



OBLITERATION FUGUE

JON T

For Ricki and Carmen



RICKI

Opening your eyes, a lime and rose velour banquette stretches and curves across a great room, looping around thick plastered pillars like a Möbius strip. Probably designed to keep us off balance you think, feeling unorientable. Sitting down slowly with strange intention, you wonder if it's really you thinking anymore. The hands seem familiar, so you run them along the pink upholstery and pluck at the ornamental buttons that punctuate the long velutinous lounge sofa. A level twelve chandelier refracts tiny prisms overhead, you swear it's swinging a little bit. No. Must just be the drugs.

"Just get here?" asks a man in an oversized houndstooth coat sitting nearby. Never Fall In Love Again is warbling through a speaker somewhere. It takes a few seconds before the realization hits that he's talking to you.

You nod your head in an indeterminate motion and scrunch your mouth hoping to look less approachable. The impossibly tight, hip-hugging white leather jumpsuit probably isn't helping. But the chunky gold ray gun holstered to your utility belt should deter most of the unwanted attention. This guy though is unfazed.

"Had a piece like that once," he says glancing down and back up in that discreet way that makes you feel like he's barely taken his eyes off of you for a while. He keeps one hand in his coat and points at the ceiling with the other, "You should check out the rooftop when you get a chance—it's quite a view."

You stay cool—don't respond. Happy he's changed the subject and indicated a possible next move, you use the opportunity to get up and leave. The skin between your ear and jaw twitches, as you prowl past him, and you smell something malodorous, like wet cardboard and dead fish. You know his eyes are following as you head toward the front desk but when you decide to look back, he's gone. The amigdalian impulses tweak down the base of your neck but you hold it together for a moment.

"Can I help you miss?", says the mousey concierge

"We'll see," you purr and slide your passport across the counter.

Someone shuffles impatiently behind you, mumbling useless complaints. You rotate imperceptibly and side-eye a pudgy suit checking his watch like he's performing for an audience. He has no idea, he's about to die.

It was Carmen who found the Elysium ad, though you knew she would never go through with it. She only wanted your sulky ass out of the apartment. With you settling into a mid-winter malaise munching Shrimp Crisps™ coupled with a fairly steep drop in grey market personal security gigs, you were a restless and terrible flatmate. Besides it was a hell of a lot of money for a six-week sail. It's not the first time you've dipped your toes into the brain wake. All the undergrounds have Splashpads™ in the backrooms—mostly for sexplay and horrorgasms, though it's more of a utility for psychos like you. This Blackwater thing sounded academic at the very least.

A memory pop buckles your focus for a moment:

“See you in six weeks!” says Carmen dropping you off at the clinic.

“Not if I see you first,” you sling back

“In your dreams Ricki,” she sings with a wave and starts to roll away.

“No. In yours,” you deadpan, ending the goodbye and getting in the last word before she sweeps into the traffic.

This Elysium place cringes hard, but you're used to dealing with techwads like them since the late 30s. It's not like you intend to play by the rules. You doubt they are. Made a big deal of the setup but you are more than ready to dive in. You've been spidering through theta waves long enough to stay in charge of your consciousness and aren't afraid to elim anything that gets in your way. Maybe that's why they called you an 'exceptional applicant'.

No one makes places like this anymore. The elevators, a gilded triptych, the bellhops, tapping across the black and white checked marble like a Broadway musical and a parlour palm in every corner. You see the concierge notice your middle finger tracing the engraving near the grip of your firearm. F is for Florence, your first love. L is for luck, O is for Opal, your birthstone, the double Vs are double victory, D is for death and a reminder of an ever-present danger, 4 is your compass and 8 is for infinite possibilities.

The insufferable man behind you clears his throat impatiently. This was his last utterance. Your ray gun was too good for this gumhead. So in one smooth motion, you unclip a four-inch shiv from your belt, spin your arm around behind you, entering the chest cavity just below the sternum and with surgical precision uncouple his heart from the major blood vessels. He slumps and you let him down to the floor slowly, your fist still inside, squeezing the warm organ mud between your fingers. No one seems to notice, except the concierge who passes you a wad of tissues for your hand.

“We'll take care of it, Miss,” he says, nodding to a couple of bellhops that scurry over with a brass-tubed luggage cart and dash Mister Impatient away to Elevator 3.

You tilt your head politely and shift the weight in your ivory boots, “So, a room for me?” you inquire, but it sounds more like a command.

“Yes ma'am. Penthouse Suite #5—with access to the rooftop,” he hands you back

your passport and a keycard which you tuck into your belt and walk toward the lift, taking care to step over the red smudge on the floor.

Your mind is calm but you can't help but feel like you're not alone here. Was Elysium using illegal combojack tech? Were the dreamers connected? It was one thing, to satisfy your mandatory murderlust with figments, but another to suffocate the beating pulse of some unsuspecting napper. You look back at the blood and pick some tissue from your fingernail. Elevator 1 opens as you approach so you walk in. As the doors are closing you pull out your keycard and rub your thumb over the graphic of an eye set in a dark pool. It winks at you like it knows a secret.



