

RESET

By
Howard Ho

RESET

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RESET

Author's Note - I would like to thank Jully Lee, Prince Gomolvilas, and Sharon Chow.

This play is dedicated to my friend and mentor Rose Ochi.

RESET

Reset was created in the MADlab Playwriting Development Program, produced by Moving Arts Theater in Los Angeles, CA. The 2020 MADlab Cohort was Amy Dellagiarino, Emily Fernandez, Howard Ho and Robert Menna.

Reset was a 2023 O’Neill National Playwrights Finalist and a 46th Bay Area Playwrights Festival Semi-Finalist.

The world premiere of *Reset* was produced by Moving Arts Theatre in 2023. The production was directed by Darin Anthony; the scenic and lighting designer was Justin Huen, the sound designer was Howard Ho, the costume designer was Mylette Nora, the fight choreographer was Ronnie Clark, the producer was Dana Schwartz, the stage manager was Chloe Brown, and the assistant director was Annika Hoseth. The cast was:

James.....Tyler Perez
Lateen.....Zachary Bones
Aiko.....Greta Jung
Old Man.....Carl Weintraub

RESET

CAST: 3 Men, 1 Woman

JAMES GAMBLE, 20s-30s White man, an average American with potential for decency but with demons lurking

LATEEN ANDERSON, 30s-40s African-British man, a quantum physicist with a posh English accent who spent his childhood in America, an upbeat nerd delighted with his experiment

AIKO TANAKA, 20s-40s Japanese American woman, a psychologist who speaks English with a standard American accent but occasionally has a Southern flair

OLD MAN, 50s-60s White man, James but 34 years older, who is successively...

- 1) Confused, troubled, and mentally unstable
- 2) Average middle class, bourgeoisie
- 3) A self-important and serious intellectual
- 4) A sleazy tyrant

TIME: 2020

PLACE: A dilapidated section of the Chernobyl RBMK reactor.

RESET

RESET

A large, dilapidated room with a hand-wheel lock door and a large pane of glass running across the stage. Beyond the glass, the walls are peeling, and debris litters the floor. There is a corresponding hand-wheel lock door there as well. Downstage of the glass is a clean area occupied by LATEEN, a Black man in a white lab coat. There is a digital clock that counts the minutes and next to it an intercom panel. Lateen is sitting at a desk typing away on what looks like an old mainframe computer terminal with a primitive keyboard and monitor. A mail slot is near it embedded in the wall. A hazmat suit hangs on a hook. A pressurized airlock hisses. AIKO in a hazmat suit enters followed by JAMES blindfolded in a hazmat suit. Aiko removes her suit first and then helps James remove his blindfold and suit, revealing a T-shirt and jeans. Lateen shakes James's hand.

LATEEN. Ah, you're here, Mr. Gamble. Welcome! (*As Aiko hangs the hazmat suits on a hook, James seems a bit traumatized.*) I'm Dr. Lateen Anderson, but you may call me Lateen. I trust your journey here was pleasant? (*No response. James looks around in awe at the room.*) You won't get these sights on any official tour.

JAMES. Is this....?

LATEEN. We're in the Turbine Hall of Reactor 4 of Chernobyl. Yes, the one that exploded in 1986. Beneath us is the still hot radioactive ooze that would kill you in a matter of minutes were you not protected by the radiation-resistant cage you're standing in. Magnificent, isn't it?

JAMES. So this is why I had to be smuggled in?

LATEEN. We apologize for our inelegant method of transportation.

JAMES. I was in the trunk of a car for like forever.

LATEEN. I know! A life-changing journey into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in a smelly old boot? What a scam, right?

JAMES. The thought had crossed my mind...

LATEEN. Naturally! Well, if it's such a scam, perhaps you'd like to opt

RESET

out now! Simply say the word and you'll sign our NDA and be on the first flight back to the English-speaking world.

JAMES. Now I didn't say all that.

LATEEN. Oh? Well then what are you saying?

JAMES. I'm saying...The hotel, the meals, the flight, it was all sweet up until the whole trunk situation.

LATEEN. And now?

JAMES. You can't fake THIS. I mean, it's like forbidden to the public, right?

LATEEN. Indeed, and for good reason. The walls of the New Safe Confinement Dome have been put in place to contain the deadly radioactivity emanating from Reactor 4. At least that's the story being told in the media. It's actually been designed to house this specialized compartment within the Dome to conduct our experiment...Mr. Gamble, you are secure in this room. Beyond these walls however there is no such guarantee. The half-life of Plutonium 239 is over 24,000 years. That's how long it takes to lose half of its radioactivity. So it's still very active. For this reason, you must stay in this room at all times until you are cleared to leave. Is that understood, Mr. Gamble?

JAMES. Sure...uh...I didn't catch your...

LATEEN. Dr. Lateen Anderson. You may call me Lateen. Theoretical Physicist. Although saying that makes me sound like a physicist only in theory. But rest assured, I'm a real physicist.

JAMES. I go by Jim.

LATEEN. JIM! Fantastic. And I believe you've met my associate, Dr. Aiko Tanaka.

JAMES. Aiko.

AIKO. I prefer Dr. Tanaka. Behavioral psychologist. I will occasionally ask you some questions and give you some prompts to help direct your journey of self-discovery. Prompts such as... Jim, are you...still experiencing any lingering doubt? About this project?

JAMES. I...no. I mean, I'm good.

AIKO. Because we can end this all now if you're still feeling aggrieved about it.

JAMES. No...no. No, I'm not...I mean, I kinda was?...but...this

RESET

room...wow. And now? You promised a life-altering experience, so I'm curious what's gonna change. I'm totally 100 percent down for this...whatever it is.

AIKO. And what do you think this is?

JAMES. Like a self-improvement thing? A special experimental radioactive treatment? Am I getting superpowers? I mean, a week ago I was ready for this to just be an all-expenses paid vacation at the spa, you know. I mean, I know there's always a catch and that there's no free lunch, but your pop-up banner ad was all like "What do you have to lose except your best life?" And I was like...**THAT'S BOLD! I'M IN! AND THEN** it became like getting shoved into trunks of cars and like "oh I'm a hostage of the Russian mafia! Who needs two kidneys anyway!" But now, like, this is cool Honestly, I've come this far. It can be whatever. I've been in a rut, and at least this shakes things up.

