find themselves in a predicament. At least those without a car... *Actually, how many can that be?* Seth checks, looking down on his street. It seems as if it's fine as a couple of cars drive down the road. Soon enough, he discovers a man rushing to seek home. His shoes are completely wet, each step taking another dunk in the overflowing water. Seth's gaze moves to the left, following the person until he disappears from his view. *Well, we've got one person.*

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By intuition, Seth goes back to his computer, which just booted a moment ago. He should be getting a faster one, but his funds are lacking. If only his stories would be successful. He opens his latest project called “The Shut-In Writer”. It’s mostly intended as a placeholder name, but in all of the previous times, Seth habitually kept the name for publishing. He recollects yesterday, briefly reading the last paragraph and softly places his hands on the keyboard. Unlike the protagonist, he disregards the “proper” hand placement, convinced that it makes no difference.

Aaron’s acquaintance takes time to reply. Then, finally, a couple message come out.

“Wow. You are miserable.

“I think when you die, you die again right here and then.

“No joke, no one is going to read that gigantic boring thread. The website will burn down with it, and no one will even bother to remember you.

“Your life is just so... boring.

“Get a life.

“Maybe then – in a slim chance – people would want to read your thread.”

Seth scrolls back up, familiarising himself to the story. His eyes glance at the section where Aaron comments about the rain. His heart momentarily pauses; fingers tremble lightly. He recognises a certain figure. Just like Aaron, a black-suited man ran on his street! *He was running to the left, and the street was overflowing with water. Surely, this is a complete coincidence.* Seth silently looks around the room, wanting to disprove this bizarre notion. Dirty piles of clothes are blocking the

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bathroom. Crumbled papers laying around, appearing like used tissues. The time close to 7:00pm. As if the mind can't adjust at the contradictory facts, Seth sickens at the thought. This just couldn't be! Slowly, he breaks into laughter. This doesn't exactly prove that Seth is experiencing Aaron's life, but given his mental state, it doesn't seem to matter. The mix of hunger, lack of sleep, constant dread over being in this prison cell, and now learning of these patterns turns him into a horrible mess. He loses his sense of balance, the body close to feigning by the harsh strain on his mind. His whole body grows heavier as although earth's gravity rises. He collapses to his side, his head fortunate enough to be protected by the clothes. His desperate laughter continues. Then, it calms down. Silence ensues, partially interrupted by his giggle. Finally, he calms down.

He turns and lays on his back. Blaming lack of sleep, desperation, imprisonment, depression, isolation, hunger and many more chaotic feelings for the burst of insanity, he tries to think seriously. Seth could very much be deluding himself into believing that he is living Aaron's life. These can be rare coincidences! It's not as if it's impossible to accidentally be the same for a brief moment. *Yes, friends sometimes say the exact same sentence!* He ignores every other similarity, he is taking inspiration from his own room for Aaron's, after all. So, snacks, the layout of his room and the street market don't count. Then, one has to consider things that do not coincide. For example, people at the street market that have taken shelter long before Seth watched. Compared to Aaron, who observed families seeking cover, this is a direct contradiction. Also, the matter that My-Life and Your-Life do not exist adds to this.

This means that this doesn't prove anything! Relieved, Seth returns to his desk. He lightly claps his cheeks, as if to tell himself to focus

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again. Though, he still feels bothered about this situation. To be on the complete sure side, he pretends as though Aaron and Seth were the same person. Anything that happens to Aaron could happen to Seth, probably; there was the black-suited man, after all. *Where was I? Right, his acquaintance just completely decimated his ego.*

Clearly bothered by the betrayal of his acquaintance, Aaron gets up and screams several insults towards the screen. The chair flips from his sudden movement. His acquaintance is unbothered, entirely to the fact that Aaron's shouting is not affecting the keyboard. It being necessary is oblivious to Aaron as he continues. Then, he notices that he is currently screaming at no one. He could type out everything he said, but in fear of getting banned, he dismisses it. With his arms crossed and his fingers aggressively tapping them, his stomach growls. It's quite late, no sign of his mother so far. He messages her, asking where she is. For a short bit, he stands still. No, no, he couldn't possibly wait any longer in hunger. Aaron shakes his head. *Fine, I'll make food myself.* So, for the first time since years, he gets up and

As Seth types out the sentence that would make him a free man, as long as his pretending turns out to be true, the spark come back to greet him. Plentiful of shocks appear on his fingertips, which hurt as much as when he first tried to open the door. "Can I not even write in peace?" Seth yelps yet again in frustration, even though no neighbour has come to file a noise complaint. On that note, it might even be helpful of them to do it. But he dismisses it, knowing that sparks would punish him for screaming again. Then, he quietly snickers. "Would that not result in an endless room? Shock, scream, shock, scream..." His rambling travels off into silence. While soothing his fingers, Seth searches for the

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open-ended sentence. It disappeared along with the previous two sentences. The sparks seemed to have taken control of the keyboard and removed the last sentences. Being used to contradictory phenomena, Seth doesn't fall back into panic. He's glad, since he's very tired of it.

It looks like attempting to bring Aaron outside brings him one step further to understanding these sparks. He tries to infer useful information out of this. Since Aaron never leaves his room, it's unusual to make him leave the room for food. It wouldn't fit his character. Therefore, Seth has been denied of writing like this. But why would he be denied? And for this, there is just one natural conclusion: His life does match Aaron's! It seems like allowing Aaron to leave would have allowed Seth to leave too, thus explaining the reaction of the sparks. Not all things seem to happen to both Aaron and Seth, though. *The proof of this is the market street!*

Long believing that sparks are an intellectual species, either working like ants or marionetted by aliens, he doesn't find it far-fetched to think that they have a certain goal in mind. It might be more complicated than simply imprisoning him. *But what use is it to them that my writing dictates my circumstance?* He concludes that this is probably something that they can not avoid. Intruding into someone's personal life might accidentally cause side-effects, in this case the effect Seth's writing can have.

