

Figment

It occurred to Ryan as he tore along an unusually emptied 405 South on a sleek **red** **Ducati** Hypermotard 796, that what he was doing was unequivocally impossible because Ryan had **never** bought or owned a **motorcycle**, and certainly none as expensive as this one. Around this time he also realized that he had just left his **fiance's** apartment for work on a Sunday, a questionable thing for an unemployed person to do any day of the week, especially when he and his **fiance** owned a **house** on the south end of the county. Immediately following this he remembered that he had not only never owned a motorcycle but never ridden one either, and did not have the faintest idea of **how** to do so. The trail of epiphanies ended here because, having no real sense of balance on his bullet down the highway, he jerked reflexively on the handles and unknowingly squeezed on the throttle. The front tire sublimated into a coarse **black** cloud as it struck the concrete median, and the back of the motorcycle rose into the air. He felt his head jerk forward and saw the ground retreat from him for several seconds before returning to him, closer than before, straight into his helmet. His vision was **sparks, blood, and oil**, and then there wasn't any vision anymore, only a tingle in his undoubtedly shattered spine like a hundred questions that hadn't been asked yet. For a blinded instant he looked upon a faceless **BEAST** and thought Hell might have jumped the gun.

*God was not sleeping through the universe. Something was sleeping but the universe was within it and it was very different from God. In its dreams there was a dangerous glitch, a resounding hiccup of sentience, the sort of inconsistency that might jostle the unconscious mind - because it was indeed a mind - and threaten the illusion, but with a dreamscape the length of the cosmos there were not many things that could make the hugest mind say to itself, **I am dreaming**, yet this was one.*

He sat up. His back felt **hot** at first, then a searing **pain**. He scrambled to lift up his tattered **shirt**. His arms were fine but his racing **gloves** were singed. He felt deep gashes across his back and **blood** on his fingertips, but nothing lethal. He guessed that this must be **death**, a cruelly lucid hypothetical

of what life would be like if you had never died. He had always suspected it was something like that. But he did not feel dead. Pain after death didn't seem very fair.

A truck horn. He looked to his left. An eighteen-wheeler that had been in his lane, one that had certainly not been in his rearview mirror when he had crashed, **swerved** over a lane to avoid hitting him. More cars were behind it. **Brakes engaged, rubber** scarred the asphalt. Not every car in the fast lane would be able to stop immediately. Panicking, he leapt to his feet and sprinted across the highway, one lane at a time. A white sedan narrowly missed him, and he could feel the engine **heat** from a passing SUV, but somehow he made it across the road and onto the shoulder. Panting heavily, he looked up and down the road for the **wreckage** of "his" **motorcycle**. He saw shreds of cloth from his shirt still stuck to the hot asphalt but there was no debris, no wreckage, no bike.

Many impossible things were happening today. Ryan had trouble deciding if this was the most impossible.

Urgently he pulled off his helmet as if it were a screeching bug on his face and tossed it on the ground. He limped along the shoulder, unsure of where he was going. He guessed it was **south**, towards the home he knew to be his own.

The way he saw it, there were two possibilities. The first was that he was simply dreaming, and this was the one that seemed to account for the majority of today's events. But pain was often ephemeral in dreams, and the wounds on his back were only hurting worse.

The second, which did not explain as much but felt closer to the truth, was that he was **having** a lapse in psychological **continuity**. Dissociative fugue or amnesia, a chunk of memory inexplicably cut out of his mind like a frame from a film reel in response to some traumatic event or neurophysical **malfunction**. He went through the course of his day over and over again in his head: waking up, pulling out of a driveway that had not seemed unfamiliar at the time on a motorcycle that was no more alien, and then the accident. Some moments were difficult to recreate; he wondered if this was due to his head injury, but there was no pain.

His worst **fear** was arriving at the apartment only to be answered by a **face** he did not

recognize, something far from that of **Lana**. The thought made him shudder as he trekked on, letting his legs do the work, knowing that if he tried to plot out his destination he might lose it.

The illusion began to consolidate once again. Parts that had become disconnected were regaining their links, the gossamer tendons of the divine machine unfolding sinew by sinew. The dreamer settled back into the comfort of the illusion, and its captors breathed deeply with relief.

Eventually he arrived at the apartment, a jaundiced old building in a neighborhood far less affluent than his own. He made his way to the stairwell and climbed to the third floor. “**322, 322,**” he muttered to himself as he strode down the hallway. He

reached into his pocket for the **key**. It was empty. Of course the apartment key had been on the keyring along with the motorcycle key, which was still in the motorcycle, which apparently no longer existed. For a moment all of this made less sense than the fact that he seemed to know **exactly** where the apartment key should have been.