AIKO. What specific kind of shake up are you looking for?

JAMES. Um...everything! I'm single with a shitty job. Politics and social media suck. And that was **BEFORE**...well...2020. Basically, I'm done with things, all the things, so whatever change happens at least something will be different.

AIKO. Not all "difference" is better.

JAMES. But the brochure said I'd discover my best self.

AIKO. And what do you / think is your...

LATEEN. (*interrupting*) And you shall! Right, Dr. Tanaka?

AIKO. (*Feeling undermined but faking enthusiasm.*) Yes, you shall!

LATEEN. Splendid! Now that we're through with that, I suppose an explanation is in order. We kept the details of this project hidden due to its sensitive nature. And also due to the fact that it is absurdly difficult to explain. **BUT** have you heard of Schrodinger's cat?

JAMES. It's the cat that's, like, dead and alive at the same time?

LATEEN. Well, we're off to a good start! (*Breezes through this a bit too quickly.*) A physicist named Erwin Schrodinger predicted a scenario in which a closed box contains a quantum particle that decays to trigger the release of a poison that then kills a cat. Now suppose the quantum particle doesn't decay and thus doesn't trigger the poison which then doesn't kill the cat. The cat would be alive. But in quantum physics, this

RESET

quantum particle can actually exist in superposition, meaning multiple states at the same time. As long as the box is closed and we can't confirm what's inside, the particle has both decayed and not decayed, which means the poison is both released and not released, and thus the cat is both alive and dead simultaneously! So is the box a casket or a kennel? (*James isn't sure if this is rhetorical or if he should answer.*)

LATEEN. IT'S BOTH!

JAMES. Am I gonna be tested on this?

AIKO. (*Glaring at Lateen.*) No! But you should have some concept of what we're doing for your full participation. So forget the cat in the casket. We're just gonna focus instead on the gifts you'll be receiving here today. Doesn't that sound good?

JAMES. Gifts sound good.

AIKO. Well, these are metaphorical gifts in a metaphorical gift box. Kinda like those question mark boxes in Mario. What's inside? A flower, a mushroom, a leaf? No one knows, but until you open it, everything is possible.

JAMES. This is like self-help 101. The Secret! You have to believe anything is possible and then manifest what you want.

AIKO. No, that is bullshit. What I mean is that scientifically everything IS truly possible. And our gift box has thousands, or really infinite, possible gifts waiting for you to open!

JAMES. That's a big box.

AIKO. No, it's not. Only when it's wrapped up, it's got infinite stuff inside. But when you unwrap it, it just has one gift. Make sense?

JAMES. Yeah, but like...if you're giving me a gift box that's been wrapped up, doesn't someone have to choose the gift inside first before they wrap it?

LATEEN. Precisely. In this case, the universe chose it.

JAMES. Okay, so the closed box has infinity gifts...

LATEEN. Infinite POTENTIAL gifts.

JAMES. Right, but the opened box only has one gift that the Universe chose?

LATEEN. Bravo!

JAMES. (*Proud of himself*) So then why not just keep it closed and let it

RESET

remain infinite gifts!

LATEEN. Astute! With infinite gifts, you'd be a wealthy man. Or even if there were two gifts, you'd be at least twice as well off. You know the Robert Frost poem? "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler." Well now with our experiment, you can travel down both roads and be one person! Double your pleasure!

JAMES. Awesome! (*Pause*) I still don't know what that means though.

AIKO. Look, why should the universe care if your gift box has a necktie versus golf balls? We don't know. But it does care! In all of human history we're left with one single shared reality, this one, and that's that. But today, we shall be exploring a second untapped reality / and

JAMES. And prove Schrodinger was right about the cat!

LATEEN. RIGHT! Except the whole cat idea was really his attempt to ridicule Bohr and Heisenberg who came up with the bonkers theory in Copenhagen. Schrodinger hated the idea, and yet his cat scenario is the most widely known aspect of the theory. Ironic, no?

JAMES. Wait, am I Schrodinger's cat?

LATEEN. Thrilling, isn't it?

JAMES. Doesn't that mean I could die?

AIKO. No, it's not -

LATEEN. You're not literally Schrodinger's cat. For one thing, we're in the room with you. If we tried to poison you, we would be poisoning ourselves!

AIKO. The dead cat thing is just a famous thought experiment. Our real experiment depends on you walking out of this room alive. Jim, you're safe here.

LATEEN. Let me answer why I know for a fact you won't die here by answering "Why Chernobyl?" It's an exotic place, forbidden. Must purely be for dramatic reasons, right? NOOOO, quite the opposite. In fact, Dr. Tanaka helped in the design of a preliminary version of this experiment...in Fukushima.

JAMES. Fukushima? Where they also had a meltdown?

LATEEN. Indeed, the meltdown is the key element here. By catalyzing an explosion approaching the temperature of the sun, the meltdown

RESET

generated energy 100 times greater than its designed capacity. That's enough to create a mirror universe...or a baby universe.

JAMES. A baby universe?

LATEEN. Yes, it comes from Einstein in fact. Our universe could give birth to an identical twin, so if our universe might be considered the parent, then a mirror or baby universe would be connected to our own via some umbilical cord. It just so happens that the Chernobyl meltdown produced this exact phenomenon, and so it is here where that umbilical cord exists. We've conceived a way to exploit that space-time bridge and bring your mirror self from the baby universe into our own world. "How?" you ask. Well, unfortunately, the technology doesn't exist yet.

JAMES. So it's science fiction.

LATEEN. No, you're thinking too linearly! I calculate at the current rate of scientific progress, the technology will exist in approximately 34 years. Meaning in 34 years, the Lateen of the baby universe using the principle of quantum entanglement will be able to send the Jim of the baby universe through the inter-universe umbilical cord back into the Chernobyl of the parent universe 34 years earlier, which so happens to be here. Today.

JAMES. That's insane.

LATEEN. Oh very!

JAMES. I still don't get it.

AIKO. Basically Jim, you will be meeting yourself from the future.