He thinks about the goal they might have. Does Seth have to give an offering? However, he doesn't know how to do a sacrificial ritual – no one (or nothing?) explained it to him – and isn't aware of anything he could offer in the first place. It's not like he has a dead goat laying around somewhere. Seth's mouth curves slightly. Maybe it's better to not clean his room for now, lest he finds out he does have goats under the

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dirty clothes. His body softly trembles. It doesn't have to be sacrificial, at the least. As for the ritual itself, the Earth might have an invisible barrier that doesn't allow aliens to enter normally, so they need me in a ritual to summon them down to earth, who knows.

Seth comes up with a second idea. It can be that these aliens are seeking entertainment from this? He might've entered an escape room made by aliens and all he needs to do is find the clues. Be that as it may, this is – to be polite – a bad puzzle then. He complains silently. A good puzzle would make use of clear hints, password locks and keylocks instead of placing painful traps everywhere. Especially traps that change based on what he does.

Still, there is little to go off of, so plans for these ideas would be rudimentary. For this to be proper, Seth needs to have more information about how his writing impacts these sparks. This might be the loophole he has been seeking for! The only thing to do for now is to write something else and see if it works.

– IV –

The sun shines through the window, indicating that the rain has been long gone by now. This would be enough time for his mother to come home, even if she were still to be at the office right when the clouds cleared up. With his message still left on read, he calls her. It rings. *How long has it been?*

The last time he heard his phone ring was when his mother tried to ask where he was after he finished his elementary school lessons for that day. Aaron was found in a pawn shop, to which his mother ran to. He told her he was lost, and on the question why he didn't call her he rigidly shrugged with an awkward smile. He reminisces about the part of the day he hadn't told her: His by-now-former friends wanted to have a jest and tried to see if they can sell off Aaron in there. It didn't exactly to plan. The owner simply leaned back on his chair and returned to his porn magazine he traded with a moment before. His former friends chose to run away and ditch Aaron instead.

The buzz from the phone repeats for the 12th time. An automated voice greets him.

"Hi, this is Jodie Woods!"

"Unfortunately, I am not available at the moment. So please leave a

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message at the end of the tone.

“Thank you!”

He hangs up pre-emptively before the tone can be heard. In an attempt to control his sweaty hands, Aaron comes up with the simplest explanation: Her phone’s battery is dead. Nothing ever happens to her so nothing will ever happen to her either. He orders food via delivery and specifically tells the person to use the key under the doormat and to directly bring it into his room.

Aaron opens My-Life. His eyebrows raise at the look of his homepage. For the first time, the mail icon in the top-right corner finally shows a red dot in the middle. It reads “1”. He turns off all advertisement notifications each time he registers onto a new site, so it has to be an actual person. He hasn’t expected to interact with someone new on the forum, let alone a private message! *Oh, oh! It might be my soulmate that sees how cool I am.* He gets excited and opens the private message.

“Hello Aaron.”

He audibly gasps a “huh”. How? His actual name should not be in any of his blogs. Every time he writes about himself, he makes sure to redact everything that can be traced back to him. Even right before publishing them, he goes through the text several times to make sure he wouldn’t leak anything. *No. No, it is fine.* It only mentions his first name. There is nothing too much to worry about here. It’s okay. Actually, if it were to be his soulmate then it would be trivial of her to know his first name. As he peels off his worry, he continues reading.

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“How is life as someone who is loved by his mother?”

“To be living with 28 years of age and not worry about getting a job. It must be thrilling to know you can rest at ease. People would be jealous at that!”

“Well, we both know you aren’t content with how things are. I mean, look at your room. It’s a sad view.”

His second verbal beating of the day. His feet frantically tap the floor, his teeth grinding against each other. How dare someone say something like this about their life? What else? What are the next insults?

“So how about this? Let’s make your life worthy of posting here.

“I have something for you.”

Reading something fully unexpected, he abruptly stops any movement. What kind of offer is this supposed to be? As an expert of being ridiculed, he quickly and tiredly concludes that this one of his former classmates. Aaron closes the tab and returns to his drama show. Throughout the fight between the couple, his eyes stay focused while his brain keeps drifting off. A typical behaviour, especially knowing that he is internally bored of watching them but never choosing to quit. But, instead of drifting to other trivial topics, he’s occupied with the unusual message. There is just one aspect he doesn’t understand.

Yes, sure, his room is not tidied. Still, no one aside from his mother would really know. Neither would anyone know about his current situation, nor does he uphold any connection to any of the people he met outside of the internet. Again, he is fully anonymised. There should be no chance for anyone to know who he is and what he is doing right now. He shortly considers his mother as the spreader of the news.

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Though, considering her calls he occasionally eavesdropped on, she seems to only talk to her older friends. When she has her phone on speaker, it would always be a middle-aged person.

Let's pretend I accidentally revealed my name. It can't be both. If someone wants to aggregate someone and then offer something, it should in usual circumstances be both. Who doxes someone half-heartedly, after all? There are numerous of Aarons out of there, further discrediting the belief that it could be anyone he knows. He tries to brilliantly explain the motivation behind the message. He pauses the show (she breaks up with him) and takes a second look at the message. Slowly slipping into the role of a detective, he lightly rests his chin on his right hand, between the thumb and pointer.

Is it a sponsor? No, a sponsor wouldn't reach out to him with the lack of reach he has. Despite some content creators with as little as 30 views receiving such deals, Aaron is just a blogger with even less engagement. *A scammer?* There is a scam called "brushing scam" where they send over a fake luxury item, then writing a review in lieu of the person without consent. Through that, it artificially boosts sales. Regardless, there are already a lot of privacy breaches with personal addresses. It renders actively reaching out to someone excessive. So, what could it be then?