OTTO

Something smells off in the penthouse. Like death and BrineSol™. The perfume of decay reminds you of that creep in the lobby.

There's a folded note with your name on it lying under the corner of a cork coaster at the miniature tiki bar that overlooks the rooftop garden. In a compressed cursive, like static on an oscilloscope:

Dear Ricki,

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to you regarding our latest endeavour - the Blackwater Project. As you might already know, you are not alone in this particular realm and some explanation is in order.

We hope that you share in our ambition. Our mission is monumental: the pursuit of a cure for mortality. It's a path fraught with challenges and the hard work will not stop, because here at Elysium, "We Never Sleep."

We are thrilled to have you join us. Your expertise in underground Deep C excursions are invaluable. Furthermore, your ability to navigate the complexities of such a mission, without hesitation, sets you apart. We also appreciate your particular tendencies and proclivities and assure you of our discretion.

However, there's a pressing issue that requires your immediate attention. We have reason to believe that an undercover agent, working for a rather unscrupulous government agency, has infiltrated our patient group. Their aim is clear: to hinder our progress and extinguish the flame of our pursuit—immortality. This is where your unique skills come into play.

Your task, Ricki, to delve into the Blackwater, where you can identify and locate this agent. The stakes are high, as actions in this realm can have real-world consequences. This mission is not just about protecting Elysium's interests; it's about safeguarding the future of humanity's greatest aspiration.

I'd like to emphasize the value we place on your involvement. For this assignment, we are offering compensation five times greater than what you would typically

receive as a patient. This reflects not only the significance of the task at hand but also our confidence in your unique capabilities and resolve.

While I trust in these capabilities, I must caution you about the Blackwater. It's more than just a multi-user technological dream state; it's a realm with its own mysteries and dangers. I won't delve into details now, but be vigilant.

I look forward to your successful involvement in this project. Your participation is not just appreciated – it is essential.

Stay sharp, Ricky. We will be in touch.

Warm regards,

Dr. Robert Karasevdas

and the Elysium Team

Isn't that nice, a letter from Doctor Bobby himself. How much did they know? Tendencies and proclivities sound uncomfortably specific. And accurate. You feel violated without the satisfaction of facing your interrogator. You don't like it. Need to take back control.

The way you see it—if psychopaths have to kill a little to keep a day job, might as well satisfy those cravings in the innocuous realms of a subconscious. Dreams, as they say, are free. But this didn't feel like dreaming anymore. This was different. These weren't just figments, they were the real thing. Meat dolls and blood bags. You lick your thumb and rub out a cuff stain. Things were going to get messy. It's your party Bobby K. If that's the way it was going to be, then let the games begin.

The rooftop garden, replete with tropical flora, has a pool populated by iridescent koi fish, blinking alternating shades of orange and purple. Behind the warm frequencies of a vintage samba, you hear the suck and hum of a city below and walk closer to the edge. But as you approach these sounds are replaced with the roar of surf and all you can see beyond the perimeter is the starless slate of night. Inexplicably, you hear water on rock, feel the salt spray in your face, and curiously smell the sharp stink of tobacco. Behind you!

Houndstooth, with a short smoke hanging from his bottom lip, holds his hands out defensively as you swivel, draw and point your raygun at his beltline, ready to loose the white heat from a glowing cylinder of gold. But not before he answers a few questions.

He beats you to it, "Don't you recognize me Ricki?" he says, but your gut says he's just messing with you. He's trying to divert and deflect, but you let him continue, "It's Otto, you know, from the block? You're my replacement, I've been soaking for too long they say, besides, I'm more of a mole guy, but you—you're the real deal, the big guns, they mean business with you. Fine with me, I'm just happy they're pulling me out. Doc

doesn't want me to tell you but——”

The man phase-shifts before he can finish, his form flipping like a dirty projector—rabbit, tuxedo, Peter, lamprey, lighthouse, nurse, jukebox, then a high lonesome whistle as his eyes bulge and his neck strains. He gurgles comedically and then bursts like a water balloon and drains into the fish canal. “Guess they had other plans,” you say to the koi making kissy faces at the surface.

You turn back to the phantom sea and climb the battlement striking a fearless pose, droplets run down the pearl seams of your body armor. Scratch your ass and bathe in the recognition for a moment. Some thing slinks just below the waterline, a black mass shadow ripples at the edges of the scene and calls you low. It's wildly beautiful.

But mysteries are dumb. Who's got the time? You leap away and cop slide across the furnishings, back to the elevator. You'll go back to reception and squeeze it out of “Dale”. He'll tell you who they're looking for.

Inside elevator two the numbers only go up from the penthouse floor. Which makes sense.

It doesn't make sense, so you get out and wait for elevator one. These doors open sideways but you get in anyway being more than somewhat of a risk-taker.

This car is conveniently on a monorail taking you somewhere else. A good thing. “No sleep over going deep,” someone probably famously said. And you think there's probably not any better way to do it.

The train is bending through granite rock cuts and under pedestrian passes. It slows down through a mossy urban grotto where you wave to some fans. A couple of glandpunk cat masks are holding a heart and crossbones flag, Your name on their lips.

You think about it for a second. Who'd know?

