

VI

I want to tell you something but it can't be explained and believed with just words. So instead I intend to show you. But you have to promise me. You can't try to explain this to anyone else. Trust me. They won't believe you. They have to be shown. But before I can show you you have to consent to being shown. The truth is awful. Some might prefer not knowing. Do you want to be shown?

"What is this? Where am I?" Ava said into a void.

Think of it like a dream. That's all this has to be. A weird, perhaps unsettling, dream. Your mind will struggle if you choose to continue. You will feel very tired. I ask that you consider your chose as if this dream is real. If you choose to continue there will be consequences but also truth. You can reject the truth and this will stay as just a dream.

"So a matrix situation? Well obvious the truth. I've all ready come out. Oh god, am I actually cis?"

Please consider carefully. I will ask again one final time, do you want to be shown?

Ava without hesitation said. "Show me the truth then."

Ava woke up. She was sweating. It was very hot. She panicked. *The furnace must have-* She thought as she looked over and saw no uncontrollable fire. It didn't even seem to be lit. But she felt very hot. The tent had no one else in it. She took off her nest of blankets. She worn nothing but a tank-top and feminine briefs. Her skin was bruised and layered with dirt from scant showers.

Then Gia and a woman she didn't know entered the tent. Ava threw a thin sheet over herself. *Why was it so hot?* Ava thought.

"Hey you." Gia said. "I have someone I wanted you to meet."

"Sure uh-what time is it?" Ava asked.

"Technically night time." the woman said stepping forward from beside Gia. And at second glance Ava realized she was incredibly traditionally attractive.

"That can't be right. It's light out and like really warm." Ava responded.

"Would you like it to be cooler?" the woman asked. And then it was. The light from outside the tent dimmed too. It seemed like maybe close to dusk now. *What the fuck is happening.*

Gia stepped forward. "Don't worry you are safe. It's me Gia." She stepped closer and Ava flinched. "We can explain everything? You asked to be shown the true so that is what we're doing."

"How do you know about that dream? Shit I'm still dreaming aren't I."

"That's possible. So just come along for the ride. After you see somethings I'm sure you'll feel better." Gia reassured.

"Okay. I'm game."

Ava then watched as the tent doors opened to reveal they were on a beach. The setting sun was blocked by one of the tent's walls. Blocked by the opposite wall their seemed to be a bonfire. Just out of sight. It gave the lighting looking through tent's opening a symmetry.

"This place you've imagine is quite beautiful isn't it." Gia said.

"What do you mean?"

"If this is a dream this all came from you." Gia suggested. "But there is a second possibility, that this isn't a dream but still a place that came from your imagination."

"It is nice here. Okay so if this is not a dream then what is going on?"

"First let's get out of this stuffy tent. I want to watch the waves as the moon rises. It's a full moon tonight. Lucky us." Gia said and start out of the tent.

"Wait I need to find my clothes and get dressed." Ava said in a mild panic.

"Those clothes would be too warm here. Plus my friend won't mind. I think you look real cute in what you're wearing." Gia said and gave an uncharacteristically confident wink.

Ava blushed. "Uh-su-sure." Considering for a moment before getting up, Ava followed them out of the tent. Gia and the ephemeral goddess whose hair shimmered slightly from the bonfire. They sat near it but faced away toward the ocean. Ava joined them nervously. The woman was between her and Gia. The temperature was perfect with the ocean breeze and the fire at their backs. The three sat on a blanket that with just big enough to hold all of them. Ava became aware the skin of her leg and the woman's were touching.

"Living is so hard and painful" the woman started. "But this moment right now is really nice. Thank you for sharing it with us Ava."

"Sure. So uh what's your preferred name?"

"Aims. She/her." She smiled.

"A pleasure. She/they for me."

"I know. Gia has told me a bit about you." Aims turned to face Ava. Their faces were so close. Ava was faintly aware Aims had placed a hand on her leg. "How would you like to help us save the world?"

What the fuck. Ava thought as she looked into Aims' eyes. Deep dark brown. Impossible to read. But a look across her face that could only indicate mutual desire. "Well of course. I- I want it to be saved. But I'm just one person. Best I could do is blow up a pipeline."

"A good start" she said. Her lips begged Ava to kiss them. "But we can manage so much more once we start admitting to ourselves. I want to save the world. Don't you Ava?"