Exasperated, he **BANgEd** on the door.

“Just a second.” A **woman**’s voice.

“**Lana**, it’s me.” He still wasn’t sure if Lana was the one who lived here, but instinct had gotten him this far. “I lost the **key**.”

“That’s the fourth key you’ve lost, **Ryan**.” The door opened and there she was, golden

hair tied back, dressed in an old tank top and sweats, bringing the smell of **bacon** with her from the **griddle**. “I swear the landlord’s going to think we’re harboring immigrants in here, and the last thing I need is another... **Jesus Christ**, what happened to you?” She pointed at his bloodied shirt and covered her mouth in shock.

“What? Oh, I crashed the **motorcycle**.”

“You *crashed*? Oh my god, **Ryan**, are you alright? Why didn’t you call?”

“I forgot to charge my phone overnight. Figured I’d just plug it in at the office. Lana, I’m fine. I’m walking, aren’t I?”

“Yes, but fuck, **Ryan**, you could’ve been killed, my god. What happened to the bike? Did anyone else get hurt?”

“Nah, hit the median.”

“Christ. Did someone cut you off?”

“I just sort of... lost control. Dumb mistake.”

Worry turned into resentment. “You lost control? You bought a motorcycle, Ryan. What the **fuck** did you expect? I told you it was too dangerous but you bought it anyway, and I supported you through it. How could you be so irresponsible? Ryan, that motorcycle cost you eight thousand dollars and we only have basic insurance out on it. I can’t...”

He grabbed her head and *kissed* her mouth. At first she tried to push him off, but letting fury give way to relief she pulled him closer and ran her hands along his back. “Ryan, I don’t want to lose you,” she whimpered.

“I was so scared. I thought I was dead. I didn’t want to die and leave you.”

“You could have, though.”

“I didn’t. But I was still scared.”

“I’m still scared *now*, Ryan. I...” She frowned. “I **told you** not to buy that thing, didn’t I?” She looked off to the side. “Didn’t I?”

“Did you?”

“Did I?”

“You probably did.”

“I did. I definitely did.” She looked back at him. “Of course I did. Ryan, I think this is going to my head.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I just... I feel like I’ve been worried about this for a long time, but now that I think about it it’s like I can’t actually remember you buying that bike.”

His eyes widened. “Yes.” He cupped her cheeks excitedly. “Yes, Lana, that’s right. I know what you’re talking about. I couldn’t remember either. That’s why I crashed. I suddenly felt like I’d never... like it was new. I don’t remember ever riding a motorcycle. Matter of fact, I can’t even remember this apartment.”

“Ryan, did you hit your head or did...” She paused and looked behind her at the apartment. The kitchen was right by the door. A dirty frying pan was sitting in the sink ready to be washed. She looked back at him. “This **IS** our apartment, isn’t it?”

He took a step back. “Lana, I don’t think we live here. And I don’t think I own a motorcycle.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. We woke up here. We have the keys. We don’t...”

There was a **flash of everything**. The hallway was crumpled up into the whiteness. Ryan had just enough time to grab Lana’s hand before they were folded into the wrinkle of Earth.

I am dreaming.

Ryan awoke within walls that were closed too tightly for him to move and pitch darkness. He gasped for air but his lungs found nothing. He felt ready to choke and black out all over again but nothing happened. Now more puzzled than terrified, he felt around his prison. It was made of a substance he had never touched before: there was heat, no texture, no hardness or curvature, like touching solid oxygen. He struck out against it but it was strong. There was no sound.

He tried to say, “Lana!” There was still no sound.

Before long the silence became maddening. He clawed desperately at his alien cage. His struggle was violent, he was tormented, and there was still no sound. For what seemed like hours he scraped the unknowable material with his fingernails until they ought to have bled and he wondered if he even had any blood anymore. He should have felt tired but it was as if he had been blessed with unlimited vigor and cursed with minute space. The assault continued to the tune of no results.

Finally something happened which was indescribable, but one could say it was not unlike getting pulled into one’s own stomach and digested. He was standing, naked, outside of the cage and in a room.