The next stop is Sandy Gardens Theatre-Main Stage. The doors open and you disembark to rapturous applause. It's a distraction. There's a sniper in the mezzanine.



CARMEN

The theatre is thick with excited bodies, an audience on the brink of hysteria, two men, centre stage, stand in the beam of a searing spotlight. One holds a shotgun at his side, the other in a tuxedo, holds out his arms like they're going to dance.

Fifteen things happen in the next five seconds.

One, someone dies. Right in front of you. Presumably felled by a rogue shooter at J14. Looks like a Julie from the first row rushing the stage. All bangs and Birkenstocks, she never saw it coming.

Two, a dim recollection descends down upon thee. Your shadow bound black-eyed reverie. The space around you slows to sludge—where time stretches long and beyond.

Three, the pads of your fingertips trace F for the Fuzz, L the Last Resort, O is for Ovum, the spark of creation, V V thank you Very Very much, D is for Dark, a heart like a stone. 4 on the Floor¹, and 8 like the Hemispheres cojoined by magic—on your sidearm.

Four, Five, and Six, three feverish patients in the audience convulse, stiffen, and droop, their eyes glazed in inky black.

Seven, you recognize the mercenary in the balcony, Rudy Haalsbinder, known murderer and rival thug. Now their appearance manifests as paranoid fantasy brought here by your own delusions. There's a knot in your stomach confronting the insecurities. You envy Rudy and lust for their power. And here they are taking yours away.

Eight, a flashback: the weight of a heavy finger drawing a looping figure, back and forth across your shoulder blades in infinitum. The room is sticky with CO₂. You lie on your stomach, paralyzed, listening to the meandering hum in your father's throat. "I love you forever," he says, "for always."

Nine. Exposed, you fling yourself toward the orchestra pit. Hip sliding across the floor, the squeal of leather catches the brief attention of your stage mates, before you disappear into the woodwinds.

Ten, before the orchestra begins the first movement, the end of a Swedish pop song plays on the PA system, the track fades out and it pisses you off that a producer could be so lazy. Why not give songs a proper ending? Give them the punctuation they deserve. Don't stifle it. Reflexively, you turn to your left and shoot the viola player between the

eyes, conveniently forgetting the stakes. You're only trying to make a point and besides violas are bullshit²

Eleven, rolling toward the brass, you line up your raygun to the space where you saw Rudy, but they're not there, confirming your suspicions, it was only emotional subterfuge glinting in the light of your subconscious like a drug store hologram.

Twelve, you've lost sight of the men on stage and the clarinet starts the opening to Dvořák's Water Goblin³, distracting you from your mission and these persons of interest.

Thirteen, the rippling shadow swirls around the feet of the players like unctuous ribbons of pitch. You wade through the strings against some resistance as the harp tessellates in the gaps. A gasp of pressurized gas trumpets through your head, burning your sinuses and bleating desperate complaints. The voices inside are now on the outside, uncontrollable and restless. You lose your balance, splashing into a black pool as the timpani rolls.

Fourteen, on hands and knees you stare at an uncertain reflection. Lips cut and curled, eyes cool and cruel, teeth dripping, your suit slick with rainbows of gasoline—you repel the likeness like a bipolar magnet. There's regret on your tongue. Not regret for your deeds but for your abject detachment. This terrible clarity sticks like a thorn in your paw and you limp toward the fluorescence of the exit, looking for a moment to reorganize.

Fifteen: Carmen occupies your attention. And you feel the tug of the current pull you deeper. Their earnest candor against your dispassion. The unapologetic manipulation, a wicked and willful pleasure. The voices are fading and you get sick with loneliness. Void evacuation. Gutter bowl. Gob stomped. The crushing rock fall of their love. A dull pain turned, unavoidable, uncomfortable and utterly unconfused.

At night, on the roof, pointing at planets, moonshade in Carmen's hair, ship lights in your eyes, you imagine the scene. Denim overalls and a tube top, they giggle at your seriousness—poke you in the ribs. The pulse of the pounce engages your tendons. There's a vestige of maniacal menace stitched into the fabric of your muscle tissue. The draw is overwhelming yet you withdraw. Bound. Jammed. Their fingers in yours, it's a breathless moment absent of gravity. And you spin with them weightless and wondering where you've been, what you've seen and what it all means? *C'est folie à deux*⁴. You writhe like mink, all tongues and tails, a serpentine spiral of sex and madness and omniscient lucidity to the end.

"In your dreams," they sing the first three notes of Brahms' Lullaby.

"Guten Abend, gute Nacht," you echo, gently stroking their nose with the barrel of your gun.

A thumb on your touchstone, 8 is for Black, the beard of a pirate, 4 is for Alkaline,

a bitter taste, D is the path of Destruction, double V for the Watchful Eye, O for Oh God No, common last words, L is the Lonesome Whistle, and F is the for the grand Finale, a tempest on the lake as Dvořák's Water Goblin emerges from the shadowy depths.