"For sure." Ava said. Desire wasn't the right word for it. This went beyond that. Ava realized Aims' hand had found its way up her leg and a part of Ava had found its way out of her briefs. "But what-" Ava said with a dim memory of what words were. Ava was on her back now. Aims' hair in Ava face.

They kissed. "Was that okay?" She asked innocently. Ava grabbed her and they found their positions reversed.

"Who are you?" Ava asked. Their bodies intertwined moving as one.

"Gia's friend and I think maybe yours. Are you ready to see the truth?"

Ava became certain that this was no dream. "Yes. I'm ready to know whatever is going on here."

"As you wish. It's a pity I was hoping that would continue a while longer" Aims said.

"Perhaps later it will." Ava held by her deep gaze.

"I'd like that."

The three sat around a table next to the bonfire. A circular woven bench matched the table's height and encircled them. They sat on cushions laid on the floor. Their backs against the bench.

"And so that's why we actually stayed out on my parent's land after the wildfire." Gia concluded.

Ava had mostly listened up until this point. Only asking short clarifying question here and there. "So if your kind messed up our timeline, how was it supposed to go?"

"They weakened nuclear energy to make room for space based solar power to take off in the 1970's. Instead fossil fuels filled that power vacuum the collective created before the tech was possible. In our timeline. Fossil fuels fell out of fashion with the rise of nuclear."

"But you said there was still climate change in your timeline. Still a mass extinction event."

"Yes. The planet was still harmed. Mass extinction is a spiral. But for centuries the planet was made habitable with great effort by my progenitors. Then for thousand of years for my kind. But alas the planet could not be saved. Nor could we leave it. Our extinction was imminent. So we did something horrible to give earth life a second shot. This action is something the collective vowed never repeat. Measures where put in place to ensure it wouldn't happen again."

"You're talking about the time travel."

"Yes. Time does not branch. Nor go backwards. They found a way, that they intentionally forgot, to reverse causation exactly. If life does exist elsewhere in the universe then our actions killed them. Reseeding the timeline. All those potential life forms that might exist made to not exist and replaced with their ancestors that would birth different children. A potentially infinite genocide."

"I don't know if I agree with that conclusion. I mean-"

"Let's not get caught in the morality of universal time travel. The point is the collective can't do it again because they intentionally forgot it. And I sure as hell can't figure that out so that moral debate is hypothetical. We have to focus on the situation we're in. Not the possibilities lost to the past."

"Okay. You're right. So things are worse now right. How long do we got?" Ava asked.

"For humans. About what will be your remaining natural lifespan. For us 300-400 years." Aims said.

"No way that can't be right even our most pessimistic model don't-"

"Our model and understanding of mass extinction are far more advanced. If you want I can try to give you the basics. But honestly I was never that interested in this stuff. My focus has always been on human communication."

"Oh jeez. It's just hitting me again. This is real. Like really real. I'm talking to someone from the future."

"Yeah this is fucked right. It's why I ran away from home at 17. I blocked all this out for almost half my life." Gia said. "I think your doing great. All things considered."

"So are you actually schizophrenic or was that all just sentient mushrooms tripping out your brain."

"I am schizo yeah. It makes my brain easier to connect with hers." Gia explained. "To make you compatible you need to use LSD."

"Uh what now? So I'm literally tripping. Right now. You have me acid?"

"It's a micro dose given through a neuralink she created by engineering some cells in your cervical spine." Gia said.

"Right so you drugged me." Ava asserted.

"In my defense I did ask first. I said I got acid from a high school connect and we were gonna trip on the solstice remember?"

"Yeah. I remember that."

"It is in fact the solstice. But the tabs were fake. Aims delivered the drug. If you'd taken the blue pill, as it were, we would have just had a fun night tripping together." Gia reassured.

"Okay so I'm tripping right now right?"

"Eh. The dose needed is actually pretty small. You're basically sober."

"Okay let's go then. I want to exit from here and just talk to you Gia."

"Of course. You're never stuck here all you have to do is ask and then-"

Gia awoke in real space. She watched the stars dance in the sky. Ava laid next to her. They cuddled under a blanket near the furnace on an air mattress. The tent door open. Olivia had left a few days earlier. Tomorrow the two of them will return home for their first visit home for the holidays.

