

Humanity for You

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The following program is brought to you by the Center for Xenophobia Awareness. Because the hatred of all that is different is just wrong. Explore someone else's world.

Last week on Humanity for You we examined the pubescent female. This week we will be taking a look at the adult male. Our subject today is 'John Smith' a twenty-three year old male of the species *Homo sapiens*, family *Hominidae*. He is an average specimen of the human race, and when last we checked in on him after last year's tagging, he weighed in at 87 dracha, was four point seven hectares in height, and of the sub-species 'Caucasian'.

John Smith, like many of his species, despite being diurnal rises not with the sun but rather with a crude alarm system, which fires rapid bursts of sound. This particular morning we see that John has fallen violently from his four-poster nest, which the culture colloquially refers to as a 'bed'.

"Fuck! God damned alarm clock!"

Obviously, our little human is frustrated by the bruising, as this situation is out of the norm. He grunts dangerously at his squawk box and proceeds to present it with a gesture consisting of the raised longest finger of his right hand, with the others remaining lowered. Studies indicate this motion is used to suggest the phrase 'Thank you for the efforts, but they were not appreciated' to the recipient of the

finger. The origin of this specific gesture is unknown, but xenobiologist Antarch Lark, a specialist in *Homo sapiens*, suggests it originates from crude hand communications.

"I swear, every morning that thing gets louder. One of these days I'll sleep with a bat and then smash it to pieces. Course then I'd be late for work..."

Despite his protests, John readies for the day in a traditional human manner. For sanitation reasons he cleanses himself with a stream of icy water, enjoying the tingling sensation caused by the jet of frigid dihydrogen oxide.

"Christfuck, it's cold! Why can't Steve just hire a guy to fix the heater like he promised? Every morning the same shit, I swear..."

After completing his morning shower John dries and dresses himself in a pair of loose fitting black leggings and a white collared upper body cover, called a 'shirt'. He clips a small red button to the left breast of the shirt with his name written in human calligraphy on it. Humans at this age have notoriously poor long-term memories, and the tag is used to identify him to others, as well as act as a reminder for his own use.

Sufficiently dressed he prepares and consumes a meal consisting primarily of the aborted embryo of a domesticated bird. Although strange and disgusting to us, it is necessary to remember that *Homo sapiens* are carrion eating species and not predators. An interesting and strange fact is that humans, despite being scavengers, are known to ingest plant-life. Amongst the sub-groups or tribes of

Homo sapiens one in particular called 'vegetarians' are known for the peculiar habit of rejecting the scavenger lifestyle and eating only plant life. Our resident expert Antarch Lark believes that these Homo sapiens may in fact be a sub-species, however other indicators of being a separate evolutionary branch have yet to be determined.

"Ah shit, I'm late for work!"

Although the dominant species of their planet John's kind are still in a fairly crude stage of development. Each member of the social community is given a specific role, ranging from warriors to leaders, or in the case of our solitary subject John Smith slaves. Homo sapiens partake in the cruel and primitive practice of slavery. Every day after leaving his small kennel (dominated by an obese middle-aged male-the slave master, often called a 'super' to indicate his superior status) John makes his way on foot to his station, a food storage center, where John is ruthlessly forced to fetch whatever delicacies the higher class Homo sapiens demand.

"Hi, I'm John and welcome to Chiles. I'll be your server for this evening. What can I get everyone to drink?"

"I'll take a coke. And if it ever gets empty, trust me, there'll be hell to pay."

Despite his position as the lowest of classes in his culture, John has learned from a young age to accept his situation. The system of slavery is so ingrained in John's society (as it has existed for several

centuries) that, like most slaves at his place of work, John enjoys his servitude. From a more advanced cultural perspective this can be viewed as a coping mechanism allowing for the slave to maintain a healthy mental state despite the degrading status under which they live.

“Oh joy, just what I needed: another fat jerk. I know I'm not getting a tip off that cheap ass.”

In order to prevent unnecessary death (slaves are costly to replace) slaves like John are rotated in and out of their work place. After finishing their time at work, slaves are given the opportunity to sojourn to a watering hole, where they imbibe a beverage called 'alcohol', which is used by slave masters to keep their slaves compliant and happy. This sort of watering hole is commonly termed a 'bar', or amongst the higher classes of society a 'dive'.

“The best part of my day: a nice cold brew and a smoke. Maybe a little action if I'm lucky.”

Here we get a unique and lucky chance to see the mating dance in action. As we watch, John Smith spots an attractive female of his species, chosen for her proud display of large mammarys. John clearly sees this female will be excellent for bearing children and feeding them, despite the clear malnutrition of the rest of her body.

“Well hello beautiful, care to take the party back to my place?”

The mating dance, performed most frequently by the male of the species, primarily consists of slurred speech and wobbly gyration of the legs.

"Stay the hell away from my girl you little shit."

Very unfortunate for John, it appears that this female has already chosen a mate. She has been wooed by the other male's superior size and the large quantity of a green papery substance, useful for feeding the young, he has acquired.

"Oi, sod off. Me and the little lady was about to go into the back and have a little fun if you know what I mean."

It appears John is attempting to continue his mating dance, his speech growing even more slurred in order to further attract the female. When in the presence of a male that has already claimed a female the refusal to cease the mating dance can be taken as a challenge. Clearly John is attempting to prove his merits, a risky method to be sure.

To make the challenge clear John takes hold of the woman's substantial mammarys, testing them for weight and firmness, which our experts suggest is an act of demonstrating to the human woman that he would know how to care for their offspring.

"That's it, you're a dead man!"

Sadly, for our subject the other male has taken the challenge and reacted violently. As our video

team watches in dismay, our little human receives a violent blow the the side of the skull. The blow is strong enough to send him plummeting to the ground. Just like that, John's mating dance ends for the night and he is dragged out by a pair of large slave drivers, who eject him from the 'bar' and send him on his way home. This is often the price for failing the mating dance.

"God my head...I need some aspirin..."

John stumbles his way back to his kennel, and like any other night pulls of his leggings and 'shirt'; he then proceeds to crawl back into his nest. He will rest for now, and tomorrow he will rise to the same sound and repeat the process. The joy he feels at the prospect of another day of blissful slavery (though sad in our eyes) and attempts at attracting a mate is enough to let him drift to sleep, despite his head injuries. For this member of the human race, it has been a good day.

"I hate my life."

God Speaks

John Smith is not paranoid. No, there's no chance at all that he is paranoid. He hears voices, and those voices appear to be tracking his every movement and describing his actions. They also seem to be analyzing them, almost like he is under study. When the voices make these little bits of analysis, they always seem to be awful at it. For instance, a few months before, during Christmas, the voices spent about twenty minutes describing in minutiae how Santa Claus was one of the dominant deities of human society. What kind of moron would believe that? Strangest of all, the voice he most often heard sounded suspiciously like Morgan Freeman.

Since John was absolutely certain he wasn't paranoid (after all, he never suspected people of being out to get him or any such tripe), the only other possibility was that he was insane. Obviously the possibility of his mental instability was a bit of worry for John, so he went and had himself psychoanalyzed. The voices following him said that he was plea-bargaining. For reasons John could not determine, this felt at least slightly accurate. When this thought passed through his mind, he increased his meetings with the psychoanalyst from once a week to twice a week.

It was on one particular trek to the psychiatrist's office on a sunny but otherwise normal day that changed the dynamics of the situation. It was on this day that John was almost hit by a car. He had taken one step onto the crosswalk when a red Jeep came barreling around the corner, brushing mere inches from John's face. The poor man stumbled and fell on his backside, and promptly offered the offending driver the finger. "Sod off you obnoxious bastard!"

"He grunts dangerously at the vehicle and presents it with a now

familiar gesture, the meaning of which is to suggest the phrase 'thank you for the efforts, but they were not appreciated'. Despite his now common reaction, John's near collision with the passing vehicle is not a regular occurrence. Exactly what effect this event will have on the rest of his day or his psychologist state we shall have to wait and see. Near-death experiences can often be life changing, so perhaps this will be similar."

Now it was far from unusual for John to hear the voice say something so off the mark, or to hear the mark at particularly interesting moments. In fact, he had heard the voice fail at describing the meaning of "the bird" more than once. The only difference in this situation as opposed to all the others was in this case, John had nearly died. So, nerves rather shaken, he did something new. He replied. "That's not what it means at all!"

For examination purposes it is worth making note of how many bystanders gave John confused looks, and then continued on their way. This number for note is seven. Like most people, they find it easier to utterly ignore the bizarre than to confront it. Until this moment John had fallen into that category as well, choosing to avoid the voice rather than to respond or to face it head on (as it were). As John gathered his bearings, he found himself drifting along in a sea of silence. Not true silence (for the sounds of the city continued), but the silence of the mind. One of the longest periods of silence he had been privy to in the past three months. The voice wasn't speaking. Not a word. Not a peep. Out of curiosity he did a jumping jack to see if it would respond. It did not. For those first ten minutes he felt atypically isolated.