1

"Four on the floor" is a rhythmic pattern often used in dance music, characterized by a steady, uniform beat on each quarter note of a measure. This style is marked by the consistent beat of the bass drum on every beat of a 4/4 measure, creating a simple and driving rhythm that has become synonymous with various genres of dance music. Originating in disco in the 1970s, this pattern quickly became a staple in house, techno, and other electronic dance music forms. The "four on the floor" beat is not just a musical pattern; it's a call to the dance floor, a universal language that unites people under the banner of rhythm and movement. Its repetitive and hypnotic nature is key to its ability to energize and engage audiences, making it a foundational element in the structure of dance music.

2

In the orchestral landscape, the viola has long lingered as an ambiguous and arguably superfluous presence. Overshadowed by the violin and cello, its role seems redundant, with its tonal range merely bridging the gap between these more prominent instruments. The viola's voice, neither distinct nor powerful, often gets lost in the orchestral mix, failing to leave a memorable imprint on the listener. This lack of audibility is exacerbated by a solo repertoire that is noticeably scant compared to the rich collections of the violin and cello, suggesting an inherent limitation in its appeal and versatility. Historically, the viola has been a secondary choice for those unable to master the violin, a bias that, while seemingly unjust to some, has nonetheless contributed to its diminished status. In an era where orchestral efficiency and impact are paramount, the viola's indistinct role raises the question of its necessity. Could not the nuanced interplay of violins and cellos suffice, rendering the viola a mere vestigial element in the modern orchestra?

3

In Antonín Dvořák's symphonic poem "The Water Goblin," the music narrates a Czech folk tale from Karel Jaromír Erben's collection. The story depicts a water goblin who, living at the bottom of a lake, ensnares a young village girl to be his bride. She

longs to visit her mother, and he reluctantly permits it under the condition of secrecy about their life. However, she breaks this promise, leading to tragic consequences: the goblin, in revenge, drowns their child in the lake, followed by the girl herself. Dvořák's composition vividly portrays this tale, encapsulating the eerie atmosphere, emotional depth, and the dramatic unfolding of events through its evocative orchestration.

4

Folie à deux, also known as shared psychotic disorder, is a psychiatric condition characterized by the transfer of delusional beliefs and sometimes hallucinations from one individual to another. This rare phenomenon typically occurs between individuals who have a close emotional bond, such as family members or partners. The underlying mechanism involves a complex interaction of emotional dependence, isolation, and stress, leading to the convergence of mental states. Folie à deux challenges our understanding of individual versus shared psychopathology, raising intriguing questions about the nature of belief, perception, and the human mind's susceptibility to influence within intimate relationships.



MAZU

Your eyes won't close long enough to blink Carmen away. She shouldn't be here. And you don't need the distraction.

"Just go," you growl beside her ear, "Away from the veil," Sifting your claws through the slipstream shadow beside you. Its already siphoned off some power. And now, pangs of emotional grit scratch your gums. There's blood in your teeth.

The music drops with a splash of cymbals, like a goblin crashing back into the lake. And Carmen decoupled, coils away. blowing a vortex of smoke rings, a DiMassi cigarette pinched between her thumb and index finger. "You're a dream come true, Ricki." she says, fading away, sputtering to aerosol.

She was right of course. Come true in someone else's dream.

You swing your grappling hook to the box seat rail at stage right and pull yourself away from the gloomy pall. Three swings and you've ascended to the balconette. You check your Raygun before dashing behind the velvet partition. F is for Felicity because words are all we have, L is for Elgar, an unsolved cypher, O is the sounding of the Oliphant—the hunt is on, double V are the fangs of a Sawtooth Wave, D is the Danse Macabre, 4 are the Horsemen, and 8 for Tentacles, all the better to hold you with my dear.

In the hallway you stop and hear the faint but present groan, behind and below. Something wanting more of you now that it's had a taste. Press on Ricki. There's a mission to fulfill, a dreamer to kill. The shroud of the black water is only evil staring back at you, awakened by fresh souls and lab trolls. Dial in the hypnogogic drift and take control.

"Your submersible awaits," says a red rabbit, from a verdant glade at the end of the corridor. They point with their foreleg to a vaulted door. The creature lowers their head and avoids eye contact. A good thing since you're tweaking with unruly hormones and chaotic urges.

Pulling the door open, you step through into a glass ready room. An ornate airlock in the form of a watchful eye gleams, brassy reflections in the cool chamber. And on the other side of the transparent wall is Mazu, hovering in the drink. Dropping her fins to

the sides of the fluted ballast, she exhales methane globules from a grin of a grill on the bow.

“What’s on your mind?” she asks you. Her voice resonating in your skull telepathically, “Wait, don’t answer. I want to show you something first.”

Mazu opens the onboarding aperture and you slink into the captain’s chair. Happy to get out of the airlock—it smells like Krill Bits™. You run your hands along the arm rests and finger thumb through the controls. They seem familiar but don’t make any sense. Dagger Flex, Nose Bone, Chip Wave, Ghost Flint, Organ Mash, and Foam Dose. “Channel scrubbers, in case we run into too much interference,” she says in an overly comforting tone. Like you’ve got something to worry about. The viewport wraps around from port to starboard. Flecks of plant matter and loose fish scales dance in the floodlights. Mazu tilts and swerves away from the undersea dock, like a shark in search of her prey.