"So that's the real reason we're out her." Ava asked.

"Yes."

"So it started as just trying to say goodbye to your childhood imaginary friend and now what that has become save the world."

"I mean wasn't that why we've risked so much already. The actions and that. Wasn't that the hope. We are nature defending itself."

"And so your serious about that plan? I mean this would be a huge escalation compared to what we've done previously."

"I want to live in a world our son can grow old in."

"It seems too late."

"Yeah." Gia agreed "but we have to try. Right?"

They woke up to Valorie pulling up right to their tent. For comic effect Gia thought. Through the front window Valorie waved excitedly then exited the vehicle. They had packed before taking the tabs and so after spending an hour of the three breaking down the tent, folding, and packing it. Gia was behind the wheel. And ready to be back home.

Valorie had so much to tell them about all the plans my parents and her had gotten up to. Gia was really happy to have such a warm place to return to after working so hard in the cold. Gia knew she'd have to return in the new year but she planned to enjoy the right now. They were well in the drive now.

Valorie turned down here music slightly. "So how's repairing your childhood ecosystem?"

"Cold" Gia said. "Hard but worth the effort. I'm learning so much. Someone from the university came to check out what we were up to. They're a grad student whose thesis is on wildfires. Man made and otherwise. Mostly on the after part."

"Yeah Olivia was telling me about that. She seems much more on board than when I left."

"Yeah I never thought we'd get our inside girl to live outside with us." Ava remarked.

"She's been adapting well." Gia noted.

"I think about that summer we spent in those hammocks. Waking up by and getting to know our neighboring birds songs. The activities of the squirrels. The cute slugs and great caterpillars. I miss that so much." Valorie said holding her tummy that was now showing on a second or third glance.

"We can still do those things Val." Ava said.

"Maybe. But not with a child. Lately I've been wondering-" Valorie was starting to tear up. "Sorry I wasn't planning to talk about this."

"It's okay. I'd want to hear if you felt like sharing." Gia said.

"I feel like that child that we're having isn't real to you yet. And he feels so real to me."

"Maybe your right." Gia admitted. "Can that be okay?"

"Will you be back. Will things be like we planned. Were we try to raise a child well. And adopt more and foster. Make a village. Do you still want that?"

"I do. We both do. We talk about it all the time when we're out there." Ava said.

"I couldn't do what I do without you helping making that hope a reality Valorie."

"Promise you'll come back when it's time. Promise you'll be in our lives."

"Valorie you know that I will if I can. I can't control what happen if the state kidnaps me."

"I need you to be around too."

"The world needs to be around for our son."

"You're not going to having the planet Gia."

"I want to." Gia whispered. "I want to save the planet Valorie."

"More then our son?"

"Yes. Valorie our son won't be able to live in a world without people defending it."

"Maybe. But why you then? We did our part. We so much. Let someone with a child do what's need." Valorie said.

"We can't be choosy with who." Ava finally weighed in. "No one is right for this task Val. We're all imperfect for it. All risking serious consequence. If only people with nothing to lose did actions then nothing good would ever get done."

"Your talking like- fuck. You are planning something." Valorie realized. "Ava, Gia wake up we are about to raise a baby together."

There was silence for a while after that. There wasn't much left to say. They all had divulged things they were avoiding saying. They wanted to not ruin what was a break from all the stress. It was lucky that there was still a ways to go. Time to sit silently and think. When they got to the house that Valorie's parents had left her, they three just sat together for a while. Valorie sat in the middle managing to rest her body on both of them.

She was looking off into a corner of the room when she final said. "Okay." And so it was.

They weren't really celebrating Christmas but they also weren't celebrating something cool like Kwanzaa. It was just the holidays; they all agreed. Starting a new tradition as new families do, steeped in their culture and various subcultures. It could easily be called Christmas, there was a tree with ornaments, but no one did. Just above the tension and self-consciousness, there was confidence from nostalgia and sharing stories and memories. A holiday most relaxing when intimacy and repression were in balance Gia thought.

Friends and family were invited to stop by at various post Christmas gatherings. By the 27th things felt calm. An old friend of Ava's was over and they were drinking and playing the quick board/card games meant for such times.