JIM. And he's my best self?

LATEEN. Perhaps! But the one thing you need to understand for now is that the "gift box" Dr. Tanaka was referring to earlier is not the room you're standing in. Rather there is a literal gift box inside this room! Which, upon opening, will provide you with the insights of knowledge, the meaning of life even, which you most desire. But you only get one box, so you will need to follow our instructions if you ever want to see the contents of that box. Now, will you follow our instructions?

JAMES. Yeah.

AIKO. Jim, I'm going to need you to enter into this keyboard the numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4 but in an order of your own choosing. Can you do that? (*James sees that the computer terminal is obsolete technology.*)

RESET

JAMES. I don't know. Can this computer handle that?

AIKO. It may look old, but it's quite powerful and robust, cannot be hacked into. And it's on its own power circuit, which means it's impervious to outages.

JAMES. In case you forgot to pay the bills?

AIKO. Something like that. Can you please give your response?

JAMES. Sounds easy. So ... 4, 2...

AIKO. Whoa! We can't know your numbers. Now come up with a different order and type it.

JAMES. Right....and the reason why I'm doing this? Is this like a test?

AIKO. There are no right or wrong answers. Choose any order you want. (*James types four numbers into the keyboard and then hits enter. Two echoey noises are heard.*)

JAMES. What was that?

AIKO. The sound you heard was a container being delivered in that drop box over there. You are to open the container to reveal a message that will guide you to your best self.

JAMES. (*Playfully*) Okay. Best self here I come. (*James opens the mail slot to reveal a metallic box. He opens the box cautiously and takes out a piece of paper inside. Aiko brings out a meditation sound bowl.*)

AIKO. Whatever you do, don't read it aloud. Instead, read it to yourself and contemplate its meaning.

JAMES. Contemplate its meaning? Like a fortune cookie?

AIKO. Sure, like a fortune cookie...The message you hold in your hand will shape the rest of your life. (*Striking the meditation sound bowl.*)

Take a deep breath! Meditate on the words with all five senses. Become the words. (*James closes his eyes for a while before a loud jolt ramps up to the lights going out. Then the lights come back on except now on the other side of the glass is an OLD MAN in rags looking around confused and afraid with a sense of resignation. Lateen writes down the time in his notebook.*)

AIKO. Jim Gamble of the parent universe, I'd like you to meet...Jim Gamble of the baby universe!

JAMES. That dude looks nothing like me.

LATEEN. I'm inclined to agree, but nevertheless, this must be you. 34

RESET

years into the future.

AIKO. A lot can happen in 34 years.

JAMES. Maybe you contacted the wrong baby universe? Is this a joke? Like you just had some old dude hiding back there this whole time?

LATEEN. There is a way to verify if this is you. You and your mirror self should be connected through quantum entanglement such that whatever happens to you would happen to him as well instantaneously. And so if you use a knife to cut yourself a large enough wound, your older self will instantaneously have the scar to show for it.

JAMES. That's theoretical, right?

LATEEN. No. (*Lateen hands James a pocket knife.*)

AIKO. Lateen...

JAMES. You want me to cut myself?

AIKO. Jim, there's another way. You don't / have to go through with that...

LATEEN. (*Interrupting*) Aiko, please. A large and distinctive enough incision that would create a unique and visible scar.

JAMES. I can't believe I'm doing this. (*James begins to cut, but Lateen stops him.*)

LATEEN. Wait. First you need to see that your older self does not currently have the scar.

JAMES. But he's supposed to have the scar already. Like if I do this now, then he should have it.

LATEEN. But you haven't done it yet. The scar is in a state of superposition...

JAMES. Superposition?

LATEEN. Multiple simultaneous states. So the scar is both there and not there at the same time!

JAMES. Like the whole cat thing. So...basically I'm writing new memories for this guy as I speak.

AIKO. Jim, you don't need to cut yourself if you don't want to.

JAMES. I wanna see this. (*To the old man*) Hey you! Jim! Can you show me your arms? (*Old Man does show his arms, revealing many scars.*)

JAMES. Jesus! He's suicidal!

RESET

LATEEN. Perhaps the scar test won't work after all. (*Jim puts the knife away in his pocket and turns to Aiko.*)

JAMES. "Not all difference is better," huh?

AIKO. Actually, there's a better method to authenticate that this is you. It involves asking your future self something special that only he would know.

JAMES. Like what?

AIKO. A secret? Some intimate event or personal detail. Think quickly.

JAMES. You're putting me on the spot.

AIKO. It could be as simple as an email password.

JAMES. Fine. What's my email password? Hey, old man, what's my email password? (*No response.*)

AIKO. Hmm...Why not try a secret you've never told anyone?

JAMES. Okay.

AIKO. Again, no right or wrong answer. Just something private.

JAMES. Let me think.

AIKO. It could be like a thing or a place or a name only you'd know.

JAMES. Fine, I got one. Old man, tell me about Paul Leland. (*No response.*) Paul Leland. Who is he? (*No response.*) He doesn't know.

OLD MAN. Paul Leland! Paul leland...paul leland....paul leland....(*The Old Man pulls out a wallet and removes an ID card from it. He shows it to James.*)

JAMES. How did you get that? Who gave that to you?

OLD MAN. Paul Leland! I didn't see you waving at me. You were waving at me! Why didn't I see you?

AIKO. Is this old man you?

JAMES. Yes. It has to be.

AIKO. (*Going to see the ID card.*) Why do you have Paul Leland's driver's license?

JAMES. Paul's a friend...who gave this to me...as a memento. Anyway, it's something only I would have. That has to be me. (*Then it hits him.*) OH MY GOD THAT'S ME! Whaaaaa...

LATEEN. So what happens next? Well, 34 years have passed. You may ask him anything. Well, almost anything. There are some ground rules. Jim?

RESET

JAMES. (*Snapping out of his shock.*) Sorry, yeah...you were saying?

LATEEN. The ground rules are...You can't ask about any proper nouns or specific names or dates in the future, but you may ask about general things like are you married? Yes or no questions. That sort of thing. And though Dr. Tanaka and I will be in the room monitoring and taking notes, we are not to be the topic of your conversation. Likewise, we will not interfere unless necessary. Finally, Dr. Tanaka will conduct a routine debrief afterwards. Is any of this unclear? (*James shakes his head no.*) You may begin. Ask away!