With the voice blessedly silent, John made to cross the street, only to be nearly struck by a car again, this time one of several police cruisers. Clearly this was not John's day. However, with the disappearance of the voice John was not bogged down by frustration over his two near-death experiences as the average person (himself included) would normally be. He promptly forgot all about

them.

With the voice metaphorically off his shoulders and his bad day left behind him John finally managed to arrive at the psychiatrist's office, and was still, remarkably, on time. Feeling on cloud nine John approached the bored looking faux blond receptionist. "John Smith. I'm here for my three o'clock appointment."

The receptionist, whose name John had never bothered to learn in all his visits, looked up at him with a face so neutral he idly wondered if she had recently had botox. "Please take a seat. Doctor Kazmarski will be with you as soon as he's available."

John leaned in to the desk and gave his best fake glare to the slightly older woman. "But it's three."

She raised an eyebrow (which had escaped dye somehow) and asked, "Pardon me?"

"Well my appointment is at three. I'm here. It just so happens to be three o'clock. Shouldn't I just walk right in and see the good doctor?" The receptionist opened her mouth to reply but John cut her off with a laugh.

"Heh, I'm just screwing around. Don't worry, I'll take a seat and wait."

No sooner had he sat down then the receptionist called him up. He gave her a sour look, entered the room and took a seat on a comfy chair. John was promptly greeted with the question, "How are you feeling today?"

As previously mentioned, John had forgotten his brush with the Grim Reaper and the Grim Reaper's twin brother, and was only focused on the vanished voice in his head. Thus, without the slightest bit of hesitation, he answered. "Absolutely wonderful! I said something to that guy in my head and he shut up. He actually shut up! Can you believe it? I mean its the first time I've ever responded and when I did it stopped talking. Its been almost a half hour now and I still haven't heard a peep. Isn't that incredible?"

Being a trained professional, Doctor Abraham smiled politely, congratulated his paying

customer, and began asking questions. “So what did you say to the voice that made it stop?”

John explained that he had told the voice it was wrong about what 'the finger' meant. “I dunno, maybe it was just a coincidence though. I mean, if it stopped talking when I told it that it was wrong that would mean it was actually something that existed, and not just in my head. So really, its got to be a coincidence, right? Or maybe just some weird mental thing.”

Abraham offered his client a complacent smile and without missing a beat said one of the worst things possible for John's sensibilities. “It must have happened for a reason John.” This sort of phrase only brought up one thing in John's mind, and that was 'god'.

For John Smith that 'god' fellow was a rather useless bit of artifice. He found that talk about how 'everything happens for a reason' was really quite foolish. In fact, he had once told a priest that the only time 'everything happens for a reason' can be true is if things happening are happening as part of a fictional narrative. After all, only an author would make it so that all things occur for a specific reason. God doesn't follow the rule of Chekhov's Gun, only authors do that. Plenty of guns hang in people's houses and don't go off ever, let alone at some crucial life changing time.

By that reasoning, he said to the priest, Mr. God must really be an author, tip-tapping away at a giant celestial typewriter. This character marries that character, this country invades that country, and so on. If that assumption was true, that everything does in fact happen for a reason, and god is an author, then clearly that god person is far from omnipotent, and is far more likely a temperamental alcoholic and fairly ineffectual in life.

John proceeded to tell the priest that god probably made less money than he himself did, and that any person who made less money than John Smith was undoubtedly downright pathetic. He never did give the priest a proper chance to offer rebuttal.

All the priest could think as he watched that frustrating man walk out of the confessional booth was: a) does John Smith come to confession purely to annoy me, and b) even this happens for a reason.

It was rather unfortunate for John that God was in fact a writer, and a really bad one at that. You

see, at the very moment that John was thinking about his argument with that priest, God was sitting down at his Typewriter of Elysium™, having just downed a pint of bitter ale. Freshly juiced, God now found his inner artist and began to type.

“Despite our little human nearly dying he has made it to his scheduled plea-bargaining and is currently speaking to the government official in excited tones. It seems John may be making progress in elevating his status from 'slave' to 'citizen'.”

Having already once told the voice off, John felt no further compunctions against doing so again. Ignoring Doctor Abraham completely, he repeated the same gesture he had given the car earlier. “First of all, this means 'bugger off' and 'fuck you' and is me telling you to go straight to Hell for pissing me off. Second of all, I'm not a slave. Quite saying I'm a damned slave! I work in a restaurant and I get paid, PAID, for taking people's orders and bringing them food. I'm a christ-damned citizen and that's the truth of it!”

“An interesting development has just occurred. John appears to be angry with some unseen figure above him. We aren't the only ones unable to see what he is shouting at, as the official appears confused as well.”

Worried that John had lost another screw in his already loose skull, Doctor Abraham placed a comforting hand on the young man's arm. In a calm voice the Doctor told him that he should “relax” and “ignore it for now.” Lacking the doctor's inner calm, John rose from his cushy chair and shook a fist at his invisible tormentor. He had successfully managed to ignore the doctor's advice in less than half a second, a new record amongst Abraham's patients.

“Listen to me you voice in my head or whatever you are, I'm talking straight at you so you'd be sit up and pay attention! I'm tired of being nice and letting you prattle on about my life and the things in it. I just want some peace and quiet, so why don't you take your bad movie star imitation and shove it up your ass!” John's shoulders rose and fell rapidly, his breath hitching in his throat as if he had run a mile in cold weather.

Now thoroughly confused, the voice of the 'almighty' managed to stutter out a response on those heavenly keys, despite hands shaky from surprise and too much alcohol.

“You're talking to me? That's not possible, you're just...well it's impossible. I'm sure of that.”

From an outsider's point of view it would have been rather difficult to determine who was more shocked by the interchange. Was it John, the not-paranoid and possibly sane college student slash part-time waiter? Could it be God, a celestial being of undetermined power, underpaid writer and borderline alcoholic? Or was it, far more likely, Doctor Abraham Kazmarski, who was listening to one side of a panicked conversation between a not-paranoid and possibly sane college student slash part-time waiter and a celestial being of undetermined power who was also an underpaid writer and borderline alcoholic? Suffice it to say, nobody involved was feeling comfortable at that particular moment.

As a matter of fact, John was feeling so uncomfortable in that moment that he dropped his arms to his sides, and then bolted from the room. He completely ignored a call for him to stop, and took the steps from the room three at a time. John wasn't certain what exactly he was running from, but he had the sinking suspicion that it was from his own potential insanity. After all, the voice he had been hearing for three months was now talking back to him.

God, feeling a similar urge to panic and run somewhere but being confined to his typewriter (he was paid by the hour and was on the clock) had only one option. He picked up his heavy writing tool,

took it into the break room, and popped open a nice cold beer. If he was going to be dealing with the possibility that he was going insane, he'd do so with a blood alcohol content that was far more suitable for the situation. Once that first beer was in his system, God felt relaxed enough to attempt to communicate with John, who was still busy running aimlessly through the city.

"You know, wherever you run I can see you. It's rather hopeless I'd say. You're tagged and on camera. I'm just putting a script to you."

"Don't care, I'm not crazy, I'm not speaking to some voice in my head. I'd rather admit that God existed than admit that I'm off my rocker, and that's saying something!" He rounded a corner, barely noticing the wailing of sirens somewhere in the distance. John paused, planting his hands on his knees so he could suck in some much needed air. Mentally he noted that he should probably exercise more, but it wasn't a very pressing thought so he disregarded it for the moment.

"How did you know my name? Well, my last name anyways."

Having sufficiently caught his breath, John raised his head to look up to the cloudy sky. Completely befuddled he couldn't help the next words that came out of his mouth. "Name? What, God?"

"That's right. The name is Jehovah Allan God, and you're John Smith, a subject of a tracking project for the study of Homo sapiens."

John was so put off by this casual statement by the voice in his head that his panic faded, replaced by very human-like curiosity mixed with bemusement. "Allan?"

"It's a family name. You humans don't have a copyright on the name you know."

Without realizing it, John had started walking. When involved in such a conversation it was easy to lose track of one's own actions. He was so involved in his curiosity and confused that he didn't notice the looks people were giving him as he walked down the street, head tilted up toward the sky. A few stopped to look up as well, trying to figure out what he was staring at. God finished another beer, and started to wish he had something to eat.

"So you're telling me that I'm talking to God, and that the voice I've been hearing these past three months was also God. Not to mention that I'm hearing these voices because you, God, are writing narration for, what, a show? A show where I'm a lab rat example of human beings? And...your name is Allan?" Without anything else to eat, God idly contemplated the gum stuck to the underside of the table, but rejected it as being just slightly too disgusting.

"That's about the skinny of it. I'm a writer for a television show called Humanity for You. You're one of several subjects we look at each episode. I still don't understand why you're so stuck on the name Allan though. What's so confusing about that?"