Take a moment to recalibrate. Close eyes, fold hands, breathe slow. More motherless memories, they come so easy, haunting and affecting. The forest floor, beneath your sandals, needles and chutes, moss on the roots. Father carries the axe and follows your steps, rumbling a roadkill lullaby:

Little Bunny, where’d you come from Where you off to play?
You won’t make it back to the warren today
You’re quick like a rabbit but you’re not quick enough
And now you’ve been flattened by the wheels on my truck
Little Bunny, I hit you, I thought you were a rock
But Now you look like a Jackson Pollock
I’ll save you from the Owl and Wolverine
And I now pronounce you, dead at the scene
Cause roadkill’s been good to me
It serves me for a highway meal
Roadkill’s been good to me
I’ll eat you in honor, butchered and clean
Little Bunny, you’ll sizzle, in a pool of margarine
I’ll eAt you with Rosehip, Wild Onions and Greens
I’ll wrap you all up in aluminum foil
And drive fifty miles till your belly is boiled
Little Bunny, I thank you as I eat your last piece
And scattered around me your bones and your teeth
I sit by the asphalt, licking the grease
You’re my guest of honor at this roadside feast

You join the chorus and swing your stick like a metronomic machete, deadheading the spent blooms and reseeding the wild with joyous aplomb. Father snaps twigs along the way. “Warmer, we’re getting warmer Ricki.” He sniffs into the understory.

“C O L,” you pronounce the letters with deliberate articulation. But you form it like a question.

“Yes love, Circle Of Life, a beautiful thing. From death and decay come chaos and creation.”

“Like me?” you ask, just wanting to hear him answer.

“Just like you bud—just like you.” he says, and kicks you playfully in the butt.

Mazu glides through the deep. Her head lamp beams oscillating through the tenebrous waters. She cradles you in the cockpit and releases more gas. You check your timestamp and wonder why you haven’t noticed. You’ve been wet-worlding for 113 hours. They were supposed to pull you a long time ago.

“Here we are. This thing, what do you make of it?” she asks half rhetorically.

You drift closer toward a towering black orchid bloom. The petals slip in and out of shadow, a mesmerizing undulation. Its lips part to release a swarm of miniature jellyfish and for a moment you can see through to another world. A topside realm where you glimpse your body in blank repose. A white room with pale figures lurking over you like harvesters, adjusting lines and pricking your mind with corrupted frequencies.

“Sensors indicate some kind of fissure, a break between here and there. I’d recommend we weld it shut or obliterate the whole thing,” says Mazu, “sad really, its so beautiful.”

“No. We’re going in,” you tell her, “to get out.”

The vulvic portal closes and you wait for the next pulse and count—

Five. “Aye Captain,” Mazu unfurls a formidable array of weapons across the hull. Four. A quick inventory on your belt - concussion grenades, shiv, stitch kit, grappler, shriekbox, triptabs, biowatch, and Raygun, Three. You force recall, a father and daughter, “Be brave, end it quickly, love.” Two. Cut the lights. One. Rise and shine Ricki, it’s time to wake up.



HERACLITUS

A great glimpse peels open. Cascades and promontories. Headlands to a raw frontier, you're calmed by the rumble of current, but unsettled by the perspective shift. The bright harvest room has collapsed into a distant white dwarf on the horizon with your sleeping self inside. You and Mazu hover in the skies near jungle bluffs and dahlia trees. The blackwater runs off the cliffs, onyx ribbons down into the jade overstory. There's a bird somewhere. There's always a bird somewhere. This one is Entropy, dark and dense, chaotic and cataclysmic, hot with hellish decay. It wades in the black dream, pecking reflections that ripple like corduroy. Outward and outward. Following into nothing. Falling into void, where it all breaks up into the crumbs of existence. Around the ankles, the black silt delta caresses and careens, never the same river twice. You are in a state of unrelenting change.

Push the controls forward, "There is no future, without the past, no cool blue without the resurrection of fire, no good, without evil," you tell Mazu, but she already knows.

"All very Heraclitean," says Mazu, but you were thinking Nietzsche.

Leaning into the Theory of Opposites, you stare up at the rays stabbing through heavenly boxes, organized and predictable. Then down at Entropy shaking the wet from their wings, flinching in disordered spasms, rapt in their psychopathy. Head to toe, high and low. Guts and skin The out and in. They cannot exist without each other. Consequence is inconsequence. Action inaction. Hunter and prey. Together in disarray.

Mazu sails into skies ahead, chasing the vanishing point. You observe streaks of evaporation lifting the water into blurry charcoal clouds through the convex deck window.

"Harbinger of destruction, those are storm clouds, Ricki," Mazu battens down a few hatches.

You know they're more than clouds. You know they are shadow tide and under fog. Barbarian sublimation above the rainforest. Swallower of worlds it calls you in. It wants the rest of you—needs your power, your dimensionality, your impulse. It calls again, c o m e. You squeak your finger down the glass and write into the condensation, F for Fenestra, an opening ahead, L for Lycanthrope, obviously. O is for

omnivore because anything is fair game, V for The Vedas, V for Venus. D for the bitter Dread of self-annihilation, 4 is the fortress around your heart, and 8 is for 8 track, the superior cassette.