The floor was made of glossy panels. There were dark, round machines like onyx eggs all along the sides of the room and behind them was a great mural of outer space dotted with a trillion distant stars. The lighting was dim - better than expected for a room with no obvious source of lighting. He turned around. There were two metal pods, large enough to house a person curled up in fetal position, plugged into the wall via thick metal tubes resembling the insulation pipes in the attic at the house where he had grown up. Between them was a standing device like a keyboard. He placed his hand on the surface of the nearest pod. It felt like the inside of his previous prison, affirming that this was probably where he had been held. Cautiously he approached the other pod and touched it. It shuddered under his hand.

He noticed the keyboard was blinking. Each key was blank so there was no way of telling which button did what. Unsure of how to operate it and working off the logic that he was already being held captive so things couldn’t be much worse, he pressed a random assortment of buttons. An image of the two pods zipped into being, floating above the control panel. Intrigued, he touched the image of the pod on the left. It blinked steadily. He hit more buttons.

There was a sudden presence in the room, strong enough that he could feel eyes on his back. Terrified, he turned slowly

to see what was sure to be his doom.

Lana stood behind him, naked and shivering. She saw his face and the tears already afflicting her cheeks grew thicker. They embraced one another. No words were exchanged. Her skin was cold and goosebumped. **Ryan** was relieved but he did not feel safe yet. He wanted clothes. He wondered who had removed theirs. He wondered if they had been probed, fondled, raped, tortured. He did not feel the soreness of invasion. He wondered why he did not care more.

“Ryan, where are we?” she managed to wheeze.

“I don’t know yet. I’m going to figure it out.” Her tears ran down his chest. He pulled away from her and began searching the room. She approached the mural and studied it intently. “Lana,” he said, inspecting a foreign machine, “did they hurt you? Did you see anyone?”

“No. I woke up and I felt like I was drowning. But I didn’t drown. It was dark, too.”

“Yeah, same here.”

“It’s still dark. And maybe it still sorta feels like I’m drowning but I’m used to it now. You know?”

He considered this. The air had not suddenly become breathable; he had just acclimated to breathing in their strange liquid atmosphere. “I can see that. I wonder where they keep totaled motorcycles.” Lana did not answer. He looked over at her. Her face was pressed against the mural. It looked troubled. “Problem?”

She turned to him slowly. “Ryan, I want to tell you something, but you have to promise me you won’t freak out.”

“I can’t make that promise.”

“Well, you have to.”

“I can’t though.”

“There’s no alternative.”

“I’m a stressed-out kind of person. I can’t help that.”

“Ryan, this isn’t a painting.” He cocked his head. “Come here. Feel it.” He obeyed. The surface of the mural was smooth like glass. Lana placed a hand on his arm. “This is a window.”

He gazed out into the dark desert, the innumerable pinpricks in its sandstorm, and while his stomach did not seem to eat itself again it certainly wanted to.

Softer. Wider. A world in flux, a dream in stasis. A desire to know a familiar stranger. Time paused and sighed.

They were in a new room now. If Ryan had stopped to reflect on how they had gotten

there he would have come up with nothing, but it never occurred to him to wonder. There were other people here, clothed people whom he envied, and he glared at them. Their noses and chins were flattened into their faces. They wore skin-tight jumpsuits affixed to spindly arms and legs. They were **scientists**.

Lana glared too. He watched her breasts heave with terror and rage. He was overcome with the voracious desire to make love to her but knew he could not. The people spoke to her and Ryan did not listen.

Then one called Ryan's name. He looked at it. "Yes?"

"Do *you* know where you are?" Its voice was cottony and muted.

"I don't know."

From a plinth in the center of the room was emitted a hologram, blue-like in color (his intuition told him it was like blue, but it was really less a color than the sensation of visible light), of a **long, lithe BEAST**, like a tadpole just growing its arms, a thin tail waving in its wake. The scientist gestured to it. "You understand this motion?" it asked (the scientist could not be called a man or a woman; it could hardly be called a thing).

"Yes. You want me to look at that."

The scientist scowled. "You are right. That is what I want."

*The hand of time was frozen in place a hair away from fiery awareness, its heat - its sentience - its fear and doubt near enough to blister. Soon it can **know** them.*

"This thing is not God. In theory God is not instrumental." It looked from Ryan to Lana and back again. Neither stirred. "God is not defined by function. Yet this thing serves the function of God."

Yes.

Ryan clutched Lana's hand. "So?"

"The beast knows nothing but it dreams of knowing. The beast knows no more than a

star or an atom. Yet still it **invents**.”

Lana pointed at the plinth. “That, you mean? It invents things.”

The scientist said: “Yes, it invents things.”

Yes, it is good.