Yes, it could be a production team working for a show! He nods to himself as if a lightbulb is shining above his head. But is it not a little unprofessional of a team to do it? Perhaps this is already part of the show! This is the part of the show where they show the backstory of Aaron, and then a glimpse of this very exchange! Aaron sees no reason

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not to reply. The worst thing that could happen is that he turns back to the boring life he already leads. Or his address landing on some black market, allowing someone to “brush scam” him. Not that he cares.

8:00pm. Seth looks at his email, his mouth agape. His food is soon to arrive. As far as his normally functioning memory serves, there was no order he put through. He didn't try in the first place, as the sparks obviously would have shocked him for trying. As he tries to make sense of this, he hears the doorbell. He moves towards his door and presses his ears against it. Another bell. After a while a door opens. That's his roommate. Barefoot steps can be heard. He likely wasn't prepared for any visits tonight, so he should be in his casual wear right now. The third bell. Finally, he unlocks the door and confusingly greets the delivery guy. A conversation can be heard faintly.

“Hello?”

“Good evening. A delivery for Seth Hall.”

He shouts towards Seth's direction.

“Seth? Go pick up the food yourself!”

A dozen of seconds of silence occur. Seth isn't able to come up with an excuse for his inability to leave his room. With cheeks pressed against the door, he calls out vaguely.

“I'll be there soon!”

Of course, he won't be there anytime soon. He said it so that his roommate knows he's awake. In case his roommate is to pay for him, he wants to prevent him to place the food on the kitchen table and get into his bedroom instead. He wants to see if other people could open the door for him or get shocked themselves. Not just for that experiment did he shout though, he is quite hungry! As his roommate would know now

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that Seth didn't quickly fall asleep after ordering the food, he wouldn't feel wrong to come into his room. At least, that's what Seth hopes for. He isn't able to make out the rest of the sentences. The door outside shuts.

Seth unconsciously takes a few steps back. His heart races. The footsteps increase in volume. His roommate is coming closer. Suddenly, his control is ripping away from him. Seth subconsciously attempts to throw up his hands in disbelief, but it stops before it could even begin. Then, his legs freeze up. Like concrete, he attempts to forcibly pull them, but they stay rigid. Tingles creep all over his body. *These sparks again!* He continues, uses all of his mental power in a try to regain control of his body. He growls. His breaths fly out in exhaustion, but his back stays straight. This is as if he is to suddenly experience a sleep paralysis in this very moment! His energy drains. Sweat extrudes out of his body. No chance. Absolutely stuck. Then, the door opens. His roommate shifts his upper body into the small opening. He takes a peek at what he's doing. Their looks collide. A second after, his roommate pulls his right arm into the room. A plastic bag dangles from his index and middle finger.

"I've got your food."

He clearly expects an answer. Likely an explanation for why he didn't go there himself, why he is standing in the middle of his room, standing like a soldier and when he can get his money back. His face contorts. His mouth changes into numerous forms, his cheeks puffing in and out quickly. Seth is eerily quiet, only letting desperate breathing come out of him. His roommate politely smiles for a moment. A tinge of cringing can be seen on his face.

"Well, alright. I'll be putting it here..."

"Uhm. You can pay me tomorrow, I guess."

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No response.

“Mm ‘kay... Well, goodnight to you then?”

His roommate exits the room. The sparks give the control back to Seth. He stumbles forwardly, landing on his knees and hands, preventing the face from sinking into the ground. He curses inwardly. *Can they not make me constantly plummet to the ground?* Already adjusted to the ways of the sparks, he rapidly moves on to analysing them. With the delivery, Seth learns of new things about his circumstance. He finally continues his Spark Theory.

d. A certain entity or a group of entities (let them be called Sparkles) control the sparks. These Sparkles must be intelligent and aware of what I’m doing.*

e. They might seek one of these two things:

1. They want me to hold a ritual – sacrificial or not

2. I am currently in an escape room

f. Some of the things that happen to Aaron happen to me.

** For the sake of simplicity, Sparkles are always referred to in plural.*

It seems like f. is more interesting than Seth might have thought. Originally, he already acknowledged that his and Aaron’s experiences are (sometimes) shared but didn’t plan to do much with it. Now that he realises that food can be brought to him, he notices the potential of this phenomenon. But when exactly does this happen? He wonders if he can write in such a way that when new bits can appear in both worlds without adding a new contradiction, he’ll live through them. For example, talking

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about My-Life wouldn't suddenly exist in Seth's life, but ordering food would allow for it to be delivered. With new insight on his hands, he continues his project.



Aaron asks the delivery man to take the keys under the doormat to get inside and drop it off in front of his door. He hasn't been minding the possibility that the guy could very well steal valuable decorations in the apartment. He wouldn't rise to lose a low-income job. Doubling down on it, Aaron asks the person to leave without giving him a tip. Of course, also putting the keys back under the doormat.

His computer plays a sweet jingle. The jingle sounds so sweet, in fact, that it circles back to sounding corporal. My-Life notifies him about a reply. His eyes light up.

"We'll provide something exciting for you. In an ideal case, the delivery should arrive tomorrow. For further details, follow the link below."

Under it follows a link for tracking the shipment.

Within a few hours, Aaron had enthusiastically talked with this anonymous user, constantly thinking about how to win this game show. And then finally, he had gotten an offer to participate in something – in their own words – *"grand"*. On his first thought, he would have assumed that it might be an invitation for an island all about dating (well, and full of sexual desire). *To be honest, someone needs to tell them that it's stupid to show how you're doing it with someone else*

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to the whole audience. Then, he realised that he is not good-looking enough to be invited to such a show. Either way, it's more desirable for him to have a game show wholly taking place in his own room. This could be a cryptic race! To be the first person to solve all the puzzles for a prize pool of a whole mansion! He spent the next hours researching about various types of cryptography. He gulped his saliva down at the thought of winning. This might be the most excited he has been in the last months.