John took a moment to think about what he had just been told, and asked the first question that came to mind. "So the TV show is like...what? On your version of the Discovery Channel?" God shrugged, and then remembered that John couldn't see him.

"I suppose so."

Finally remembering that he wasn't worried about his sanity, which was highly in question after such a long conversation with a voice in his head, John got back on topic. "So, does this mean I'm not insane?"

"Well I don't think so, but I am starting to think I've had a little too much to drink."

Although it wasn't exactly the best confirmation that he was not insane it certainly did make him feel a little better. Of course if all of this was true and John wasn't just hallucinating a voice...if he was in fact sane then that could only mean that the voice he was speaking to was, in fact, God. With that in mind he realized a few things. If he was talking to God (and not just insane) he had a unique opportunity to ask all the important questions that humans had been wanting to know for thousands of years. Probably best to make use of it on the off chance it was real. "So...God...what's the meaning of life?"

"Haven't a clue."

"Oh. Well...oh." Awkward silence fell between the two, and John stopped walking as he tried to think of what to ask next. His forehead scrunched up painfully tight as he tried to focus his swirling thoughts so he could ask a good one. It was rather difficult though, because it seemed like there were several people shouting loudly nearby, and some wailing sound getting closer and closer. "How are my ratings?"

"Well let me put it this way. I'm the only writer on your segment, and

I'm the lowest paid writer on staff."

"Well, I guess my life isn't very exciting. I don't know, maybe its your writing style. Certainly interesting things have to happen to me. Are you sure I'm not badly rated because you're a lousy writer?" Half-way in the middle of opening another bottle God stopped and positively fumed in the general direction of his typewriter. Some little human was calling into question his writing prowess? Admittedly he was a damned awful writer, but that didn't mean he'd let anybody else say so. He had his pride!

"Now just you wait a moment!"

God didn't have a chance to writer any further, for at that precise moment a red Jeep with police cruisers in hot pursuit came around the corner and struck John dead-center on its front bumper. Unfortunately for John, a 141 pound male was no match for a one ton hunk of metal moving at speeds in excess of seventy miles per hour. His body went flying up and over the Jeep, dropped, hit a police cruiser, ricocheted off to the right side like a pinball, and barreled over a sketchy hot dog stand. Onlookers, God included, stared in abject horror at the bloody mess that was once a young man. John Smith, possibly sane, certainly not paranoid, college student slash part-time waiter, was dead.

As the scene unfolded, God found himself contemplating his own life. For the past three months he had been an underpaid alcoholic for a television show that studied the life of an underpaid human. He wondered if some other 'superior' life form, likely an underpaid alcoholic somewhere else in the Universe, was writing the story of the day that John Smith, a human worried about his sanity, spoke to God for the first time and died a meaningless horrific death. Then the most horrible thought of all crossed his mind. John Smith was dead, and that could only mean one thing.

"Well shit, I'm out of a job aren't I?"

In Which Doctor Abraham Psychoanalyzes Himself

Imagination and dreams are merely vague guidelines, road maps written by the blind or perhaps

someone who had never seen a map, into the vast realm of the subconscious. Yet despite his strong opinion on the very useless nature of dream analysis in psychology Doctor Abraham Kazmarski was stuck reading an in-depth article on the subject. The title of the pile of papers sitting in his steady age-increased hands was *A Study of Dreams and Dream Analysis in Cases of the Unemployed African American*.

He unceremoniously slapped the article down onto his broad mahogany desk, enjoying the satisfying 'fwap' noise it made on impact. It wasn't that the psychologist writing the paper hadn't done his research. Nor was it that a case study on that particular socioeconomic/ethnic group seemed both stereotypical and racist (the author was himself African American). No...dreams just held no interest to Abraham. At age fifty-seven he had been dreaming for nearly six decades. Mentally he did the calculations, his eyes hopping from point to point in the empty air as he visualized moving decimal places.

“Assuming one dream at minimum each night from birth until birthday at age sixty we have three hundred sixty-five (ignoring leap years for convenience) dreams each year. Approximately. Add a zero to multiply by ten...multiply by six...” Abraham took the useless papers he had just tossed onto his desk, snapped a pen that was hanging precariously on the edge of the desk, and promptly scratched out the resulting number.

“By these calculations by the time I am sixty I will have dreamed roughly twenty-one thousand nine hundred dreams. Assuming no truly interesting ones occur in the next two and half years and out of those twenty-one thousand nine hundred dreams I will have remembered three.” The aging cynic leaned back into his leather chair, enjoying its give that provided just the right support for his aging back and increasingly leathery bottom (it matched the chair). His wrinkled hands released the pen, not bothering to stop it as it completed its previous journey and rolled off the desk dropping to the wood floor. The pen made a 'clack' sound and then two more in a row as it bounced briefly before settling on its new home. It didn't satisfy him the way the paper's sound had.

At this point in his life dreams and by extension ambitions held no meaning. This was ultimately the reason why he found the long-winded article to be frustrating. At least the author tended to avoid Freudian associations. While every psychologist learned about Freudian theories very early on (Abraham himself had first heard the name 48 years ago) a large number refused to take Freudian dream theory or his sexual identity theories seriously. If Sigmund Freud had wanted to fuck his mother, that was up to him. As for Abraham, his mother had been an overbearing three hundred pound Polish woman who felt it necessary to feed anyone who entered her household and constantly remark about how American *gonif*, 'the thief' was ruining everything from the old days. As a result he had found it impossible to identify with the Freudian line of thought and thus refused to accept dreams as meaningful.

Abraham, now thinking about his mother, considered that it was perhaps her penchant for feeding you even if you insisted you weren't hungry that had led him to have this ridiculous belly. Gently he placed his hands on his rotund stomach which bulged just enough to stretch his button-up shirt but not enough to force him to go up a size. It was not excessively ponderous. No, it was just that the entire concept of being out of shape and having this belly seemed just as much a waste of time and life as reading an intelligent man's ramblings about the importance of dreams as related to one very specific sub-culture.

Yes, despite nearly six decades of life Abraham was sitting in an office in exactly the way he had never wanted to. Of those three dreams he remembered the earliest was of becoming a backpacking hiking guide. This dream from his youth at age eleven had probably stemmed from growing athleticism and a book he had read about Mount Everest. All the way through high school, despite the protests of his family who insisted he find a real job, Abraham had wanted to avoid a normal life and adventure across the world! Travel from place to place with just what you could carry and with company only as those who wanted to follow you. Yet like most men pressured by overbearing mothers and with no support from simpering hundred pound fathers he had gone ahead and gotten a "real" job.

His office was filled with nice things. He looked from place to place, from item to item, considering their nature one at a time. He had two clocks: one a simple digital clock for convenience, the other a large oak monstrosity that someone had convinced him was classy about ten years before. There were three small figurines: one a ballerina in mid-leap given to him by his daughter, the next a foot tall elephant in brass whose origin he could not recall, and the last a small white copy of *The Thinker*. Dominating the room (aside from his desk) were three book shelves all in wood. Two of them contained nothing but psychology and sociology texts, and the third consisted of the literary works he was proudest of having read over the years. The top half was filled with books whose contents he largely couldn't remember as they had been read between thirty to forty years prior.

Yes, it seemed to Abraham that his office was stacked from end to end with every sign possible that his life was outwardly a success but inwardly a sham. He made money by 'helping' people with mostly superficial problems fix these problems, usually temporarily. No...that was perhaps a half-truth. Those people whose problems were even momentarily corrected by sessions in this office were not his real source of money. His real source of money was simple. At least half of his patients were regulars, people whose problems and neuroses were either so severe or so mind-numbingly trivial that they could not be solved simply by talking to someone and following their advice regardless of said person's training in the matter. This meant that week after week he met with the same people he had been meeting with for years, some of them quite a few years. Time and time again they arrived at his office, discussed their latest trials and travails, wrote the good doctor a check, and pranced (or moped) their merry (generally more depressed than merry) ways home (or to a bar, whichever was closest).

Abraham rose from his comfortable chair and stretched, his spine creaking and the muscles in his lower back twitching in the process. His days were spent confined (though not literally) to a chair and a big worthless office where he failed to help other human beings in any significant way. In this manner he had passed the previous thirty years. By modern logic, if he was lucky he would continue the process for another ten years and then retire until he died at the grand age of eighty having managed

to at least spend one decade of his life not working. Of course by that point in time his body would have reached a point where even the simplest activities were too strenuous for him to partake in and thus he would be forced to do *nothing* until he happened to drop dead.

“Doctor Kazmarski, your 3 o'clock is here.” Abraham paused in his stretching, his body frozen into a position that from an outsider's perspective resembled the ballerina figurine safely on the ground. Arms twisted into the air, back arched, left leg slightly extended behind him...

“Ah, yes. Go ahead and send him in.” He returned his body to a more normal position, brushed non-existent lint off his neatly pressed shirt, and sat his increasingly buttery behind back in the chair. So much for taking a walk to stretch his legs. Time had apparently slipped by more than he realized in between reading the article and contemplating his navel.