“Let’s try this again Mazu. In to get out,” you exhale and empty your lungs dramatically nodding toward the looming system.

She mimics the theatre and releases a geyser of steam from the lower deck. Pshhhhhhhh.

“Ill-advised, possibly catastrophic,” warns Mazu, “We’re not equipped for that kind of turbulence.”

Maybe Mazu isn’t, but you’re ready to shake things up. You’re waking now with the resignation, there is no rebirth without ruination. Another vision swipes the periphery. It’s you and Carmen in the sunken living room at penthouse number five. The keycard secretly winks in your pocket. You put down the snow globe, watching the sparkle flakes dance around the Chateau Frontenac. She sips a Manhattan, but you’re more Boulevardier. You press play on the tape deck. She leans back on the orange tasselled pillow with a hand on your thigh.

“I wish it was this forever,” she muses under her breath. And you know she wants you to lie to her and say that it will. Instead, you pet the back of her hand with your fingertips and say nothing. The toms thrum through luscious strings. A kick drum booms like a heartbeat. The horns, heroic sail high in some sonic stratosphere. Eyelids dropping, another dream now catapults you further.

You catch up with your sleep self in the mechanical bed. The bright room crackles, responding to your immaculate materialization. You drop one nurse with a neck twist and the other through the eyeholes of a ghoulish mask. You dangle her head like a bowling ball and wiggle your fingers through the mucous membrane, tickling the pink labyrinth before you drop her to the tile.

“Good morning Ricki,” you say to the self, tilting your head slightly and dipping your shoulder, matching her poise and presentation “It’s time to say good night.”

The raygun on your belt vibrates in anticipation, It emits a 523.25 hz C5, which always annoys Carmen. And you wonder for a moment if she’d forgive you for what’s next. Without hesitation, you line up the barrel to the sleepyhead and fire. Ricki is dead, long live Ricki.

The anti-climax is deafening. A good thing. You unclip your body from the gurney and drag it onto the other two bodies. “In to get out, “ you repeat like a mantra as you climb on the bed and plug yourself in, falling into yourself again.

The clouds break, and Mazu, relieved, expresses a cone of flatulence from her blow hole. “Looks like good fortune is shining on us Ricki!” she says, rousing you from your death fetish dimension, “ Lost you for a moment, penny for your thoughts, glad you’re

back, looks like fair weather on the plateau there at two o'clock. I'll touch down and we can regroup."

Mazu drifts down to the honey-coloured sands on winged bellows, from her stern a cluster of inflated bladders twitch in the thermals. The scene is diffuse with atomized particulate, dead nimbus, flattening her metallic hull to a matte patina.

The descent is a curious feeling. There is some familiar comfort in the gravity. Like a weighted shroud, it envelopes your essence in dense charms and invisible forces. Like your compulsions, the fall is irresistible. There is no high without the low. No here without there. No you without them. It seems like you've secured your place in this thermodynamic fantasy. Chaos is control, Reality is dream. All you have to do is perpetuate the cycle and kill to live again over and over.

Mazu touches down on a tripod of pneumatic cricket legs, lowering you to a stone dais set in the dune like a pearl. It's hot out here on the mesa. And for a moment you want to feel the cold wicked water once more. A bead runs down your temple.

Sub-atomic strands writhe under multidimensional pressure. You imagine them escaping your body like flatworm photons. More unseen powers, a halo round your cranium. The colourless bird weaves a figure eight overhead. It's followed you here of course.

Walking the perimeter, surveying your surroundings, there's a loneliness to the land. A rugged meditation, in solemn repose. Like you, it doesn't feel much. The sand pours through your fingers and a thousand years pass. Countless more appear before you.

"How many times have we made this run?" you ask Mazu.

"You asked me to stop counting Ricki, but I can give you the answer, just like last time. Do you want to know what number you are Ricki?"

"This time just tell me how it ends" you groan.

Mazu hisses in the heat trying to cool down, "I can't do that, your reincarnation is the only thing that stays the same. Everything else is variable. Change is the only constant, as they say."

You sit down in the shade of Mazu's belly and wonder whether you're just bored of the whole thing or you're wearing down, weary and unfocused. Perhaps it's time to break the cycle. Interrupt the pattern and dislodge yourself from the eternal wreckage hurtling through space, orbiting a hole of vast emptiness.

Blink. You're with Carmen again. She's lying down, crossed legs, swinging her foot to the music and chewing a stir stick. You envy her nonchalance, her neutrality. She doesn't care about the cycle, as long as you're here with her.

"Let's get away together," you propose.

"But I like it here," she says adjusting the pillow behind her head, "Everything we

need is here, I don't want to go back to our shitty apartment."

"What if I told you that we're dreaming and that this subconscious world is only one of many places we can be?" You shift your weight, leaning in closer to Carmen and pass her your weapon, "Say it with me: F is for—"

"Fibonacci and the infinite spiral."

"L is the"

"ancient Luminescence of damned stars"

"O is the"

"Egg, because you have to break some to make an omelet."