JAMES. So, Old Jim, am I really gonna win the lottery? (*To the older man*) Hey Jim, old Jim, do I win the lottery? Hello?

OLD MAN. Nothing matters.

JAMES. Well, that's what this piece of paper says "You will win the lottery." So it kinda does matter right now. Do I win the lottery or not?

OLD MAN. Winning the lottery doesn't matter.

JAMES. Just answer the question. Do I win the lottery?

OLD MAN. Yes.

JAMES. Yes! Then you can afford to take better care of yourself and have a healthier lifestyle and not look like this, right? What happened to you?

OLD MAN. (*Mumbling*) We are nothing. I am nothing. Nothing matters. That's what he says. Day and night. Nothing matters. Nothing matters. On and on...like a fucking mantra until you give in and believe it. Nothing matters.

JAMES. Who's doing this to you?

OLD MAN. Who? You! Get away, you piece of shit! I was doing fine before. Run! Run! Before they change you...(*The Old Man works himself into a frenzy and moves around the room frantically.*)

OLD MAN. (*Crying*) Nothing matters.

JAMES. What? What does that mean "nothing matters"? What do you mean, old man? (*The old man drops down to the ground, apparently having a seizure and choking on something and then squirms before going limp.*)

AIKO. Lateen!

JAMES. Holy fuck! Did I just die?

RESET

AIKO. LATEEN! (*Lateen springs up, grabs a hazmat suit, and exits.*)

JAMES. Oh my God! I saw my own fucking death?

AIKO. Jim, look at me. Take deep breaths. (*Jim does so.*)

JAMES. Where did Lateen go?

AIKO. Lateen will check up on future you. How are you doing?

JAMES. What do you mean? I'm freaking out!

AIKO. Keep breathing deep breaths. It'll help reduce the stress you feel.

JAMES. I don't want to reduce my stress. I want to know what the fuck was that!? (*Wearing a hazmat suit, Lateen enters the side of the room with the old man and feels the old man's pulse. He motions his hand across his neck and drags the old man out of the room.*)

JAMES. FUCK! WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS PLACE?

AIKO. Please stay calm.

JAMES. CALM???. How are you not freaking out? There's a dead body there? And it's ME? Where is he taking me?

AIKO. To the incinerator.

JAMES. You need to let me the fuck out!

AIKO. I'm sorry, but we can't do that.

JAMES. FUUUUUCK! AHHHHHHH! (*Smashes his fist against the wall.*)

AIKO. Calm yourself! Now I'm sorry you had to see that.

JAMES. The Old Man said to run. What did you do to him? To me? Who the fuck are you people?

AIKO. Jim, I'm gonna pause things right here for our first debrief.

JAMES. I just saw myself die for Christ's sake.

AIKO. Of course. Tell me about that. Now what's going on in your head?

JAMES. SHOCK?!? Like, that moment just answered one of life's fundamental mysteries. "When are you going to die?" And there it was...on a platter!

AIKO. A privilege many would envy.

JAMES. Privilege???!? Or burden?

AIKO. Of course, I understand your uneasiness, but I want to remind you that his death isn't a death sentence for you. You're still here, and you're perfectly capable of making different decisions that lead to

RESET

different outcomes.

JAMES. I'm gonna avoid coming back here in 34 years, I can tell you that much!

AIKO. But it happened. Your older self showed up.

JAMES. That's not gonna happen to me.

AIKO. IT ALREADY HAPPENED TO YOU! So then my question is who will you be now? What will you do differently starting today?

JAMES. Everything!

AIKO. More specifically, how will witnessing this event affect the choices you make?

JAMES. HOW? It'll change every fucking thing I do. How could it NOT? I mean, he basically did nothing with his life. I mean, we apparently win the lottery. That's what it says on the slip of paper, and the old man confirmed it. But then that means fuckall because in 34 years I'm nothing but a sad sack of shit. No, man, that is NOT me. I mean, I understand that that WAS me, but I'm not going to make the same decisions he made. I'm gonna take those lottery winnings and invest it in therapy, a home gym and go vegan and do yoga and marathons and shit. Whatever it takes not to be that fucking guy.

AIKO. Look at you!

JAMES. Wait a second. Is that what this is? Scared straight? Come to think of it, I do feel like my best self! Now, I have some meaning and purpose. I've never even thought of going vegan before! Where did that come from?

AIKO. It was in you this whole time.

JAMES. AND big announcement... I'm gonna go buy that lottery ticket first thing when I get back to civilization.

AIKO. Well, let's talk about that...

JAMES. Fuck, in a weird way your advertising was 100 percent true. I'm like a new man now. Holy fuck. Thank you so much!

AIKO. I'm glad you're having an epiphany, but...

JAMES. Best thing that ever happened to me! I mean, in all those years of remedial therapy, I've never had a breakthrough like this, where I know now in my bones that I gotta step it up, be a better man. I don't want to die in some fucking abandoned warehouse in the middle of

RESET

goddamn Chernobyl. Crisis averted! I could kiss you right now.

AIKO. (*Sarcastically*) Yay! I just have one question...

JAMES. I FEEL LIKE I COULD DO ANYTHING RIGHT NOW!

Sorry, you had a question?

AIKO. So you think you could re-enter society now as your best self?

JAMES. Absolutely. I mean, I still have some trauma to work through, but a little trauma might not be a bad thing.

AIKO. Right, in the two roads diverged analogy, you looked down one road and saw that it was bad, so now you will take the other road.

JAMES. I'm all about that higher road now.

AIKO. Great! (*Pressing the intercom button and speaking into it.*) Phase one completed!

JAMES. There's more than one phase?

AIKO. Well, it's up to you. You can continue if you want to.

JAMES. I'm already my best self. Why would I continue?

AIKO. Well...“Crisis averted” you said. What if in fact you don't avert this crisis?

JAMES. I just said I was a changed man.

AIKO. Yeah, you feel that way now. But how do you know that's not temporary?