The seasoned analytical senses of a psychologist kicked in the moment the new patient walked through the door. It was a trait similar to that of a detective. Both professions required the ability to immediately gather information and assemble it in order to make sense of a puzzle, particularly if that puzzle is a human being. Other than the paycheck this brief moment was what had drawn Abraham to the field all those years in the past. “*Well, what do we have today?*”

Abraham's eyes darted over the frame of the patient in order to take in a number of different factors.

Appearance: subject is of roughly average height for a male, plain face with few blemishes save one small scar on the lower left side of the jaw, Caucasian, average weight, clothes slightly wrinkled, light brown hair without specific style cut unevenly in the back indicative of a self-applied haircut.

From this Abraham was able to come to a few basic starting assumptions. While the patient wasn't an attractive man he was not unattractive or ugly. This would likely mean that his plain stature, weight, and appearance give him something of what might be termed a 'middle child syndrome' in which the affected person believes themselves to be of little particular merit but is not painfully self-depressive or

neurotic. This was supported by a slight degree of personal care given to both clothing and hair which the subject has more control over than the rest of his appearance. However, he obviously doesn't expect too great a result from caring for his appearance because of his already mediocre self-esteem. This is supported by the clothes being wrinkled but not to the point of looking unclean. The fact that the patient's hair was cut by himself might mean a desire for control over his individual circumstances that is not normally allowed or possible in his everyday life in this society. Impressions all of it, but useful for later.

Posture/Gait: subject has shoulders slumped and narrow clearly more so than would be natural, steps are short and the heel drags slightly on the hard wood floor as he moves, the planting of a foot during the final stage of an individual step is heavier and clunkier than should be present in such a short dragging stride, hands and arms remain fixed at side without any swinging or motion save slight twitching of the fingers on each hand while taking steps.

If Abraham was on his mark he had just learned a lot from a very small amount of watching. The unnecessarily slumped shoulders supports a lack of self-confidence. Simultaneously, the fact that the young man was still standing at his full height without slumping in the rest of his posture should provide evidence for the theory that the patient also does not suffer from depressive or self-abusive tendencies or hampering neuroses. The clipped and dragging steps were more likely to be caused by nerves centering around the meeting than to be his actual normal walking pattern. The stiff arms, twitching fingers, and the heavy foot fall (an attempt to increase self-presence or fill the room with sound) all back up this theory.

“No need to be nervous. I'm guessing this is your first time meeting with a psychological therapist. Am I right Mr. Smith?” The young man stopped right in front of the desk. Abraham noted that as soon as he had finished talking the young Mr. Smith had looked to the left and down as if seeking an escape. He was uncomfortable and nervous, a sign that he didn't want to be in the office but

had to be perhaps?

“Ah...yeah, that's right. Its Doctor Abraham right?” The doctor smiled. It was a trained professionals' smile. The perfect blend of white teeth, upturned cheeks, little dimples, spread wrinkles, and a twinkle to the eye. Not overbearing, not false, but rather kind and charming. A smile that says, 'hi, I'm your doctor and you can trust me because I'm a swell guy.' It had taken him eight years in private practice to perfect it and another four to make it an unconscious effort.

“Technically its Doctor Kazmarski, but most people go with Doctor Abraham since its easier to remember and say. So John, I take it from your accent that you're English?” Keeping a smaller version of that practiced smile on, the doctor gestured with his left hand to the open chair next to John Smith. John gladly took the chair and slumped into it as if he was be released from a heavy weight.

“Originally, but I've lived in this city for a little longer than I lived in England so...I'd say I consider myself just as much an American as I am English.” John's smile came as a response to his own words and clearly showed that he had not practiced it and that it was influenced by the situation, unlike the good doctor's. The cheeks turned up into a slight U which was present for a half second and then U twitched becoming smaller before finally settling in that same minor U-shape. A smile from a man who doesn't want to be smiling but is trying to anyways both for his sake and for the sake of the other person present.

“I understand the feeling. I consider myself just as much Jewish as I consider myself an American, yet at the same time those feelings and identities are separate.” Identifying with the patient is a useful tool of the professional psychologist for all clinical therapy. It helps calm the patient and form a link that allows for a greater and more honest flow of information between the two. As John's fingers were still occasionally twitched it was clear to Abraham that this first paltry attempt wouldn't cut it.

“Alright John, let's get right to the point. There are a number of ways we can tackle this first session ranging from using it as a chance to get to know each other all the way to you telling me as

much of your life story as you can in the time we have.” John flicked his eyes to the ceiling, a sign of consternation and frustration?

“Those sound great and all Doc, but isn't there some way we can just cut straight to the point and like fix my problem with a wave of the hand or something?”

“Nothing quite like that. I'm not a magician, just a professional mind reader.” No laughter. Not even a hint of a fake smile.

“John, there are plenty of things we can do. I could show you a series of images which you would describe to me in detail. I would go 'hmm' in response to each of your reactions and scribble notes on a pad of paper that you can't see and thus makes you nervous. Or we could start simple and you can tell me why you're here.”

John sat stock still. There was no finger twitching or any other bodily motion. The only sign he was still aware was the simple fact that his eyes were drifting slowly but steadily from the right to the left. Finally he craned his neck back and to the left, checking to see if the door was closed. “I'm not paranoid. I don't like...think people are out to get me or anything. I thought about that option long and hard. Literally I couldn't sleep for two days in a row. I just stayed up the whole night thinking to myself: maybe I'm just paranoid...but no that doesn't make sense. All of it, back and forth.”

“Oh?”

Apparently spurred on by the non-committal response John continued. “No matter how much I debated with myself the different options all seemed impossible except one of them. If I'm not paranoid and what I'm hearing isn't real which would be totally ridiculous then...then obviously I'm insane, right?”

“What have you been hearing?”

John swallowed, once again checking the room like a caged animal attempting to ensure its safety. “Narration.”

“Narration? I'm not sure I understand.”

“It’s...well for a while now I’ve been hearing voices in my head. Well, one voice actually. It follows what I do during my everyday life and narrates what I’m doing. But its weird, because its not like its just describing my actions, its stating like it was fact the reason for everything I do and for all the things that happen around me.”

“Interior narration is usually analytic, it’s not terribly uncommon actually for those suffering from dissociation with the outside world.”

“Yeah but...its wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong with this sort of problem. As I said, it happens all the time and is perfectly treatable. Nothing insurmountable or inappropriate.”

“No doc, the narration...the descriptions of what’s happening and why its happening...its wrong. I drink a glass of milk and it says that humans are 'unique as a species in that they must continue to ingest the lactated liquid of the female parent for the extent of their lives in order to prevent infectious disease'. Trust me, I wrote it down. It said other stuff about how milk is an industry for those whose mothers aren't available anymore or something. But see, that's what I'm saying. It narrates things *wrong*.”

Abraham found himself slightly adrift at this intriguing revelation. He suddenly wished that the pen was no longer on the floor. Fiddling with a pen and pretending to write notes...each was a useful tool to allow time for a therapist to actually think about the situation without seeming to be at a loss for words. “John, can I call you John?”

Nod.

“John, while I will admit I’ve never heard that particular aspect there was something above the rest of it that I picked out. You said that you wrote down what the voice said, or at least part of it. That’s correct?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re absolutely certain that what you managed to write down is one hundred percent

accurate in terms of what the voice said? No shadow of a doubt?"

"Yeah."

"Why did the voice say 'humans are unique as a species'? Why would a narrative voice in your head, regardless of whether their description is correct or not, use the term 'humans'."

"I dunno, why would I?"

"You see John, normally if you or I were thinking about human beings or things that human beings do as a whole we would use the term 'people' as our generalized term. We know that we are human and that those we are talking about are human, so it rarely comes up."

"I guess so." John isn't keeping his eyes focused on Abraham or even straight ahead. His confusion is making him uncertain and more uncomfortable. Best to wrap up the explanation.

"While I'm still not entirely sure why the narration would be wrong it is my opinion that the use of the term 'humans' during this generated narrative indicates a problem associating with the greater whole of society or people in general. A feeling of being adrift and helpless while surrounded by others that you can't seem to understand in a world that you similarly can't understand can be a very crushing feeling that leads to dissociation."

"You mean I'm hearing a voice narrating parts of my life because I don't fit in with other people and with the culture around me?"

"I mean that's a distinct possibility. John, what you have to understand is that this is our first meeting. There won't be any absolutes that come out of this session or even necessarily the next few. What we're doing right now is establishing base parameters for our relationship here as well as providing me with an understanding of what issues you feel you are having and perhaps a few general concepts of where they might stem from."

"So, no hand wave instant solution then?"

Abraham gave John his best doctor chuckle, a technique as practiced and perfected as the smile. Just the right amount of placating mixed with genuine amusement. Never fails. "I'm afraid not. In fact

I'm going to be assigning you a little homework. You see, what I'd like you to do is try and write down as much of what you hear in the future as you can. Keep track of what is said to the best of your ability. Specifics are extremely useful in this sort of situation so this part is very critical to your therapy."