"Double V"

"For Vice Versa," you both say in unison.

"Are you a bad person Ricki?" asks Carmen, tweaking your earlobe with the business end of the sidearm.

"There is no such thing," you tell her, "we aren't bad or good. We are only what's happening to us at this moment."

She seems satisfied with the answer and is enthralled with the intimacy, so you continue, "D is for"

"Decay, the inevitable and inexorable," she says, frowning playfully.

"4"

"the Chambers of your heart"

"and 8"

"is for the Octet, because there is symmetry in the universe."

Crack. A flash illuminates the room as Carmen pulls the trigger. The music switches tracks and continues its loop. There is no rewind.



DELEUZE

Dead again. Call it trial and error. Colliding tragedies in a comedic wreck, you throw off another carapace. You're moulting under the groaning radiation of another sunset. You should find it tiresome, but it still exhilarates. Reborn from crackling embers, soot prints lurch away on a brutalist embankment reveal your position. Naked on the parapet, your skin throws off the dark tears of nightmares and glows incandescent and eternal.

Components and companions left ahead and behind, you collect your thoughts like you're picking up a deck of cards. The secret soldier, the lithe and lucky lover, and the shotgun shade, all scattered characters across a materializing matrix. You plug in and phase out to the rhythm of pistons and the whip of consciousness, snapping you awake with the crack of dawn.

Through the gold, Mazu approaches like a hovercraft on a pillow of positivity, "Ready to ride Ricki?"

"Take me somewhere different this time," you project, tilting your head from side to side.

"Of course, any particular direction you had in mind?" Mazu spins her compass on a spindle.

The question bothers you. It feels like a trick—a trap you've visited before. Mazu isn't capable of deception, but she may not realize she is part of the pattern. Another nomad on the plane.

"What if we stay Mazu?" you poke her undulating bladder, in an uncharacteristic display of playfulness.

"I don't think it's an option. Even this place will slip into a socket eventually. It's probably better to choose a path, don't you think Ricki?" Mazu reconfigures, leggy and crab-like.

"Let's go all the way up," you say spontaneously, not really understanding what it might mean.

"Topside it is! Hop in," Mazu uncoils a ramp like a tongue and you step aboard, still unclothed, your buttocks glistening with fresh cells.

Here we go again, you think but Mazu hears you.

“Don’t you like our time together? What can I do to make it different? More enjoyable.” Mazu transmits. Her empathy dripping, ripe and yellow.

“What would you have done if I said I wanted to go all the way down?” you emphasize the last word with a guttural resonance, hoping to change the tone of the conversation. To what? You don’t know.

“I suppose I would have mentioned that I noticed you have been thinking in black and white lately. Perhaps stuck in a binary groove where there is only up and down, high and low, hard and soft—when there are all of the places and positions in between. While it’s helpful in theory to see opposites as co-inhabitants of a concept, other perspectives may satisfy other questions.” Mazu lowers the temperature and scents the cabin with fluorine.

You swerve your head in vague agreement, “It’s easy for me this way, wrong is right, black is white, day is night.”

“And evil is good? Right Ricki?”, Mazu interrupts unsarcastically.

“For me it is. Hey, I’m just trying to move things along. I don’t have time for games and distractions.” You shift your bare cheeks on the vinyl captain’s chair. Squelch. Mazu releases methane sympathetically.

Three eyeholes look out to the atmosphere. You step into the one in the center, mindful of trying something on the spectrum. Water vapour streams down, streaking the airscape in pastel stripes. A slow squarewave drones on an LFO emitter in the floor, thrumming through your heels and up your spine. It makes you feel unusually buoyant. The mood is unrecognizable and Mazu senses your discomfort.

“It’s Joy—won’t hurt you. Bit of a sonic cocktail—mixed alpha, beta and gamma frequencies and sent them through the synth. I was thinking it might set you on a new vector.” Mazu’s purr is moving and irresistible, “I can tweak the cutoff. Take down the intensity?”

“It’s fine, I’ll play. Anything to break the circle,” you say arching forward and pressing your left breast on the glass, leaving a dermal print, like a lone planetary body, an opalesque orb moored in the noctilucous mesosphere. You trace the outline with your finger and spiral the perimeter out in expanding loops.

“Interesting thinking Ricki, maybe we can introduce a parametric variable and unhinge the Ouroboros. Break the symmetry, tilt the axis and divine some radical helix to track,” Mazu pauses, “To hell with perfect forms, they devalue our worlds and idealize an abstract existence. I think these are the diversions you’re talking about—”

In a moment of clarity and introspection, you interject, “Do you think I’ve grown? These cycles of renewal, have I learned anything? And if I have, isn’t that enough of a variant to deviate and spin off on a new trajectory?”

“Let’s find out. We have arrived at the top,” Mazu sings, improvising a ten note melody, “Time to suit up, looks dangerous up here.”

Mazu lands on the rooftop of an industrial complex, surrounded by arboreal giants and secret animals, sizzling and croaking somewhere in the canopy. You open the wardrobe, pull out a black leather jumpsuit and squeeze in. The wind howls outside like a warning as a pedestal ejects from the floor presenting your belt and raygun. Your hand twitches, anticipating the cool weight of the ancient talisman, but it feels too easy.