He was a cutie. Ava's old friend, Daniel. He dressed, talked and smiled like some idealistic farm boy. In his mid twenties, he was still coming out of his acne. He was fit and looked like he could carry two 50 lb bags of beans over each arm for hours. But also wouldn't know what to do in a fight. That was just his vibe though. Gia also felt like he was hiding something. A fun guy for sure.

And I mean her probably was of course. The guy talked vaguely about things and stories without names. In such a casual way. Also works in information security. And friend's with Ava. It can be nice to meet a colleague. And just talk about nothing important. Each having full empathy about the other's strategic vagueness. No self-consciousness about saying the wrong thing. Because the only true social plunder is increasing security or safety risk. So they could just talk as humans.

"So Olivia has been telling me about Rust. It seems neat. By the way she talks about it." Gia said.

Danny shrugged "It does make big claims. But-"

"Okay" Gia interrupted. "Marry, fuck, kill. Python, C, Rust."

"Well with that list." He paused and smiled. He clearly already knew his answer. This was a part of his affect. He wanted to look kind of dumb. Gia admired the effort. "Okay well. I guess marry C, fuck python. Sweetly though you know. Python deserves a good time. Then with a heavy heart, there is no choice after all, kill Rust."

"That makes sense" Olivia said trying to reduce perceived tension that wasn't actually there.

"What would yours be? from that list" Danny asked Olivia with the most genuine seeming smile.

Olivia started always done for a bit. "Well marry Rust obviously. Fuck C and have a truly magically experience but she's too set in her ways to settle down with. And kill python. It was

great but we don't need it anymore."

"Kill Python?" Danny seemed shocked, or was he actually?

"There was no other choice." Olivia smiled.

"Do you have any idea what they're talking about?" Ava asked toward Valorie and Gia's parents.

"I mean I know python a bit. Like I've modified a script or two. I was always told that if you learn just one language then it should be python." Valorie said.

"That is true for now. But that advice only holds for people that are adjacent to software develop. Rust aims to be a language for everyone, and for everything. There's no reason we need like 8 different core languages do all of our computing." Olivia said.

"See this is why folks are so hard on Rust." Danny laughed.

"Let them. We can take it." They both smiled at each other.

"Is this what you kids talk about nowadays?" Cathy asked.

"Mom we're all like 30." Gia said

"Yeah I'm the baby here." Danny added. "So I can confidently say. No the kids are talking about way cooler stuff."

Tom placed down a card and the game was over.

"Well I'm going sit this next few out" Ava said as the fluxx like homebrew game they found in an abandon theater suddenly ended.

"It was just getting good." Tom said.

"I might have a smoke." Danny said glancing at Gia then got up.

"I'm down for another." Olivia said.

"That's the spirit."

"I might go get some air too" Gia said. "It's a bit stuffy in here."

It was a bit breezy in their backyard. Gia shivered. Then took a breathe and put her arm around Ava for warmth. Daniel lit a cigarette. Offered then put the pack in his shirt pocket. He seemed not cold at all in his tucked in long sleeve plaid button up and jeans. Gia noticed around his waist a slight waist line and white inside his sleeve. Then it clicked he was wearing long johns. Not unusual so this time of year but meaningful. He planned to talk outside during his short visit.

"Grey skies have always made me feel at peace." Danny said puffing the cigarette, pushing smoke out his nose, but not inhaling. If he had buttoned up to his collar, it would be less obvious. "Like now is the time to make the big preparations for the spring but there is also no rush. The work isn't on the seasons schedule yet."

"I prefer the fall." Gia said engaging in the small talk to get a read on what they were really doing here. "But I don't harvest anything. I imagine for you the fall is a lot of work."

"For my parents." Danny offered. *Why so vulnerable?* "I don't do much farming except to help out." He admitted. *What a wonderful cover story.*

"I imagine they need help at various points in the year." Gia said "It must be hard having to put your life on hold for months at a time."

They shared a look of mutual recognition. "It can be yeah." He agreed. "Ava told me about Aims."

Well shit. "Are you-" Gia started.

"She didn't say much" he said with a friendly look towards Ava. "Just I'd need to be shown. And whatever it is. I'd like to see the truth."

"Are you sure?" Gia cautioned.

"Absolutely."

"Okay."