"You know...you ain't half bad doc. Maybe this will actually work."

"Out of curiosity, has the voice said anything about our session so far?"

"Uh, well I was trying to ignore it, but I think it described this as a plea bargaining."

"Interesting..."

This is how Doctor Abraham Kazmarski and John Smith first met. This is how Doctor Abraham Kazmarski became the second person John Smith told about the voice he had been hearing. And this is how Doctor Abraham Kazmarski was the only person to know that John Smith had a journal of everything that the voice had been saying for nearly three months leading up to the tragic death of John Smith.

The Alcoholic God

The family of God had once been known as a vastly successful and erudite group of prodigies. Every single member of the family for centuries had picked a profession or trade or hobby and excelled at it to the point of extraordinary fame. People across the Universe of every shape, size, color, and age

all knew the name 'God'. So great was their success and fame that the name 'God' became known as far out as a tiny rock, third away from a yellow star, on a distant solar system in a similarly insignificant spiral galaxy. On this unimportant planet there was a language of common use in which the name God, which throughout the universe was synonymous with success, power, and knowledge came to be the word for the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent ruler and creator of the Universe. If the God family had known, they would have been flattered.

Ah, but you, being a clever reader, have already seen the trick. 'The God family had *once* been known as a vastly successful and erudite group of prodigies.' You've seen through the pandering and excesses of the discussion on the spread of the name to the core, the very crux of the matter. If the God family was so great, why is it 'once'? How does such an amazing family get laid low to the extent that they no longer have the influence or fame or knowledge that they had for thousands of years? How could this bright family of prodigies who once had connections in every corner of the known Universe not be aware that this tiny pathetic planet called 'Irth' (or some such drivel) used their name as the name of their grand deity?

The answer, of course, lies with the one member of the family who is NOT a prodigy. The first member of the family in thousands of years to take up an activity and not instantly excel at it. One person? Could that really have such a broad affect that it caused this once great family to crumble into a mere shell of its former self? Yes. And no.

Jehovah Allan God was born on Effedros just like his forefathers had been for the last five thousand years. He seemed to be just like every other God child before him. Healthy, energetic, kind, and easily bored. When Jehovah was thirty-seven, a mere hatchling with his old shell just starting to turn blue (the point in which the youth would gain a second name), he read a book. It was rare enough to *see* a book let alone read one that for Jehovah this was a life changing experience.

The young fledgling had caressed the brown spine and rust-colored cover with his four digits. Tiny particles of flaked off shell fell from his fingertips onto the book, the little points of the fading

yellow carapace meeting that old surface. It was an enjoining of souls, a moment of pure beauty in which the last shreds of childhood met the hopes and dreams for a soon-to-be-adult's future. This book, with printed words and all, was Jehovah's future.

“I want to be a writer! I want to write things that people can enjoy, like this!” Jehovah proudly held out his hands, displaying the time-worn book to his three parents. He could feel himself turning bluer by the second as they watched him present his heart and soul in bound paperback form.

“Nobody makes books anymore. Its all presented digitally.” This didn't deter Jehovah. He simply shoved the book out even further, as if presenting it as proof that it didn't matter. The future was here in his hands and there was nothing other than it in his personal Universe.

“I don't care if its like this or if people suck it into their brains with a straw. I just know that I want to write. I want to entertain people with words and thoughts and concepts! I want to wow them with how skilled I am. I want a typewriter!” His parents laughed with delight and three sets of hands picked him up, tossed him into the air three times. Family tradition of course.

The male parent caught him on his third downward tumble, promptly placing the more petite frame on his shoulders. “Of course, you're a God so you can do anything!”

The female parent tickled his thigh, a familiar gesture he had known all his life. It had comforted him through storms, cuts, and nightmares alike. “That makes you Allan of course!”

Jehovah stared with wide yellow eyes at his female parent. “You mean you're giving me my second name now? Is it because I picked what I want to do?”

The neutral parent, the unfortunate one who had the nasty task of collecting the egg and the sperm and mixing that genetic cocktail within its own body before delivering it seven months later, was always in Old families given the job of memorizing family history. That was why it was it who answered. “It is because you picked. When a child picks, we have to give them a second name straight away. And Allan is an ancient family name passed down for many centuries. All of them have written for the entertainment and joy of others. By giving you this name, it is a sign that you too will bring

delight to the hearts of others with the written word.”

So it was that Jehovah Allan God gained his second name and his chosen profession. It is rather unfortunate that as time dragged on it became clear that unlike his namesakes from the past, he lacked talent at writing. He stumbled through four decades of practice and training, constantly at his Typewriter of Elysium™ which had stood faithfully by his side all the while. Despite the legendary status of the God family, every work he attempted to get published was turned down by editors and publishers.

As evidence we present the following quotes from editors and publishers regarding Jehovah's work: “There aren't enough characters”, “there are too many characters”, “the characters lack depth”, “the characters are too emotionally invested in the narrative”, “the narrative lacks emotion”, “the emotion fails to follow the narrative flow appropriately”, “the topic is too vague”, “the plot is too convoluted”, “the wording is awkward”, “the wording is high brow and pretentious”, “not the style we are looking for at this time”, “try again later”, “there's just something missing”, “the work is too short”, “the work is too long”, “the work lacks originality”, “the work is too original for publication in this medium”, “the material presented is offensive”, “the material presented is too boring and commonplace”, “your name is too well known so try a pen-name”, “your name is bankable but we just don't want this level of product associated with our publishing company”, etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. ad infinitum.

It was in this fashion that, having just had his four thousand five hundred sixty-eighth attempt turned down that Jehovah Allan God, the only unsuccessful God, found himself on his eightieth birthday. A failure, a mockery of all that his family had stood for over the course of thousands of years. He, the once proud God, was now...nobody. Unemployed, unsuccessful, untalented, unattractive...if it was 'un' he was it.

“I hate my life...I'm just a laughing stock to the entire Universe. They all know me as the Little God that Couldn't. All I want...all I want is to make people happy with what I write. Isn't that enough?”

He looked up from the beer clutched between his dark blue hands. The face that greeted him was the disinterested fanged and hairy face of the bartender.

“Buddy, I don't give a bilo's ass what's enough. You having another beer or what?” Jehovah stared at the bottle, realizing at last that it was empty just like the previous eight...nine?

“Maybe something harder...got anything that'll make me feel like a gold brick has exploded in my brain?”

“What?”

“Doesn't matter just...whatever is the house and is strong. It's not a good day.” The bartender rolled his eyes and reached under the counter for a bottle of some thick brown liquid that he poured into an empty glass.

“Strongest house drink we got, a Blue Mole.”

“It doesn't look blue...”

“I didn't name the stupid drink, geez.”

Jehovah had one...and then another...and then another...and then another. Soon he was in a haze that repeated as quickly and brutally as his rejection notices. It began and continued into infinity with no clear way of determining a final destination save perhaps a death by replacing blood entirely with alcohol.

This was how Jehovah Allan God awoke in a hospital four days later, having been in a detox lab for the bulk of that time. It turned out that, according to the doctors, he had in fact managed to replace about seventy-five percent of his blood with alcohol. They told him it wasn't possible. They said there was no way he could have lived through that or even have consumed that much alcohol without passing out earlier or dying. In fact, they assured him that even with the best scientific methods in the Universe Jehovah should have been dead before he even received the slightest bit of treatment, and even that treatment shouldn't have saved his life.

The hospital bill was enormous, but covered by the research program Jehovah agreed to attend

to help doctors study how and why he had lived. Yet the news was filled with two facts that Jehovah could not escape then or now: 1.) Jehovah Allan God, youngest male child of the respected God family, had nearly died of alcohol poisoning caused during a drunken bender. 2.) Jehovah Allan God had, during a drunken bender, bet the entire sum of the family fortune, including the deed to the family property and had lost.

This is how Jehovah Allan God successfully managed to destroy the wealth, influence, and respectability of the God family. In one night he had failed so miserably that he had managed to ruin a family that had stood strong over the course of thousands of years. This is how Jehovah Allan God became briefly the only remaining well known God as he was an infamous celebrity due to his spectacular abilities at failure. This fad lasted for the next thirty-five years, in which time God managed to learn an important lesson. Every single member of the God family is an unsurpassed prodigy at one thing. For Jehovah Allan God, this one thing was alcoholism. No living being in the Universe could survive the sheer amount of alcohol he was able to partake in on a regular basis. And this habit, coupled with continued failures at getting published and a mounting debt are what lead to the last minute hiring of the formerly notorious God by the producers of the highly successful Universal show Humanity for You.

“We want you to narrate this segment for us. The subject's name is John Smith.”

Discovery Pt. II

The following program is brought to you by the Center for Sentient Appliances Awareness.

Please, be aware that your stove has feelings too. Explore someone else's world.