Seth yawns after several hours of writing. He covers his yawning mouth and returns his thoughts back to the Sparkles. So far, he had been able to write freely. Which is not a good thing in this case. He would have preferred to be directed towards a certain goal so that he can finally go out and look at different walls for once. There has been nothing so far that could make him infer on a step-by-step instruction for a ritual or even as little as hint for his escape room. *How would you even bend the sparks to your will?*

He might have to invent a ritual on his own. Surely, the Sparkles would eventually show him the way if he were to start writing one himself. For example, they could show him if he is supposed to have a sacrifice or not. *Just anything, please!* And with that, he gets ready for bed.

Feeling refreshed, Seth turns his computer back on. He orders new food using Aaron's story. He wants to make sure their circumstances can work out for this. So, his and Aaron's time of the day should match. Food ordered in the evening is most likely not to arrive in the morning. Luckily, he had never mentioned what Aaron's date is, lest he hungrily waits for several months.

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It's time for breakfast. Well, depending on how one might want to define "*morning*". Aaron crawls out of his bed, whose sheets haven't been changed for months. Regardless of why his mother is still missing, she isn't here to make a meal for him, and he couldn't work on this matter with an empty stomach. This time, he orders and pays with his card directly. His cash is running low, after all. He messages his neighbour and asks him to bring it to him directly. Aaron thinks of a proper excuse in the meantime.

"I hope the keys were put under the doormat..."

"I hope so too..."

Seth sighs as his phone's display lights up. His neighbour has replied to his message he never wrote. Seeing how Sparkles would change reality to this extent, he's glad he's never thought of writing Aaron's death.

Staying on topic, Seth realises how this could very well imply how he would turn to be overtly sexual just like Aaron. He blocks every pornography site he knows of. He nods to himself as though he just disarmed a bomb.

The food arrives without much trouble. He had added several meals on top of the order. It should be allowed as it's still coinciding with Aaron's generic order. As for the excuse, he tells his neighbour his cat ran out of the building and that he had to run after him. He hides in the bathroom until his neighbour brings the heap of food. Seth smiles at his own genius. Still, it's better to come up with new excuses as to not arouse any suspicion.

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After ordering his food, Aaron sits down on his computer, and he asks people about his mother's disappearance. He listens to people on MyLife giving suggestions as to what might have happened. Everyone agrees that he should just be calling the police or actively search for the places she often goes to, but he finds these pieces of advice unhelpful. On the internet, he often hears how the police are doing too little to help and that the people are forced to search on their own. Now, of course, he couldn't be doing that either. Aside from the scary thought of taking a step into a world he hasn't seen for years, he doesn't know where his mother usually goes to. He did occasionally listen in on his mother while she was calling, but the only location he recognises is her own workplace. *Actually, I could try calling them...* He dials and fidgets with his free hand waiting. A voice greets him and he greets back.

"Uhm."

It almost sounds like a squeak. He rasps and adjusts his voice.

"I'm Jodie's son... Aaron..."

"Oh! Hey, Aaron! How can I help you?"

"Yeah... I just wanted to ask if you heard anything from her?"

"I'm sorry my dear, can't say I heard of her since yesterday. Is everything alright over there?"

"No yeah. All good... Thank you."

He hangs up immediately after.

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Well, that didn't work out as he might have hoped. He looks up her name. Surprisingly, she seems to use Your-Life; with her real name at that! Either way, it doesn't seem like she has posted anything recently, so he ditches the page. He deems the search with her name as useless, so he takes a different route.

"How to find your mother"

Several websites appear on his feed. The first ones are links to a comedy show with a similar name, police stations, DNA tests and a dating site offering divorced mothers. *I wonder how many fall for this scam...* He scrolls further down and jumps to the fifth result page. Some of the results are of the same variant as before, but the others talk about selling trackers or coaching seminars for building up a circle of single hot mothers. Right before he stops his search, his eyes lock on a specific result. For some reason, that one feels right.

As he clicks on the link, the website loads in a pace as if it were the dial-up age. From top to bottom, Aaron notices how it is also built as if it was from that very time. Only a third of the screen in the middle is occupied with elements, the rest only consisting of the dark blue starlit background. At the top is a singular word in 3D, as big as possible. It greets him in the most unusual way. His own name.

For the second time, his name has been said without telling them! The mouse gets greasy from the collection of sweat on his hands. Aaron's breathing grows heavier. How can not only an anonymous person know his name, but the website itself? Aaron tries to calm his body. He controls his breathing. He, however, forgets he shouldn't be breathing

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quickly. His light-headedness forces him to pause for a moment and recollect. He continues reading. Under his fancy name is a text.

“You feel like you’re in deep trouble?”

“You feel anxious?”

“Then you’re in the right place! We offer the perfect prayer to solve your issues. No fees attached!”

A phone number is below it. Aaron is reassured. Finally, someone understands his troubles! His mind wanders whether he should be calling the number. After all, if his name is there and they know what his troubles are, they surely know how to help. Then, he realises that this text is actually quite generic. *This could apply to anyone!* He feels like one of the people that pay attention to tarot or astrology readings. In embarrassment, he insults himself for falling for such an obvious trick. The computer hums and the clock quietly ticks. A reminder of his safe space. He calmly assesses the situation.

Even if the text would be able to suit everyone, the 3D “Aaron” possibly couldn’t. Except if it was trying to only scam Aarons and not anyone else, but that would be way too inefficient, no? His thoughts get interrupted as his name accelerates into a spin. As the spin finishes, it reveals a new word. It now reads “Aaron Woods”.