JAMES. You weren't listening.

AIKO. No, I heard you. You sounded like someone spouting cliched New Year's resolutions. How many people make good on those resolutions?

JAMES. How many of them saw their own death?

AIKO. Seeing your own death is definitely a kick in the pants, no doubt about it, but its effects may eventually wear off. When you get sick of yoga or vegan food, then what? You'll return back to your default non-best self.

JAMES. But I'm saying that that won't happen!

AIKO. Yes, but 34 years is a long time. Enough for you to regress backwards gradually...maybe so gradually that you don't even notice.

JAMES. You're...this is...I'm having a moment, and you're like...fucking with my vibe! This is overwhelming. Do you understand that?

RESET

AIKO. Of course, I do. It's just that you will end up / like him...

JAMES. STOP! (*Aiko backs away. Lateen enters.*)

LATEEN. Everything here under control? (*Silence.*)

AIKO. Yes, we've debriefed. Successfully.

LATEEN. Good. Jim, do you have any questions?

JAMES. Is she always this annoying? (*Lateen is confused.*)

JAMES. I mean, you believe people change, right?

LATEEN. Of course they do!

JAMES. So then that future old me won't be me if I just...don't do what he does, right?

LATEEN. Theoretically.

JAMES. See?

LATEEN. But there's also a high probability that epiphanies do not play out the way you anticipate.

JAMES. You too?

LATEEN. My apologies, but this isn't based on my personal feelings about you. It's based on fact. And as an entangled pair, you and your future self are forever intertwined. Meaning that that could still be you.

AIKO. Exactly my point.

JAMES. That makes no sense. If I just live a little better, I won't die here.

AIKO. That's what we all hope! But there's only one way to know if that's how it all plays out. Jim, you've just been through phase one. Phase two, however, is the next step in your evolution toward your best self. Here we would be able to confirm whether the positive changes you've made in your new best self attitude bear fruit.

JAMES. Oh I get it. I'm not done being your lab rat.

AIKO. Just so we're clear, scientists don't ask lab rats if they want to continue. (*Pause*) Jim, I owe you an apology. I should not have messed with your vibe. As a psychologist, I should know better. I promise I won't do that again.

JAMES. Yeah, alright.

LATEEN. Looks like everyone's made up. So are we ready for the next phase of the experiment?

JAMES. I've already come this far.

RESET

LATEEN. Yes, and in fact, an alternate version of your future self will be appearing at any moment.

JAMES. But I'm dead. I saw myself die!

LATEEN. That timeline's version of you is dead and gone. A second alternate timeline's version of you is still very much alive.

JAMES. And he's better?

AIKO. Again, we don't know. We'll find out.

JAMES. He's my best self, isn't he?

AIKO. Potentially, yes.

JAMES. It can't be worse than the first guy. I can't believe you almost had me fooled. Me ending up as a piece of shit? I don't think so. I told you I would make changes to my life.

AIKO. Perhaps.

JAMES. Is he getting close?

AIKO. Yes. We just need you to open the mail slot and read the message on the slip of paper. (*Aiko hits a key, and a thud is heard behind the mail slot. Aiko brings out a meditation sound bowl. James sighs and once again returns to the mail slot where he finds another metallic box with another slip of paper inside.*)

JAMES. (*Reading*) Hmmmm....that's weird.

AIKO. (*Striking the meditation sound bowl.*) The message you hold in your hand will shape the rest of your life. Take a deep breath! Meditate on the words with all five senses. Become the words. (*The lights go out with a loud jolt and then come back on with power restored. As before, an OLD MAN is now standing in the upstage room but this time wearing casually futuristic clothes, looking around confused but with more confidence and better health than the last time. Lateen writes in his notebook.*)

OLD MAN. Could it be? Lateen? It's like I never left.

LATEEN. (*To Jim*) See? As I said, still very much alive.

JAMES. Jim?

OLD MAN. Hey, you! This is a real trip. God, I remember Chernobyl like it was yesterday. (*Points at Lateen and Aiko.*) These fucking people, right?

AIKO. Ahem, we are not here.

RESET

OLD MAN. Oh, right. Sorry.

JAMES. What do you remember?

OLD MAN. Oh, I remember everything. Ask me anything!

AIKO. For your first question, you may administer the test of authentication.

JAMES. What?

AIKO. A question that only you would know the answer to.

JAMES. Oh shit. Can't I just ask the same question?

OLD MAN. Yeah, Paul Leland. (*The Old Man pulls out Paul Leland's ID card. Noticeably it's in better shape than previously seen.*)

JAMES. It's in mint condition.

OLD MAN. I kept it nice and pristine remembering I might have to use it someday.

JAMES. I'm pretty confident this is me.

AIKO. I insist on a new question.

JAMES. What's her deal?

AIKO. Jim!

OLD MAN. No, man, she's cool. Maybe I just swiped this card off the last guy or overheard your conversation. I could be a fraud. And Jim... (*Whispering loudly*) You're better off doing what she says. And I mean that in general.

JAMES. Really?

OLD MAN. Hey, trust me. She'll take care of you, I promise.

AIKO. PLEASE!

JAMES. What does that even mean?

AIKO. I think what old you is saying is that I'm a professional and know what I'm doing. Okay. When you're ready, please think of another authentication question.

JAMES. Right...

AIKO. Quickly. First thing that pops up.

JAMES. Got it. How did you study for the SAT?

OLD MAN. Hehe. All-nighter after snorting Steve's stash of adderall.

JAMES. Authentication complete! Thank God it's you. For a second I thought I was gonna become the other guy... Wait...you're not gonna die on me, are you?

RESET

OLD MAN. Oh, that was some traumatic shit. Changed my life.

JAMES. I KNEW IT! I DO CHANGE!

OLD MAN. But will I die here and now? Funny thing...you'd think I'd know since I was you at one point and remember being on the other side of that glass. But to be honest, I haven't the foggiest.

JAMES. What? But you remember the first guy dying....

OLD MAN. Hell yeah. Me though? It's like a big gap. I remember being you seeing me show up and then nothing, a blank space. Almost like that memory's been redacted. Except for that one detail...ask away!