Last week on Humanity for You we examined the fetus. This week we will be taking a look at the adult male. Our subject today is 'John Smith', a twenty-two year old male of the species *Homo sapiens*, family *Hominidae*. He is an average specimen of the human race, and is about to become the newest subject for tracking and observation.

Although human beings are clearly a pale and fleshy lot with few obvious natural weapons they are the dominate species on their planet. Human muscles lack any distinct crushing power, their claws are dull, and their teeth barely capable of tearing flesh. What makes their status as the dominate species truly peculiar is that they are one of the few examples ever witnessed of a carrion eating species gaining dominance. Our studies, and those of famed xenobiologist Antarch Lark seem to indicate that this is not a new trend and has existed for tens of thousands of years.

Here is John Smith, demonstrating for our viewers one of the primary reasons that human beings have managed to claim this position. You see, despite their relative weakness and nonthreatening size and capabilities the human being has vastly superior muscular endurance. No other mammal on the planet, even amongst carnivores, matches the ability of the human to continue simple tasks like running for such extended periods of time. So great is their endurance that John Smith, our newest subject, along with many other humans partakes in running as a pleasurable activity.

"Fucking hate gym class...why the hell do we have to run for a grade? Its college, not grade school!"

As our digital crew approaches carefully the micro-cam prepares its tiny nano-tracker. It swoops in, the skilled tech crew taking steady aim. Their task is made somewhat more difficult as John Smith's body bobs and shakes because of his running. Yet these men are experts and with the talent of experts they get their shot lined up. The micro-cam releases its projectile which strikes the target with what will

amount to a bug bite sensation, almost unnoticeable by the subject.

"Ouch! Shit, what was that? A bee?"

Breathing becoming heavier, our newest subject slows to a halt and

Paused

01: I'm not sure I like this footage. Do we have anything better?

02: The footage is fine. Are we certain its worth the risk using someone like God?

03: If the segment bombs it's his fault, easy enough. Didn't we already agree on this?

02: We did, but I'm not still not sure his infamy is enough to make it worth the risk. He's terrible.

01: I really don't like the footage that much. The camera's a little shaky.

03: He's not bad. He writes the drivel we give him about as well as can be expected.

02: I don't know, other than the carrion eater bit, this episode seems too based in fact. If people catch on it won't play out well for us. Is the rest of it more to form?

01: Perhaps a new camera crew is in order? Or better cameras? What's the budget on that looking like at the moment?

03: If you think its too realistic, we can edit the information we sent to God and have him rewrite the episode. There's still time.

01: I think we set aside at least a little extra to update the virtual camera equipment every few months. Aren't we due to take care of that?

02: Forget about the stupid footage!

01: It's an important factor. If the footage looks bad then our viewers won't appreciate the show as much. Then our ratings go down and our profits go down. This show is about profits isn't it?

03: Only to the point that it keeps running and we don't have to cancel. It can be as lousy as we want as long as it keeps our viewers and the government from paying any real attention to Earth.

01: Then it stands to reason we should have everything up to snuff to make sure the viewers get the best of the best.

02: See, that's exactly why I'm saying we shouldn't use God.

03: This John Smith? His segment is of no importance whatsoever. It'll appear every couple episodes. Forget about him and forget about God. Neither of them matter in the end. And yes, we'll work on the camera system.

02: The bio-tech crew said the nano-tracker was giving odd feedback. Lark, you designed the thing right? Maybe there's

something about John Smith worth investigating and putting real effort into.

01: I told you the system was outdated.

03: It's nothing. It's like Lyra said. Just a glitch.

02: Fine. Do we want to finish watching the episode?

03: Do what you like, I'm not interested in humans.

Resume Program

I Come to Bury John Smith, Not to Praise Him

“Well, I guess my life isn't very exciting. I don't know, maybe its your writing style. Certainly interesting things have to happen to me. Are you sure I'm not badly rated because you're a lousy writer?” Half-way in the middle of opening another bottle God stopped and positively fumed in the general direction of his typewriter. Some little human was calling into question his writing prowess?

Admittedly he was a damned awful writer, but that didn't mean he'd let anybody else say so. He had his pride!

“Now just you wait a moment!”

God didn't have a chance to write any further, for at that precise moment a red Jeep with police cruisers in hot pursuit came around the corner and struck John dead-center on its front bumper. Unfortunately for John, a 141 pound male was no match for a one ton hunk of metal moving at speeds in excess of seventy miles per hour. His body went flying up and over the Jeep, dropped, hit a police cruiser, ricocheted off to the right side like a pinball, and barreled over a sketchy hot dog stand. Onlookers, God included, stared in abject horror at the bloody mess that was once a young man. John Smith, possibly sane, certainly not paranoid, college student slash part-time waiter, was dead.

Well, dying anyways. That plain average body was cracked and broken in more places than he could count. John's field of view was shrinking into a cold abyss. It was worse than not having his contacts. Everything that was clarified by corrective vision was still obliterated by the encroaching shadow. “Am I really going to die like this? Here? This is...this is...THIS IS STUPID!”

The crowd that had gathered around John's fallen body failed to hear his screams of injustice. John failed to see them at all. Perhaps the world he had fallen into was one of his own making. The last bastion of mental processes of a brain being steadily deprived of oxygen from blood flow. After all, his blood was now flowing onto the pavement rather than into his heart, lungs, and brain.

Every single day when John woke up he got up and out of bed. Every single day when he walked he did so with the casual grace of a person who had been doing so for over two decades. It is the grace and experience that comes with instinct: pure unstoppable natural reaction. His brain had for so many years managed each minute action of his body without John ever being aware of it. As such when his arms and legs failed to move while he was *actively* commanding them to do so...John knew it

was really the end.

John let the reality of what was happening to him sink in. Riding into the sunset. Buying the farm. Kicking the bucket. “Who the fuck wants a farm anyways?”

Trapped by the knowledge that his very existence was falling apart and his last experience involved learning that his life was bad television John couldn't help but understand directors better. As the body shuts itself down there are a number of unpleasant factors that occur, but for the most part the process is quick, painful, and utterly boring. When the damage is severe the brain ceases to process information regarding speech and movement and instead focuses on preserving the vital functions of life. Itself, the lungs, and so on. Dying people didn't always get last words and their brains often ignored functions like memory in favor of self-preservation. Movie goers watching their hero die silently without some sort of last farewell would be sorely disappointed.

With his brain shutting down John gathered his wits. There was at least this much time left, wasn't there? “The final thoughts...memories that define our lives right? I guess I should...give it a try.”

Deep within the swirling endless abyss of finals week John Smith emerged from a THC and alcohol induced haze just long enough to make note of his surroundings. He peered carefully around the room, wondering to himself why exactly it was so difficult to see. Forcing through the thick fog in his brain he discovered he was not currently wearing his glasses, fully explaining the visual fog. Groping around his right hand, somewhat numb from having been slept on, came to rest on a thin pair of wire-frame glasses. As soon as he placed them upon his face the world shot into view quicker than a bullet bill.

No longer burdened by his inability to make out objects smaller than the size of a tank he once more took in his current locale. There were a few things he discovered rather quickly, and he mentally filed them in order of importance.

1. He was not wearing any pants.

2. *Nor was he wearing any underwear.*
3. *This was not his room.*
4. *Neither was this a dorm room.*
5. *At the very least, this was not a dorm room at his school.*
6. *The decorator of this room liked the color pink far too much.*
7. *The decorator of this room also liked the band Pink far too much.*
8. *There was a girl in the bed with him.*
9. *She was, as far as he could tell, wearing only a pink sports bra.*
10. *He found the concept of a pink sports bra rather counter-intuitive.*

Having successfully made a mental list of every available important detail he squinted his eyes and squeezed his forehead. This was in hopes of using raw force (the brain was a muscle after all) to bring the details of the previous night back to the surface. Unfortunately all that was bubbling up were vague recollections of being invited to a party at another school and the beginnings of a headache brought on by scrunching up his forehead so tightly.

Frustrated that he could not remember what lead him to this current situation he looks up and down the room to locate his clothing. Quickly he spots his jeans, underwear, and Offspring t-shirt in a pile with a pink shirt (of course) and some skimpy looking black skirt. Sliding out of bed he tiptoed to the clothing, feeling as if every creek of the floorboards was a personal assault on his brain, made worse by his self-induced headache. After what felt like an hour long drum solo in his skull he reached his clothing and began to pull it on. As he was in the middle of pulling on the left leg of his jeans the noise of a bed shifting caught his ears and he tripped, collapsing in the loudest possible pile. He was pretty sure he hit every single damned creaky floorboard when he crashed. "Are you okay?"

It occurs to him that this is the first thing he's heard spoken since waking up. Then he realizes he ought to reply, so he looks back at the girl and his jaw catches. Previously he hadn't noticed just how damned attractive she was. He had been mostly focused on getting his bearings. She was petite,

slim, and well proportioned, with long wavy black hair reaching her shoulders. Most shockingly her eyes were a bright pink color, most likely from colored contacts. He instantly begins to wonder about the events of the previous night even more, wishing he could recall. Something either magical or marvelously accidental must have happened for him to have been in bed with a girl who was actually good looking. "Uh, yeah I'm, uh, fine I guess."