Maybe your weapon is a crutch and a curse, limiting your will to real power. You feel the push and the pull. You capitulate awkwardly, vulnerable in the existential indecision, oscillating between the violence of expedience and the omnipotence of self-control.

Your meditation slips but you but you anchor in the margins. From right to left. Eight are the eyes of the black widow, self sufficient and solitary. Four are the cardinal points, Nothing Worthwhile Stays Easy. D is for Domino, catalyst of the chain reaction. V for the Vortex. V for the Vagabond. O is for Odyssey, always travel in style. L for the Longshot, like a rare comet, and F is for Fulcrum a pivotal point in your story.

The raygun catches yellow flares from the reflecting moon dangling conspicuously between communication antennae. It sings like brittle feedback, wavering, a detuned howl in a sad vacuum. The separation dials in to a singularity, a point, the dot of the sixth chakra between your eyes, like a sentry of concealed wisdom.

“Put it away Mazu,” you wave off the temptation and the object sinks back into the floor, “Maybe I’ve become too dependant.”

Mazu whirs thoughtfully and responds, “You’re always becoming something Ricki. We are all in a state of becoming, infinitely in flux with no beginning and no end. Like this adventure, you’re a rhizomatic structure, always in the middle, branching in different directions. Your raygun is but one assemblage of desire and power. Undoubtedly there are many scattered through this expanse of modal realities.”

The outline of a door lights up and you step forward and through, feeling your way through a silky membrane onto a step outside of a Mazu’s fuselage. It’s dim out here like a purple twilight and Mazu turns on a floodlamp behind you. Your shadow before you shifts unnaturally and you wave your left hand as a test. The dark silhouette on the roof tile does not follow but starts to vibrate and spasm excitedly instead. Connected on the spectrum, maybe you are two parts of a whole. Like Father and daughter, this is the abyssal monster of the blackwater and you are its anthropomorphic illumination.

“Time to come together,” you gesture at the reflection, bracing for impact.

It leaps up and sticks to you like hot tar, then slowly melts into your body in blotchy pools. Sinking into your skin down to the marrow in your bones.

Mazu recoils into tortoise form and pulls her legs and head close, retreating from

the perceived infection You swipe your spackled hand through the air swarming with palpitating ions that begin to coalesce. A corporeal apparition blinks into existence, speaking low under the high frequencies.

“We’re voiding your contract Ricki,” says the vaguely familiar voice, “the Doctor is no longer invested in the infiltration. Lets say things have worked themselves out and Elysium is no longer in need of your services—or you, for that matter.”

“Funny,” you say, habitually reaching for your sidearm, “I was about to say the same thing. Plus it looks like I’m the one that’s cured mortality.”

“I’m afraid not Ricki,” says the ionized figure now pointing a gold raygun at your head.

“Go ahead, but indulge me, a short prayer before the end,” you appeal but don’t wait for a response, “F is for Felicity, this moment of joy, O is for Occupant, my essence in this body, L is for the Lattice, an interconnected framework of dimensionality”

Your assassin fires and a cylindrical missile spins toward your forehead. Time softens, every movement lagging and languid in a thickening spatiotemporal porridge.

You continue, now with a smile creeping across your lips, “V for the Vagrant, the incarnation of deterritorialization. V for the small end of the funnel, focused and formidable, D for Deleuze and the concept of Difference, a tangible system of relations that actively shapes spaces, times and sensations, 4 is Forsythia, a harbinger of an eternal Spring, and 8 is the eight-ball, game over.”

The monster in you groans as a steady pressure pushes into your cranium. Leaving your body is easier this time, but your dark passenger is resisting, trying to weigh you down with causality and static notions of a self. “We are better together,” you say, “Let go and let me show you.” Pulling up a scene—It’s Carmen, waiting in a hotel lobby.

A piano player in a brown houndstooth suit plays, Theme From A Love Story. The B4 on the keyboard is slightly flat. Carmen sits nearby absently scratching X’s and O patterns on the velour armrest with a long purple fingernail. She wears an embroidered floral gilet and baggy denim trousers that bunch up around a pair of fuzzy yellow slippers.

You roll up with the suitcase and give her a keycard to the room, “We’re checked in babe. Allons-y, Alonso.”

“You were right, you know,” she says, “It’s good to get away—do something different. I just want to savour every minute. Come sit, let’s hear him finish the song.” She pats the space beside her and swishes the pads of her slippers on the floor like jazz brushes.

You slide in, bumping her hip in your silver jumpsuit. The detuned note in the recurring melody makes you wince. Looking at the piano, your eye twitches and you feel your pulse thump in your neck. You could swear he is now striking the key with

emphasis. The urges are strong but you wait till the song is finished.

Carmen strokes your cheekbone with her thumb as the last notes fade out and the player lifts his foot off the sustain pedal, “Okay love, I can’t wait to see the room!” she says bouncing up off the cushion.

She grabs your hand and pulls you across the lobby toward the elevator. “Go on ahead and push the button, I’m just going to give the piano guy a little tip,” you say with a wink.

The End Again