JAMES. So tell me about ourselves!

OLD MAN. Oh...uh...married... kids....

JAMES. Who's our wife?

AIKO. Jim, no!

OLD MAN. Oh Janice is a wonderful woman!

JAMES. Janice! I don't know any Janice. How do we meet?

OLD MAN. How do you meet who?

JAMES. Janice?

OLD MAN. Oh, I don't know any Janice.

JAMES. You just said she was our wife.

OLD MAN. Well, I know my wife, and her name is not Janice.

AIKO. James, remember no specifics are to be mentioned. If you do, then you risk altering the future.

JAMES. You mean, the future just changed? What happened to Janice?

OLD MAN. Janice who?

AIKO. A Janice exists somewhere, but learning her name somehow prevents you from meeting her. Finding potential mates is a counter-intuitive and messy process...as are most things in life. Any disruption to that process could alter it forever. So once again, NO NAMES.

JAMES. No names, got it!

OLD MAN. But hey Jimbo, rest assured, the missus we do have, who shall remain nameless, is a keeper! You'd be nothing without her.

JAMES. Hey, I'll take it! So what else is going on?

OLD MAN. Um, what else? Good health...good job....good pension...you won't believe how rare pensions are now. I'm one of the lucky ones.

RESET

JAMES. (*Huge relief*) THANK GOD! You have no idea how relieved I am that you're doing good!

OLD MAN. Hey, I tried. I did it all for you, man!

JAMES. And it was all because we saw the previous bum, right?

OLD MAN. Maybe that lit the fire under me. I don't know. But it worked! Because now I'm out there helping men like that who are down on their luck and caught under the wheels of the system.

JAMES. Really? How?

OLD MAN. Well, more recently I donate loads to charity, because for all intents and purposes, the world has gone to shit.

JAMES. You mean more than it has already.

OLD MAN. Pfft. You don't even know what the bottom looks like. I mean, I'm starting to think how bad things get is bottomless.

JAMES. Why? What's happened?

OLD MAN. The oligarchy led by...(*Catches himself before saying the name.*) this one guy I promise you've never even heard of. But he's bigger than anyone even today. I mean he's like this massive dictator that's figured out how to hold onto power and wealth indefinitely. Basically social services...you remember things like Medicare and Social Security...well they're all gone. The police and military, however, are funded like there's no tomorrow. It's kind of amazing to think back on what we lost. You know how the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice?

JAMES. No, what is that?

LATEEN. (*Interjecting*) Martin Luther King, Jr. paraphrasing the abolitionist Theodore Parker. And I'm British! You need to teach yourself some American history.

OLD MAN. Right. Little Jimbo, read some history goddamnit! Haha! Anyway, the point was the moral arc of the universe is like a horizon way out there where justice will be served eventually...but it must be a very very very long arc, because I can't even begin to see the justice part of it.

JAMES. But we're there fighting the good fight?

OLD MAN. Hell yes. I volunteer. I donate. Oh I said that already. I...and this is relatively new....I protest. But these are massive VR

RESET

protests. Billions of avatars together in unison! It's beautiful and the best part is law enforcement can't do anything as long as you're behind an online firewall.

JAMES. You mean there's no in-person protests?

OLD MAN. Ha. Try that shit in person and you'd be hauled off and convicted so fast it'd make your head spin. These jails are like torture tent concentration camps. It's nuts, man.

JAMES. I really wish I could stop all that knowing what I know!

OLD MAN. You can't. It's too big. It's like...something that already started back when I was you, so you're not in a position to do anything. I mean, if you were a billionaire, maybe you could do something.

JAMES. But that's not gonna happen, is it? The slip of paper. It says I don't win the lottery.

OLD MAN. Exactly.

JAMES. So...what? I have to go out and make a billion dollars from scratch?

OLD MAN. I don't know. But if you did, then you'd have a shot.

JAMES. I'm so glad you're okay at least.

OLD MAN. Yeah, I'm good. I mean, they could hack into my VR headset and figure out who my avatar is and all that shit. It could all come crashing down at any moment.

JAMES. You don't sound worried.

OLD MAN. I'm not. I'm here with you right now. In the idyllic past.

JAMES. Doesn't seem idyllic to me. I guess we don't know what we have till it's gone.

OLD MAN. Absolutely...(Coughs) Excuse me...(Coughs) Oh...could I get some water? (Coughs some more) Water! (*Lateen exits while Old Man continues flailing.*)

JAMES. Hey! Jim! Jimbo! You okay, buddy?

OLD MAN. I...I...

JAMES. Stay with me! I think Lateen's on his way with some water! (*Lateen enters the room behind the glass wearing a hazmat suit carrying a paper cup of water. He hands it to the Old Man, who is coughing and can't even take a sip of it before he drops the water and collapses onto the ground. Lateen feels the Old Man's pulse, signals his hand across*

RESET

his neck, and exits carrying the old man.)

JAMES. Noooo! Are you fucking kidding me?????

AIKO. Jim, breathe.

JAMES. FUUUUUUCK!

AIKO. Jim, look into my eyes.

JAMES. Why do I keep dying?

AIKO. Jim, look at me. *(James looks at Aiko and slowly begins to calm down.)*

AIKO. Deep breaths. *(Jim does it reluctantly.)* Good. I need you to calm down before I explain something to you.

JAMES. That you've been lying to me!

AIKO. Please calm yourself.

JAMES. Did you know I was gonna die?

AIKO. No one knows these things.

JAMES. Bullshit! Why are you so calm?

AIKO. That's my job! Listen, the last thing we want is a dead body on our hands.

JAMES. Oh, I'm sure it's a huge inconvenience!

AIKO. Jim, maybe it's your fate.

JAMES. To die as part of your experiment? So when I signed up for this, I signed a death warrant?

AIKO. Far from it. You heard yourself. You live a full life. A legacy of philanthropy, family, activism. You become a model citizen.

JAMES. Then why do I need to come back here?

AIKO. Jim, you're in a bootstrapping paradox. You've seen what you become, which means you will become that. You are the cause and the effect. There's no escaping it.

JAMES. But I can escape it. Janice was my wife, and then she was forgotten.