Of course the first thing out of his mouth just had to be stupid. What a wonderful first impression that he was making. Or at least the first impression he could remember. Even though it was awkward, he knew he had to say something else. "Did we...I mean that is to say...last night did...errr...that thing...bumping and sweating...and there might have been uh...well you know..."

Miss Pink raises one dainty eyebrow, accentuating that fuchsia orb. She adjusts her bra as if out of habit and frowns at him. He feels a little bit more uncomfortable, because it must have been terribly obvious where he was looking when she made that idle gesture. She lets out a sigh and shifts in bed. "Are you asking if we had sex?"

He nods, unable to speak out of fear of saying something even more tremendously stupid. As bad as he is with women it wouldn't be surprising if he embarrassed himself even further. The girl smiles, the corners of her lips curving up ever-so-slightly in that way certain girls have makes you shiver and instantly think naughty thoughts. She stretched her arms over her head and replied to her own question that was his own unspoken one. "Sorry to disappoint you, but no, we didn't."

An idiot, that's what he is. There was no way, even drunk that a girl that looked like her would sleep him with a goofy dope like him. The only girls that ever did the nasty with him (drunk or otherwise) weren't even in the same class of appearance as this one. However, there's one thing that he still finds odd about the situation. "So wait, then why was I naked and in bed with you? Heck, why would you sleep in the same bed with some naked guy you didn't know?"

This concept doesn't seem to bother her and she steps out of the bed, very casually walking past him in just a matching set of pink panties and sports bra. Was she taunting him, or was it his

imagination? "It's my bed isn't it? You did make a pass at me last night, and I thought it was cute in a dorky sort of way. You got really massively drunk, passed out, and a couple of the frat guys stripped you naked. Since you hit on me and I think those guys are kinda jerks, I figured it'd be my treat for you."

Self-loathing rolls about in his stomach like an automated thresher, turning his insides into wheat strands or possibly ground pork. He was shot-down, knocked out by alcohol, stripped nude by jackasses he didn't know, and then pitied within less than ten seconds. He was so pathetic that he was being teased with something he couldn't have and had failed to get just for the amusement of some girl obsessed with everything pink. Bolting to his feet he snapped his shirt off the ground and whirled on Miss Pink. "I don't need your pity and I don't need to be taunted! Especially not by some stupid girl who's so captivated by pink that its a wonder she hasn't dyed her skin pink! Fuck you!"

Satisfied that he had made his point he left the room, slamming the door behind him. Before he made it more than two steps away he heard that smug voice of hers call out from within that chamber of the horrid color. "You forgot your shoes!"

He went back into the room, got his shoes, and left as quickly as was humanly possible. But even that speed wasn't great enough to prevent him from seeing her face. That stupid tiny nose, those cocky and self-amused soft lips, and those eyes. Those god damned pink eyes, looking down on him.

Even in the last moments before his impending demise John Smith knew this memory was pathetic. Was it life defining? Was he defined by failed attempts at picking up women and mercilessly becoming the plaything of every living being around him? Had the cruelty of those college students and Miss Pink who had watched him fail and fall just been a minor precursor to becoming an animal for study in some galactic television show? Was it the last desperate firing of synapses in a dying brain? His own brain playing a joke on him by not letting him recall something happy and life defining? "No, I don't want to be a joke. Can't I fix it? Isn't there some way to change it? Can't somebody help me?"

Anybody? God? GOD! GOD HELP ME! HELP ME GOD! Allan? Jehovah? GOD?! SOMEBODY! I want to go back, I want to do it all again, I want to do something, anything at all, as long as it's better! As long as it has meaning! I just don't want to be a joke! No...I'm not even the joke, I'm the stupid punchline! The lousy end to a story that takes too long to tell and doesn't end up being funny anyways. That's not what I'm supposed to be! I'm John Motherfucking Smith! Who is this God bastard anyways? How dare you treat my life like it was nothing? How dare you act like I'm just a monkey in the big broad urban jungle to be watched and patted on the head when it does something well!"

John's body was lifted by stretcher onto an ambulance as the crowd of onlookers was held back by a team of paramedics and police officers. About thirty feet away the Red Jeep that had plowed into John was on its side, wheels staring horizontally into nothingness. Police were escorting the driver towards a cruiser in handcuffs. The offender had flipped his Jeep when, shocked at seeing a body go flying over his vehicle, he had swerved violently to the left. Fifteen minutes before John had first seen the Jeep the driver, a thirty-five year old office worker, had drunkenly mooned a police officer on a crowded Chicago thoroughfare. When the driver refused to pull over a call for a pursuit had started. The Jeep led the police on a merry chase through the city for nearly an hour before its fateful collision with John. Had John known the entire situation, the strange sequence of events that led him to this moment in time he would have felt validated in his belief so long ago espoused to a priest who recommended the psychiatrist whose office John had been heading for when he first encountered the Jeep and whose office he had been leaving when he was struck and killed. Maybe. Everything happens for a reason. "What a load of bullshit."

As the paramedics pumped thousands of volts of electricity into his heart in a vain attempt to restart it, John desperately searched through his foggy brain for a happy memory. Something truly defining. A good final note to end it on. "The day I talk to God..."

Papa Don't Preach

“And that's the story.” Within the confines of the confessional booth no man or woman could be truly comfortable. Whether it was because of the cramped space, the lingering odor of hundreds of other sweaty, nervous, guilty confessors...or because the weight of some grand spiritual presence was

upon them...it didn't matter. No individual was ever comfortable within a confessional booth. Least of all Priest Michael Noland, a preacher at Saint Clement Catholic Church.

Priest Noland had listened to the confessions of John Smith three hundred and forty-seven times prior to this, making this instance number three hundred and forty-eight. He knew this because confessions were monstrously boring business and he amused himself by taking notes and audio recordings each time one of the parishioners came in to confess. He knew who was fucking who, who had stolen what, and who actually believed in God. Assigning things like Hail Marys and giving out platitudes that were almost always direct or slightly altered Biblical quotations was easier than breathing for Michael. John Smith was one of his odd cases.

“My son, all you did was sit down in the booth and say 'and that's the story'. How many times have I told you that being a Priest does not grant me supernatural powers. I can't read your mind and I can't see your past, present, or future.” Yes, John Smith came to confession each week out of habit. Though he had never expressly stated it, Michael was absolutely certain John was an atheist. Since John only confessed habitually he seemed to use confession as an outlet for his aggression and inability to act superior to others. This was the sort of thing that Michael's therapist, an older Jewish psychiatrist that Michael had tried to convert many times, was always prattling on about.

“Did I? Why do you think that is? Have I been stricken by a demon? Is the devil possessing me so that all I can do is say that something has happened but not explain how or why it happened? Is my mind decaying? Is it mad cow disease? Is it a sin that I can't finish a story?” Coming from John, this sort of prattle was childish. John usually actually did tell a story which was more often than not just a retooled version of a Biblical parable. Maybe something was actually on John's mind.

“This isn't like you. What troubles you my son?”

Though Michael couldn't see John he could feel palpable tension in the air. With practiced care Michael turned on the audio recorder. This story was probably going to be a fun one if John was uncomfortable about it. “I've been hearing a voice father.”

This wasn't exactly what Michael had been expecting, but he'd play along anyways. "The voice of God?"

"Not unless God sounds like Morgan Freeman...but no, I don't think its God."

Michael set the recorder down in his lap and looked carefully at the screen separating them. What did John look like at a moment like this? It would be interesting to find out. "Who do you think it is?"

"Nobody real. I'm not paranoid or anything but...I think that maybe I'm crazy. What should I do if I'm insane? Do crazy people go to Heaven? Am I...am I crazy father?" John's voice was actually quivering! It was shaking...it was...uncertain? Was John Smith genuinely telling the truth? Had he really been hearing a voice?

"Everything happens for a reason my son." The confessional booth shook violently as John Smith kicked the door. Michael nearly bolted in that instant. He had never had anyone react like that to something he said before.

"I say I'm hearing voices and think I'm going crazy, I try for the first time to be honest with you and get your real opinion, to get some genuine help and all you can say is something as stupid as 'everything happens for a reason'? The only time 'everything happens for a reason' can be true is if things happening are happening as part of a fictional narrative. After all, only an author would make it so that all things occur for a specific reason. God doesn't follow the rule of Chekhov's Gun, only authors do that. Plenty of guns hang in people's houses and don't go off ever, let alone at some crucial life changing time!"

Michael considered speaking, but realized his audio recorder was still going. This was a good rant. Good material. Very interesting stuff.