The computer breathes and the clock is turning, slowly. Aaron gets up and frantically searches his room. The ambience is filled with his rummaging. Under the piles of clothes, he looks for anything that watches him, listens on him. The piles fall down. More clothes cover the floor. And then, for a few seconds, he stops. No, it would be senseless to keep searching for this device. Not without any clues as to where

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it is. He scratches the back of his head. The clock is still ticking. Aaron can't concentrate. This clock, it takes his focus. It tells him that by every second he is wasting here, they could be closer. Those who made the website. What if they're on their way? This website was a trap! His eyes draw back to the screen. The phone number is still visible. His head sags and he reaches for the phone. Perhaps it is smarter to call them before they actually arrive at his place. He could talk himself out of it.

"Greetings, Aaron Woods."

With a shaky voice, Aaron replies.

"Uhm... hello?"

"I thank you for reaching out to us. We appreciate it highly. It is important to see the faults in ourselves. To reach out to us and ask for help. Not everyone wants to admit it."

"..."

"We offer you a simple prayer. One that will solve your worries. Are you willing to try?"

He hesitantly agrees.

The Sparkles have not been showing up ever since. Seth grunts. It sounds more aggressively the closer he gets to the point of actually having to explain what the ritual is supposed to be like. He couldn't just make up something! *That couldn't possibly summon these aliens! Or like literally whatever they want!*

He taps his fingers on the table. It doesn't actually seem like performing a ritual is the right thing here. Is there any other agenda

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Sparkles could have here? Maybe it is world domination and he is imprisoned, or he is currently experimented with, and all of this is just a simulation... His fingers abruptly pause. His eyebrows go up and a moment later crunch together. Seth shifts around the chair. And then, he starts typing again.

The voice has been on a monologue for the past minutes. If this is supposed to scare someone, they'll be at most scared of boredom. In the meantime, Aaron theorised how this situation could be explained. He first assumes that this is a scam or a well-done prank. The delivery man must have been paid to give out the information of Aaron to the people with the website. Aaron originally thought of him bugging his room with a secret microphone, but that would be too extreme for this. He also wanted to reason that the delivery man wanted his revenge for not getting any tips, but it's as much too extreme of a behaviour for this. So being paid to give out information it is.

Now, with that information, the scammers or pranksters only had to change the website so that Aaron's name only appears when it matches with the same IP address as his. Something like that. Could have been filtering out by reading the brand of keyboard, mouse, monitor and etc. That can be precise enough to assume that it is actually Aaron. And this theory, which is plausible enough for him, eased him.

Still, Aaron checks the room. Specifically, his window. He gets up and closes the blinders. While the call is mundane and while this could just be a genius scam or prank, Aaron won't take the chance to be wrong. There's a non-zero chance that they stalled for time to have a sniper set

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up, after all. Aaron then takes the phone and sits down on his bed. He wants to be as out of sight as possible.

He slowly notices how the voice must have stopped talking at some point. As if it knew that Aaron is paying attention now, the mysterious voice talks again.

“The guide for your ritual should have popped up on your screen by now. The material isn’t there yet but consider reading the instructions in the meantime. See you later.”

It hung up. *See you later? What’s that supposed to mean?* He tries to calm himself logically. Now, if they really wanted to kill him, for whatever reason that might be, they could have done so already. So, seeing how this could just be a meaningless threat, Aaron throws this issue aside. He sets his focus on the ritual. Obviously, he isn’t going to do it. A “scary” scam or prank won’t suddenly make him believe in supernatural phenomena. Offended, he inwardly defends himself. *Even I would know to differ from fiction and reality!* Thus, he reads the page as if it were a crappy fictional piece.

Like the voice said, the website redirected him to a new page. There are several steps, as easy to follow as a cooking recipe. Well, if one were to actually cook. His eyes swiftly jump through the paragraphs. The one material the list mentions piques his interest. One unique tesseract, it says on several occasions. The instructions explain how to handle it properly. Whatever it may be, it sounds powerful. Since he lacks ‘one unique tesseract’, he doesn’t spend too much time thinking about what each step means yet. Overall, the page looks cool. Though, he doesn’t

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get why they would put in the effort into making this... For a scam, there's a real lack of – well – methods for scamming him. And for a prank, this would be some real dedication into making it seem as real as possible. *Kudos*.

– VI –

Aaron's monotonous life resumes as if this were a day like any other. At around 7:00pm, he jumps from the knocking on his door. A figure brings in a package. He looks at the face and recognises him as the delivery man from before. Before he could bring out a thanks, the man leaves the room and the apartment. *That was oddly quick...* Aaron hopes he wouldn't have stolen anything. *Wait, what kind of guy delivers both packages and food?* Normally, it would leave him deeply puzzled, but considering how he already came up with the theory, it makes sense for the same person to come back. But this means that the prank isn't over yet. He looks at the package.

From the outside, there is nothing to note here. It's a typical cardboard box with its labels on it. He cuts the tapes that are holding the flaps down. His right hand stops in the middle of cutting, interrupted by a notification. He turns around, looking at the computer. It seems like he received a new message from My-Life, which can only be from the anonymous user. He gets up and grabs his mouse. *Wait a minute. Are they related?*

The anonymous user from My-Life and the mysterious voice both reached out to him in a questionable way. They both somehow knew his name. These two might be in cahoots! So, there is something big going on here! And if Aaron is part of some big plan, that means he is

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being controlled to do something right now. And this something could be opening that dangerous box! Inside there could be a bomb. This is a scheme of serial killers with their favourite way of killing people! His heart starts to beat loud enough for him to hear it. He imagines each beat as the last seconds he gets to live. How foolish of him! Why would he give away his address? Only because he wanted to find something exciting in life for once? That's not what he wanted. Not at all.