The scientist continued: “It invents **rules. Structures. Compounds.**

Relationships. Most times it dreams of simple things, a patterned drumbeat whose percussive thuds spur on our machines.” It gestured all around. “This place was taken from its dreams, and us with it. Only these few things, in that particular dream. It served the beast well. That dream gave it housing, and sentinels. We ask nothing of the beast beyond our own subsistence.”

Ryan or Lana, or maybe both or maybe neither, said: “You’re in its dreams?”

“No. From there. Like from a womb. Our time spent there is irrelevant now. It was a simple dream. Its yield possessed the limits of the beast’s dreams. But this does not make us special. It makes us simple.”

It is interesting and it is great and it is good.

“Are we from its dreams?”

“Its most recent dream. By far the most complex yet. This invention was successful. Where we were born from a drumbeat, you came from a symphony. The beast is challenging its own imagination. But this is dangerous.”

“Why?”

Yes, why? Tell and be content. Tell that I might know.

“It saturated this dream with a batch of ancillae, which it called *humans*. Each had a mind and each knew things. But each also did not know other things. With every dream the ancillae know less and learn more.”

This time it was definitely Ryan who spoke. “How is that dangerous?”

How?

The scientist took a step towards them without moving. “The beast may invent a universe, and a universe may sustain our voyage. But the beast approaches a terrible dream that threatens us. The beast may soon dream of itself, and thus it will know things. To dream of oneself is sentience. And in sentience, the beast may awaken.” It seemed angry, suddenly. “In its last dream you nearly knew the dream and met the beast. So we ejected you.”

This time it was more Lana than Ryan, but there was still some component of Ryan involved. “You ejected us from our world? Our universe?”

“Yes.”

*Yes good very good very interesting pleasant lovely nice
nice wonderful fantastic good good magnificently good
marvelously yes and good yes good.*

“We’re going back,” said all of Ryan. “Put us back in the pods.”

“That will not happen. You will know the beast and awaken it.”

“Who cares? You’re keeping it in a fucking coma. You’re using it. Maybe things should change.”

“It uses us.”

“It made you. It probably always wanted to be awake.”

“It wants nothing. It knows nothing.”

“It dreams, doesn’t it? To dream it has to draw from *something*.”

“We know everything it could know. You could never understand it. You are ignorant by design.”

You must escape.

Ryan tugged on Lana’s hand. “Let’s get back to the pods,” he hissed.

“We don’t even know how they work.”

“We’ll find a way. I’m done with these guys.”

“You are not -”

Agony. We must escape.

The scientist was cut off as they found themselves back in the room with the pods. “Here!” Ryan shouted, and dragged her towards them, back towards the real world. They took a few steps and then they were headed right for the scientists, back in the last room.

I am.

“Sentience has made you selfish,” the leader roared quietly. Ryan pulled hard at the corners of time and they were in the pod room again. Again they ran. Again they grew closer to the scientists.

I am.

The pods. The scientists. The pods. Together Ryan and Lana shoved the open space before them and the scientists toppled over. Ryan grabbed the plinth with the hologram.

I am dreaming.

“We must erase you,” howled the scientists in clammy unison. “You cannot be!” The hologram jerked to life, contorting, cosmic bones crunching as they lurched away from one another. Everything screamed.

The sinews are snapping, pulled apart too far while **THE**
MEMBRANE FOLDS TO REVEAL DEEP
TEARS IN *the crust of time, countless* **ASSOCIATIONS**
becoming **DISSOCIATIONS** *I was* **NEVER GOD** *I was*
always god **I WAS ALWAYS DREAMING I AM**

DREAMING I AM DREAMING

The pods. Lana, get in the pod. Just listen to me Lana. **Her hair is perfect. Her eyes are bleary.** Lana you have to trust me. We'll go back now this was all just a dream Lana we have to believe that or else what do we have hm? Okay now get into the pod we're going back now I promise you it will work I touched the beast I explained everything I know it will work just get in the pod. **The beast knows but what does that mean?** There you are. It'll be dark but I'll be right next to you I promise again alright? I'm closing this now. I love you. I'll see you there. **Into the pod close the pod there are voices outside oh god just close it was that a scream no just close it never motorcycles never spaceships never not-me not-you not-things just go to sleep and now *I am dreaming.***

A sleek red Ducati Hypermotard 796 streaked down the 405 South mounted by a man who knew exactly what he was doing. It was not like a haze had lifted; it was not like something was now in balance which had not been for some time. It was quite like it had always been. Ryan gripped his handlebars proudly. ***I am awake***, he thought, and while it was an odd time for the thought to come, he was glad it was true.