AIKO. Yes, specifics may change, but your overall life doesn't. For example, your wife was no longer Janice, but you were still a happily married man. That didn't change.

JAMES. Sorry, but marrying a completely different person is a HUGE change.

AIKO. Fine, it's a huge change, but it's a blindspot change.

RESET

JAMES. A what?

AIKO. When you authenticate yourself with a highly specific question, you are nailing down the universe so that the link between you and the Old You is confirmed, narrowing down the infinite possibilities of your life to a single possibility, causing the universe to send your life into overwrite mode / and overwriting

JAMES. And overwriting Janice?

AIKO. Yes, and so when you heard her name, the universe was able to quickly cobble together a new timeline where you have a different wife.

JAMES. You mean, a timeline where Janice is dead?

AIKO. No, she's probably alive, just not married to you. We can't know exactly though, which is why we call it the blindspot. That's why old you can't remember if he dies or not. And that's also why we need authentication to happen early in your interaction. Only after the highly specific question does the old man enter the blindspot and thus can be edited and even erased to give you agency to change.

JAMES. So I can erase my own death?

AIKO. It's possible.

JAMES. Possible isn't good enough. If coming back here MIGHT kill me, I won't want to.

AIKO. Jim. You will want to!

JAMES. How do you know?

AIKO. Because I saw you, the older you! When your older self walked in, there was no evidence of coercion or trauma. In fact, your older self seemed excited at the idea of revisiting you, himself as a younger man. He was enjoying a literal nostalgia trip. And so, you will voluntarily come back here 34 years from now knowing full well your death could be around the corner.

JAMES. But my kids? My wife?

AIKO. I'm sure you had them fully taken care of with insurance policies and savings. Think of it. Knowing you're coming back here means you'd be able to plan for the future with more foresight and urgency. You've been given a gift. The gift of knowledge. Knowledge is power. And on top of that, you're a hero. You will go down in history books as subject zero in the proof of universal deterministic interference! That's

RESET

the name of this experiment. You'll be famous.

JAMES. A famous guinea pig? Oh boy! I've never even heard of any famous guinea pig. And hey, the first old man was also a famous guinea pig, but that didn't stop him from being a bum, did it? (*Aiko shrugs.*) Oh please, you knew the first guy was gonna be like that!

AIKO. No, not exactly.

JAMES. Not exactly?

AIKO. We only have guesses for what the results will be. And I suspected a bum, as you call him, was one possibility if the message said you'd win the lottery. And through our psychological projections, we believed you'd respond to that by bankrupting yourself in the pursuit of that winning lottery ticket.

JAMES. Projections? Based on what?

AIKO. Remember the psych test you took to get here.

JAMES. The online personality quiz?

AIKO. We called it that to make it seem fun. We made projections from it, predicting your behavior and state of mind, and now that you've seen your future self, our projections seemed to be accurate.

JAMES. But he said I did win the lottery.

AIKO. How much did you win? Was it enough to offset your losses? And did you spend the money wisely? And how about all the lost potential you wasted obsessing over a winning ticket?

JAMES. But seeing that bum changed me!

AIKO. Did it though? It was only after you got the second slip of paper saying you WOULDN'T win the lottery that you were able to meet the second old man who was an improvement. Apparently, you learned a little modesty.

JAMES. Why didn't you just tell me to be modest, so I wouldn't be a bum?

AIKO. Again, it was a hypothesis only. We don't know everything, and that's why we are doing this experiment. Speaking of which, let's debrief. What's going on in your head now?

JAMES. Well...I'm having thoughts like I'm a lab rat. Expendable.

AIKO. And how does that make you feel?

JAMES. I don't know. Trapped?

RESET

AIKO. Jim, that's understandable. And that's why we will always ask you whether you want to continue, so you do not feel trapped. As far as feeling expendable, please rest assured that no one here has actually died, because they're YOU and you're still alive! Those future yous were merely single possibilities in a spectrum of all possibilities.

JAMES. Meaning?

AIKO. Well...Lateen would probably say "In the double slit experiment, quantum theory showed that..."

JAMES. What the hell does "quantum" mean anyway?

AIKO. The way I understand it..."quantum" means really really small?? The smallest you can get?

JAMES. So a quantum leap...is really a TINY leap? (*Aiko nods.*) Wow, TV really led me astray on that one.

AIKO. But Jim, we ARE really really small compared to the universe. And yet you've already altered the universe with two completely different future selves that could make a thousand small decisions that change the destiny of the world.

JAMES. Me change the destiny of the world? Like whether or not I buy a cup of coffee could change who becomes the President or something?

AIKO. Sounds far-fetched, but we're talking about a 34-year gap between you and future you. A lot of your new and improved destiny can happen in that time. That's enough to change the fate of a man. Perhaps even the fate of the world...if you found the right man.

JAMES. And you think I'M the right man?

AIKO. Yes, I do.

JAMES. Really?

AIKO. It's because of you that we now have our first two points of reference on our spectrum of possibilities.

JAMES. Two points? You mean, the bum and the good guy? They died for your two points or whatever? You know, I think I'd like to start living this life I've been promised. Maybe go meet my wife....whoever and wherever she is? Debrief was a success! I'm done here. Thanks for the worst vacation ever. See ya in 34 years...unless...

AIKO. Unless what? (*Lateen enters.*) We've debriefed.

LATEEN. Excellent. And?

RESET

AIKO. And Jim would like to end his participation in the study...unless...you were saying?

JAMES. Nothing. You have your two points on the spectrum. You're welcome. (*James starts to put on the hazmat suit.*)

LATEEN. So you're not continuing on to discover your best self?

JAMES. I think I've already discovered my best self.

LATEEN. But what if there's an even better best self beyond them?

JAMES. An "even better best self"? I'm a copywriter for Big Pharma who's written some pretty cringey things myself, so that ain't gonna work on me. Good is good enough. You said I could end this at any time, and I'm out.

LATEEN. You're out?

JAMES. Two roads diverged in a whatever. Two.

LATEEN. Right. That was a poem. This is science. It's not two. It's actually...three.

JAMES. You said two. See, I knew you weren't telling me things.