Aaron hastily walks away from the box, his back touching the window. He gulps as quiet as possible, as if the bomb can be triggered by sound. His body stiffens. It might have movement detection too! *No, no, no, no! It's a time bomb!* With one rounded step after another, he slowly approaches the bomb. He takes the scissor he left on the table. As though he were a surgeon, he carefully cuts the rest of the tape. The flaps jump open quickly. Aaron winced at the movement. The box reveals a ton of package cushioning. Pellets that are perfectly spherical. He lightly pushes them to the side, careful to not let a single of them hit the floor. A black surface reveals itself.

Hold on, is this a bomb? The mere description of it being black doesn't justify him questioning it. It is so utterly devoid of light that anyone would believe that this is how the colour of a black hole looks like. Before he takes out that creepy object, he takes a second look at the pellets. Atypically, these pellets have no line going around each. Normally, they would be there in a process of gluing two halves together. This would mean that someone rounded them off individually. *Who would put so much time into that?* One pellet is small enough for him to grab it with his two fingers. He takes one. Soft, somewhat squishy but the surface like polished metal. What kind of material can do that?

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In fear of accidentally dropping one of such unknown pellets, he puts it back into the box.

Back to the black hole thing. Despite of it looking as dark as a black hole, he can feel no suction from it. Either way, if it were to suck, it should have taken the pellets with it. *But these pellets are weird, so who knows.* Aaron mindlessly picks it up. Due to the colour, he can't tell exactly what the shape of this thing is. He rotates it on all three axes. When he does, all he sees is a silhouette with changing corners and edges. Despite of the lack of depth, he can roughly make it out to be a box. He holds the box in front of the lightbulb. Like an eclipse, the sight of it is completely removed, leaving behind only a black space. He guesses the size of it. A forearm in width, almost a finger span in depth enough to grasp it and one palm in height.

Eventually, he turns the box far enough, which is just a flip in total, to see two little white dots with a line in-between. Aaron makes this out to be an indication that the box can be opened. Assuming the box is placed on the table most stably, the symbol goes up and down. The symbol seems to be painted on the box. The paint's colour seems to be the exact opposite of the box. Even if Aaron turns off the lights, he still sees it. But his index finger can't be seen, even if he touches the symbol. *What in the world is this thing?* He turns the lights on. That couldn't be a bomb. These serial killers could not possibly make something this incredible just to blow it up. How does this box exist? Perhaps he should open it. These mysterious people delivered it to him personally, after all.

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With a deep breath, he cautiously places it on his desk, pushing away his keyboard and mouse as though they need to make room for the majesty. He assumes the box opens in a way such that the symbol gets split in half. His left hand holds down the bottom half while his right hand opens it. A hinge adds a friction strong enough to ensure that the carrier is intentionally opening this box. With only seeing the silhouette move and his right hand moving, he intuitively feels that the box is opening. He peeks inside.

An unknown shape floats in the middle, surrounded by the same void as the outside of the box. Where would Aaron even begin to describe it? He looks at it for minutes. There must be something holding it up. He lifts the box. While he does so, he notices how it doesn't move as fast as the box. Instead, it slowly shifts back to where the centre is. Just as though it were a human moving to a vacant spot in a queue. Then, he turns it in such a way that the space around the shape should be exposed by the visible background. But nothing is around that shape. No stand, no strings... maybe magnets? Well, magnets could be hiding in black in there. He takes a quarter from one of the chaotic piles above the bed. With careful aim – he doesn't want to hit that strange shape – he drops it from as low as possible – wouldn't want to have the bounce hit the strange shape either.

It falls. But it falls for too long. Longer than a second. Longer than a dozen seconds. Aaron watches it, moving to adjust the viewing angle. At some point, he watches from directly above. Eventually, it goes out of sight simply due to the little horizontal momentum he gave it. It has yet to make a sound. In complete bamboozle, he rests in the awkward

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half-standing position. Finally, he sighs and falls back into his seat. *Let's just say, there is no magnet.*

Aaron watches the weird shape floating. It doesn't make sense how it looks. Something is... wrong about that. In a moment, he realises what this could be. He opens the mysterious page. It shows his full name in 3D and below a hyperlink with the text "Welcome back". When he clicks on it, he gets taken back to the page of the ritual. The text is in white, and the background is in dark blue with light-blue bubbles. Some of them are popping. The low-quality background gif runs slow enough that one can see each individual image. The title is bigger than the rest, emphasised with trailing stars on each side.

"The Unique Tesseract

"Touching it outside the chant is not dangerous as long as it doesn't prolong about 5 seconds. When disregarding the rule, the unique tesseract teleports the object that touches it to an unknown space.

"Preserve the unique tesseract in the Empty Box. Having it not float causes it to repeat the above-mentioned side-effect.

"Do not move the open Empty Box too quickly. Doing so will drop the tesseract."

He knows that the tesseract stands for a cube of the fourth dimension. A tesseract beyond his comprehension. Though, for some reason, he – a three-dimensional person – can still see it. Maybe its uniqueness stems from the fact that it allows one to peek into the fourth dimension? Whatever it may be, he knows to be extremely careful with it. He doesn't dare to touch it, even if it tells him that it is safe. *Wait, how does air not count as touching the unique tesseract?* In the end, there's

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not much of a point to think too hard about it. That's an object that is beyond Aaron's comprehension, so trying to understand some bit of it, like the Empty Box, seems to be pointless.

Aaron gathers the last items needed for the ritual. What is this for? Is he going to summon someone? Is his mind going to be taken over by supernatural beasts? Nevertheless, turning back is no option. Too much has happened in the past minutes; he wouldn't even think of what could happen were he to refuse.

Seth rests his intertwined hands behind his neck. Then, he cracks them, individually. He sighs, as if to say he were sorry.

He picks several items off the ground and shelves. They're in the recipe being asked for. A pen, a sheet of paper and at last, the unique tesseract. He also puts on a hoodie, as though it were to protect him from that object. He glances over each step once more. Another glance. And a last. On the sheet of paper, he copies the text exactly as it says on his screen.