AIKO. We weren't telling you for a reason. If you knew from the start that there were multiple phases, you wouldn't have taken each one as seriously. Play a game with extra lives and a few deaths are meaningless collateral damage. Play it with ONE life and you will play to win.

LATEEN. And now you have a chance to navigate the third and final reality with the cumulative wisdom gained from realities one and two, resulting in even more bounty in three. Triple your pleasure!

JAMES. And if I choose the third reality, the second one will be erased, including my kids, correct? Well, my son James Jr. ain't too fond of being erased, so he's told me to tell you "Fuck off." I've seen enough game shows to know you're tempting me with garbage behind door number 3.

LATEEN. Well, I hadn't realized I was such a sinister figure as a game show host!

AIKO. Jim, if you want to end this, we will respect your wishes. But know that-

JAMES. That what? If I roll the dice again, there's a chance everything would be super-duper awesome? No, because what if everything's way worse?

RESET

LATEEN. Precisely! Then that would answer the age-old question of whether the universe is cruel and unjust or truly indifferent. We're on the verge of knowing. Aren't you curious?

JAMES. Curiosity killed the cat.

LATEEN. Well you're in luck! In our experiment, the cat is dead AND alive!

JAMES. I don't want ANY death! Look, you clearly want me to keep on going, but dangle the mystery box all you want, it ain't happening. You heard future me. I have no power. None of us do.

LATEEN. But you DO have the power. You can choose to roll the dice one more time. If you walk out that door, you're telling me you won't regret that you might have rolled the dice to reveal a reality in which the world does NOT burn? A reality in which your life is not a meaningless charade?

JAMES. Is this my choice or not?

LATEEN. (*Heated*) It is your choice. But since you are either unable or unwilling to think about the ramifications of that choice, I have elected to do it for you. If you exit that door, you will be forever plagued with the guilt of enabling an oligarchy. Your guilt will thus drive you to become a small-time humanitarian working with futility in a system where real change is no longer possible. Hence, your life will become utterly meaningless. Here in the now, your life does have meaning. What you decide in the next few minutes will have the power to alter our entire world and yet you shrug and shirk this momentous endowment with the insouciance of a child who wants to play at small-town life. Who in their right minds wouldn't give everything to stand here and take a chance, if not for his own sake then for that of humanity itself?

JAMES. But things could also get worse!

LATEEN. Then you'll have to make them better. Are you truly ready to give up on your one chance to change the world? Or have we wasted a multi-billion dollar enterprise on an unworthy ingrate dumber than a sack of rocks?!?!?! (*Silence.*) Aiko, let me know when he decides to grow the fuck up! (*Lateen exits but leaves the door open. Long pause.*)

AIKO. Bless his heart, but Lateen has issues to work through.

JAMES. That's putting it mildly. I almost punched him.

RESET

AIKO. Sometimes I want to too. But I don't, because Lateen may put on a whole preppy scientist act, but deep down, he's a bumpkin like me. Oh yeah, he's not British either. I mean, not originally. He's 'Murican! But his mom shipped him across the pond as a kid, and now he flaunts that accent like a shield with the words "I'm special!" written on it. So annoying! (*Aiko presses a button on the intercom.*) Yes, Dr. Tanaka requesting transit for test subject James Gamble. Great, see you in 30 minutes. (*To James*) Now we wait. (*Long pause as they wait.*)

JAMES. Do you want me to stay?

AIKO. Your choice is your choice. Doesn't matter what I think.

JAMES. It matters to me.

AIKO. You wanna know what I think? I think my dad was a lot like Lateen. A scientist. Hard-headed. Intellectual. Basically an asshole. He moved our entire family from Japan to America for science when I was only 10. At the time I was devastated, losing all my friends, my language, my culture, everything I knew. How dare he take that away from me? I hated my dad for that. I used to stay up late at night and wonder who I might have been had I stayed in Kobe and lived my "real" life. Because my life in America just wasn't who I was supposed to be. Well, at least that's what I thought until the morning a 6.9 earthquake hit Kobe completely leveling the apartment we would've been living in. No survivors. I realized my father didn't destroy my life; he saved it. That little Kobe girl died and was reborn as me. Never would've thunk it. No one can ever know how it's all gonna turn out. All of life is a spin of the bottle.

JAMES. I could really use a drink right now. (*Aiko plays some country music from an old tape player. Then she goes behind the computer and pulls out a bottle of Jack Daniels.*)

JAMES. Well damn, Dr. Tanaka!

AIKO. Aiko. I usually pop it out when no one's looking, but what the hell. It's been a bit of a day. (*James takes the bottle and drinks. He passes it to Aiko, who resists sarcastically.*) Oh, no thanks. I'm working...(*She grabs the bottle and takes a big swig that impressively goes on for a while*) Jim, I get homesick out here in bumfuck Ukraine, so lemme tell ya, this here is home in a bottle.

RESET

JAMES. They drink Jack Daniels in Kobe?

AIKO. Oh I forgot to mention. My dad moved us to Tennessee.

JAMES. Really?

AIKO. (*Staring Jim down.*) What, motherfucker, I don't look like I come from Tennessee?

JAMES. No, I meant...I...Earlier...I was gonna say...if you weren't busy later, I wanted to maybe get a drink with you, and now I have.

AIKO. Having a drink with test subjects isn't usually allowed.

JAMES. Yeah, well, I don't usually decide the fate of the universe. But here we are.

AIKO. To the fate of the universe! (*They take turns downing some Jack.*)

AIKO. No matter what you choose, you've already been really brave coming this far.

JAMES. I'm not brave. I came here because I couldn't stand my life.

AIKO. But you did something about it. You signed up for an experiment that was shady as fuck, and you made it all the way here to the exclusive Chernobyl Honky Tonk Bar! (*In a Ukrainian accent.*)

Budmo! (*Another swig.*) Hey wait, are you 21? Let's see some ID!

(*James plays along by miming showing her an ID.*) Can I see your friend's ID? (*James pulls out Paul Leland's ID from his wallet and shows it to her.*) Must be a pretty special friend to receive this gift from him...(James seems distraught.) Hey, are you okay? (*Turns off the music.*)

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