"I hold a prayer to you

"I plead: Show me the path beyond my realm

"A realm stretching across space and time"

The sheet is placed in front of the unique tesseract. Aaron closes his eyes. Not because it says so, but out of reflex. As if he is scared to see what could be happening. He chants the written text. As to why he has to write it down and say it himself is beyond him. Still, he does so.

After his full chant, he narrowly notices something. He doesn't know what it is, but it feels... isolating. He repeats the chant, as he is told.

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Aaron's intuit grows wearier, the feeling of isolation growing. His will to stop increases. But he fights against it, he chants again. Each line gradually changes his state. His intuit changes to knows. He knows the surroundings are turning darker. More chants. His body gets lighter; his mind slurs each consecutive chant. *Am I falling asleep?* No, if he were to be, he would wake right up. That's what's supposed to happen if you were to catch yourself falling asleep. But it's not. Every part of his self is now aggressively telling him to stop. It's dark, as dark as the box. He opens his eyes. Darkness. He closes and opens his eyes again. Deep darkness. He shuts them tightly. He rips them open. His panic grows as he flickers his eyelids. This isn't isolation, it's imprisonment. Suffocation. He starts flailing. No gravity or air is holding him back. His sense of orientation is lost. Is he currently spinning? Is he upright? He yells.

"HELP! H-!"

He halts before the second proper scream. Why did this just sound so dry? It's as though he screamed it in his mind. He shouts again. In this moment of confusion, his focus lands on what he sees. *Pitch black*. His pupils fail to adjust. *The blackest black*. Not even the eye floaters are there. Or the floating blobs when you close your eyes. *This black*. A very special black. The very kind he has been looking at a moment ago. The black of the box. The box that was holding that thing? The box with the endless hole?

Is he inside the box?

– VII –

He dreads the blackness. It doesn't do anything to him and yet it's there to torture him. Silence in every way. He hears nothing, he sees nothing, he smells nothing, he feels nothing. Nothing but himself. The fabric of the hoodie, the sweatpants resting on him. He is everything in this void and he yearns to be less. It sounds paradoxical. Wanting to feel like this void is but yet hating it. He wants to be of little importance and still is everything that can be of importance. Except if he wants to call the void, the nothingness, important. Which wouldn't work; it's nothing. To be within a world where Aaron is making up only 1/8.000.000.000th of the population. However, he is in *this* world. Trapped in a box.

...

How much time has passed? Can someone even have time in this void? There doesn't seem to be room in the first place, though he could measure himself. He knows that his hand is about 18cm long. But can he be sure that his body hasn't shrunk or grown? Okay, so his hand is as big as double his middle finger. A middle finger is as big as about five times his fingernail. By this logic, he could reimplement time. Well, if there were anything that would be ticking, since he hasn't heard his heartbeat in a while.

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So, he isn't able to count the seconds since he warped into the void. If he were to guess, it would be days. It could also as well just have been one. What he knows is that he has mostly resigned from his panic. Still weary, but at least not completely stressed.

...

There is one thing that confuses him, though. Why does he not hear himself that loudly yet? There is little that he has learned from the times doomscrolling, but the one thing he knows is that staying in Earth's quietest room is ambitious. People report how they can hear everything more loudly the longer they stay. Heartbeats and rubbing on the skins could be heard clearly. The longest record should be around 90 minutes. At that point people want to escape the place for how much they can listen to. Aaron considers himself lucky. At least he doesn't have to be under such situations.

...

He refocuses on what happened right before. He shouldn't have done anything wrong... They might have swapped places with him. Right now, aliens are destroying all of humanity while he is stuck in the void prison. *Yikes, hopefully not.*

...

His heart beats once. Aaron is taken by surprise.

...

"They have taken away mom! All they wanted to do is distract me from the ritual and, just like that, they have no one that will go to the police

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to say she's missing! No, but she's got coworkers that would worry about her. Right? Then why would they take me here? Is my mom here too?"

He turns and turns. Not a speck of anything.

...

Aaron imagines the worst-case scenario. What if he truly is forever stuck here? It's a moment of silence. Not only on the outside, but even his inner thought doesn't dare to think further. But, in the nature of his mind, it does. His head looks down at his hands. Only imagination can fill for what could be there. He buries in them and curls into a ball. Tears wet his hands. Others fly into the nothingness, without a destination. He screams uncontrollably. The void doesn't scream back. Last time was when he was a kid. When he realised that his friends turned out to be making fun of him. That he didn't have any in the first place. He misses his room. He misses his mom. He misses home.

...

It takes a while to notice, but Aaron doesn't feel hungry at all. Whatever is happening, his body is not the same as in the past. Perhaps the lack of time is the cause of it? All of this is so reality-breaking that making sense of any of this seems to be pointless. But Aaron's got the time to think about pointless things. All the time in the world.

...

It'd be a lie to say he hasn't felt horny throughout the whole isolation. The main issue though is that with the lack of a beating heart there is

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also a lack of blood flow for his private part, he guesses. So, even if he wanted to do something about it, he couldn't. He tries to get used to it, putting off the feeling and thinking about something else.

...

It's the tenth time of his heart beating. Aaron picks up on how it seems to be slowly beating faster. He holds dearly to this thought, taking it as a sign of anything happening. Anything!

...

"Is my body real?"

...

He runs out of things he could think about. That's what he has thought in the past several times though, as it turns out that given infinite time, you will always find the next thing to think about from the infinite things someone can think about.

...

Boredom would be the wrong word for this. For what feels like months, he has grown to like it; the nothing. It gives him time to reflect. To change his views on his meaningless life on Earth. Even the act of going to sleep to wake up again seemed endearing to him. Experience mundane life again has been an itch he couldn't scratch since the start of this. To experience something, anything. A thing. Something. Anything. Thing. *The word sounds like a delicacy.* Perhaps it really is. Without the need to eat, the concept of eating becomes less about

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consuming food and more about consuming ideas. To consume “thing”. In any case, his word is the truth. Nothing and no one to dispute him.

...

It’s weird though. Not only does he not have not drink or eat, but he also doesn’t seem to have the need for breathing, probably. No one would call nothingness nothingness if it were to contain air. A lot of annoying things were taken away from him and now he asks to have them back.

“This is what Buddhism is, no? The believers strive for the nothingness... Is this really the best state someone can be in? Right, they don’t want ‘best state’. But that’s such a ridiculous goal to want, is it not? What is there to be happy about if you want to stop being happy? Only to avoid sadness? Is it not the mere existence of sadness that happiness can coexist along with it? Isn’t that why good and bad exists? People wanted more than just nothing, they wanted to explore. At least I want to have more than nothing now. Something, anything.”

Aaron whispers “Something, anything” without stopping. Each time, right before he says it, he builds up tension. As if he were to create deep longing within the short gap of silence. Some gaps of silence become longer, some shorter. For him, it is not as though it makes a difference.

“Something, anything.”

It sounds like a ritual, each syllable as a form of a chant. He pronounces each syllable variably strong for each iteration. Once, each syllable is screamed. Once, each syllable muttered. He lampoons in a tone as if he were a cartoonish antagonist.

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“If this is not insanity, what is?”

...

His heart-rate seems to steadily rise. He hasn't given up the hope for it just yet.

...

There is a new problem. It seems like his ears have started to turn up the volume. Slowly, he picks up the noises of his own body. He hears the quietest change in breathing, the rubbing of his skin. The squishy sound the tongue makes when it rubs against the teeth. His gulp is like a soft explosion he can't avoid.

On the positive side, his eyes develop eye floaters. Sometimes, he sees them as squiggly lines or spots. In rare occasions, he sees spiders or clouds in them.

...

The noise is unbearable. He can't move an inch without hearing the muscles stretch and contract. Blood vessels pass by his ear like firework when the heart decides to beat again. The heart itself interrupting any thoughts he had.

At last, he screeches. The screech itself shouldn't be loud, but as it was the only time he said something in a while, it was. His ears ring in response and then... everything is quieter. He nods to himself – while he hears the neck crack the tiniest existence of a bubble – and starts humming. He increases in volume until he's back at the usual loudness when he talks.

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...

While the heart-rate is still increasing, the noises return faster bit by bit. Eventually, he is forced to talk around every 100th heartbeat.

...

"I could have done so much with my life! Like finally take a step outside! Who would waste so much time on staying inside, rotting your brain with entertainment you'll forget anyway? Oh, what? Because you're such an agoraphobic? Is that what it is? Because I would have dearly preferred to go outside much more than fearing that people would think of me as disgusting! No, I wouldn't have... But I would now!"

...

"She must be worried. She'll think she missed the chance to have a proper talk and... and thinks I would have... You know, I regret not saying thanks for her. Not for the food but for everything. All what she's done for me. I know she just tried to get me a good life. Better than a decrepit shut-in life. Ugh, I should have realised it earlier!"

He ruminates on the topic for a while. Then, he clasps his hands.

"Sorry, Mom. I'm sorry for being so hard to work with. I'm sorry for not listening to you, for being so stubborn and selfish. To be convinced of not making friends anymore. To not meet anyone except you. I know you are working hard to keep our heads above the water. I'm sorry to make you do everything on your own. I promise I'll be better. Will you forgive me? Will you give me a second chance?"

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“Do you remember how we used to run down the street each evening? Oh, how I cherished the ice cream in the summer. And then, each winter, we picked a random new stand to have our dinner. My favourite was that one Japanese one. Maybe I was always doomed to enjoy Anime, heh. But I always praised the old cook for his amazing ramen. The way he presented them with garlic and a cooked egg on the surface. Ah, I suppose I never asked what your favourite stand was. Maybe we should go visit it sometime?”

Was he doing this for himself? To ease his guilt? Trying to move on-wards from everything he did wrong so that he can be in this empty void less deserving of it? To deserve being freed again? Is the point of the void to experience grief? To be obsessively alone, lonely, troubled with his own thoughts, only being able to share with the blackness? To learn a lesson?

He doesn't know.

And he imagines Mom responding.

...

Aaron plays “Word-chain”. The second word starts with the last letter of the first word and so on.

“Something, gadget, things, softly, yearn, nuance...”

As it turns out, negative thoughts can influence the game.

“Void, death, hell, lies, silence, endless, suffering...”

...

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He starts listening to the noises again. He greets the sounds of his skin rubbing, the joints cracking silently, the blood cells moving. He listens to his skin giving a distinctive sound as though rubber is being stretched. In a weirdly pleasant way, he starts to appreciate it. It's like kids slowly liking vegetables. It's like teenagers entering adulthood with their first beer, slowly adjusting to its unique taste. *This is definitely insanity.* At this point, Aaron can hear his muscles contracting before he can feel them doing it. His thoughts get louder, which doesn't make sense, but they sound real. As if he is saying them. He listens on the electrons wandering in his brain.

And then the heart beats faster. Way faster. It rushes, it feels something coming. Aaron finds a dot far away. Infinitesimally small, but existent. It expands. It feels like watching the Big Bang happen. Light zooms past him. Noise that would shatter his eardrums enter his brain as if they had been there the entire time. It's like a shuttle entering Earth's atmosphere. He feels like screaming but doesn't. His body feels everything that it felt in the past. The touch of his bed, the touch of the wooden desk, the unread books. There are too many things flying past him. These things, containing his memories of the past, in the form of every sense, come and go. They go into the littlest detail, from one nanosecond to the next. And yet, they are compressed into digestible dots, as though looking at a single one contains every day at the same time. Aaron is beyond overwhelmed. Everything is white, but not in a bright way. They simply contain all colours in one.