John wasn't finished by a long shot. "By that reasoning Mr. God must really be an author, tip-tapping away at a giant celestial typewriter. This character marries that character, this country invades that country, and so on. If that assumption is true, that everything does in fact happen for a reason, and

god is an author, then clearly that god person is far from omnipotent, and is far more likely a temperamental alcoholic and probably fucking sucks at life.”

John laughed bitterly, wishing for a moment that the voice would interrupt him. Hoped it would say something stupid at this precise moment so that he could have more fuel to the fire of his anger. It didn't seem forthcoming, so he just kept going. “Hell, I bet you that if all that is true then god probably makes less money than I do. Do you have any idea how little money I make? Shit, I don't even make minimum wage an hour and tips? Tips are a fifty-fifty shot in the dark. Sometimes its great and sometimes I walk with like twenty bucks for five hours of work! Jesus Christ, don't you understand that any person who makes less money than me is without a doubt a downright pathetic fucking mess?”

The young Chicago Englishman shoved the door open and stopped just shy of exiting completely and shot off his last word. “You can take your Hail Marys and Holy Fathers and 'everything happens for a reason' and shove them where the sun don't shine! I don't even know why I come here anyways, its certainly not to get the word of God! The day I talk to God to ask him what's what? That'll be the day I die!”

All Michael could think as he watched that frustrating man walk out of the confessional booth was: a) does John Smith go to confession purely to annoy me, b) even this happens for a reason, and c) maybe John Smith needs real professional help. And Michael just so happened to know a therapist.

Does John Smith Dream of Electric Sheep?

01: This is exactly why I said we should have fixed the digital recording equipment.

03: What are you talking about?

02: He means back at the start of the project. Remember?

03: When do I ever listen to Elias?

01: You don't have to phrase it like that.

03: What? That I don't like you or care about anything you say?

01: Right, like that!

02: Can't we just get down to business?

03: Yes, agreed. The recorded data is incomplete, but it's a necessary fault of the limited time of the recordings. My technology is excellent but not perfect.

01: Well, we have him, but what are we going to do with him? Do we even need to keep him?

02: Are you worried about the legal issues?

01: Somewhat, but we've already committed fraud a number of times so I suppose I can just let it go.

03: We may need to keep him. You see most of my research into the nano-recorder is inconclusive.

01: Inconclusive?

03: That means that I have not resolved fully all doubts and questions on the related subject.

01: You don't need to define it. What was inconclusive?

03: Well it...oh we have activity. Let's take a look.

John Smith was standing on nothing. Well, maybe he was standing on air? Was he standing on a blue screen, only it was white? He craned his neck as far to each side as he could, and then up, and then down. Yes, he confirmed for himself, in every direction he looked it was all the same. White. Blank. Endless. Pale eternity. A white-washed university. Maybe God...well the real one anyway (if there was

such a thing) had gotten frustrated with the Universe and decided to use white out so he could start over.

The more he considered his unusual position in space and time, or lack thereof, the queasier he became. His stomach sloshed about, acidic fluid crawling at the inner lining of his belly desperately seeking freedom. John collapsed to his knees, head swimming from the strain on his eyes. There was nothing to focus on and without a focus he was getting dizzy. "This...this is impossible."

His knees pressed hard against absolute entropy. They clearly weren't going any lower, but when he looked down all he saw was that same white expanse. It was like standing in the middle of the air, supported by something that couldn't logically support you. Was this what the apostle Peter felt like all those thousands of years ago? Standing and walking on water, defying all logic and reality...coming to grips with the knowledge that, save for grand mystical power, nothing was holding you in place. A few moments in such a precarious position would cause anyone's faith to waiver and crack. "Where the hell am I? Am I dead? I'm dead and this is hell? Purgatory?"

John felt no need to list heaven. Even if those places existed he certainly wasn't going to heaven. Hadn't he bad mouthed God repeatedly? Hadn't he bad mouthed God immediately before his death? "Didn't I see that Jeep once before?"

"John Smith, I have come for your soul!"

"Gah!" John shot off his knees and to his feet, stretching his arms out to balance himself. His head was still spinning and...

"Ugh, how disgusting! The little human just vomited! He vomited all over my hard work!"

The young Englishman took a heaving breath, hands pressed against his thighs for support. Slowly he tilted his head up to find the source of the voice. Before his very eyes was one of the most prominent figures in human art, mysticism...and according to Doctor Abraham, deeply rooted in the human psyche.

Garbed in robes of black, jarring in this white world, with bleached bone for hands and face...was the Grim Reaper. Death himself come for John Smith's soul. Grasped in a single skeletal hand was that legendary scythe...the tool of the reaper. Death raised his free bony hand....and waved.

“Hello.”

John cautiously returned the gesture. “Uh, hi.”

Death looked down at John's nearly prostrate figure (a difficult feat for a being with no eyes), grasped the scythe firmly in both hands and pronounced a death sentence. **“You are a dead man John Smith.”**

Gulping, John lowered his head to the white ground. His own vomit was mere inches from his forehead, but he couldn't bring himself to care. “I...I thought so. Are you sure you're not wrong? Maybe its a mistake. Maybe I lived?” John's voice was shaky, his arms shivering as his hands clenched and unclenched erratically.

“Nope. Definitely dead. Haha, you should have seen your body when it got hit! Whoosh, off you went! And the afterwards? If I had to invent a word to describe how dead you were it would be 'corpsealicious'.”

Cold tears splattered down from John's voice, sliding until they one by one mixed with the former contents of his stomach. Seeing this Death fiddled with his scythe and coughed into a single hand.

“Umm, I mean, sorry for your loss.”

“Can't I...can't I not be dead? You're Death right? You can fix it! You can bring me back! I wanna go back.” John finally looked up at Death, his eyes blotchy from crying, his lips quivering.

“Take it away! Make it not true!” John's tears stopped the moment Death's bony right hand was placed on his head. The incarnation of mortality settled into a crouch so that he was looking John directly in the eyes. Staring into the hollow eye holes of a skull was terrifying enough to stop any man's tears.

“Why?”

John blinked, the last stray tears slipping from his sockets in the process. Maybe it was just having Death itself in such a close proximity, but John was completely bamboozled. “Why? Why what?”

“Why do you want me to take it away? You want to live again? What for? Let's be honest here John. Do you have anything worth living for?”

“I...I was only twenty-three. I had so much ahead of me in life. Maybe I hadn't accomplished anything yet, maybe I didn't have many goals, maybe I was completely average, but that doesn't mean I didn't have anything to live for! I had a future, somehow, somewhere! Maybe a wife, maybe kids, who knows? It all just ended too early. If I could go back...”

“You'd what? Do it all over again? Do anything as long as it was better? As long as it had meaning? As long as you weren't just a joke? I heard it all John. I'm not a bad guy and frankly I feel a little responsible. So I'm going to do you a favor. I've wanted to say this for years now but...”

Death released John's head and rose to his full imposing height. John craned his neck up, trying to maintain eye contact, but the incarnation had to be over seven feet tall. The imposing skeleton extended a hand out to John as if beckoning him to take it and stand. **“Come with me if you want to live.”**

“You're going to bring me back to life?” John grasped Death's hand and was promptly pulled to his feet. His eyes lit up, his heart beating heavily with the excitement of the prospect.

“Not quite. Consider me the Ghost of Christmas Past because I'm going to take you on a tour of the inferno that was your life.”

“Wait, aren't you mixing your referen~”

The empty universe was gone, immediately replaced by a small room filled only by a desk, a

twin bed, a pile of dirty laundry on the floor, and a lonely poster of punk rocker Billy Idol. “This, this is my room!”

“Ding ding!”

John stumbled across the room to the bed and ran his fingers across the sheets. They were soft and slightly cool to the touch. “It feels real but...this was my room before I moved out. How could it be real?”

“Magic! Or technology, whatever. They do say that any significantly advanced technology is equivalent to magic.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means you should shut up and just accept that I, Death itself, have taken you back to Earth and back in time so you can see exactly how worthwhile your life was. Got it?”

Nod.

“Good! So...you know honestly I didn't think this through. Got any suggestions?”

“You want me to suggest how to show the way through my own life to prove whether or not my life is worthwhile?”

“You make it sound like I'm being a jerk, but basically yes, that's what I mean.”

“I...don't know.” John hung his head in shame. It was the same as always. Even when pressured he couldn't think of a way to prove if his life had any worth to it or not. How was somebody supposed to prove the value of any individual life anyways?

“Well that's alright. Let's go check on little you, shall we?”

Death grabbed John by the wrist and pulled him out of the room. They marched down the noxious yellow-colored hallway and out into the living room. The room was what John liked to call

'waving a flag in your face'. His parents, feeling their name Smith' was "too American" had chosen to deliberately remind guests that they were Brits. John's argument that their accent should be enough had fallen on deaf ears many times. So, following their warped logic, his parents had a framed painting of Queen Elizabeth above the mantle, a miniature copy of the Clock Tower of the Palace of Westminster on the piano, and a digitally edited photo of his parents with Tony Blair. Observant repeat guests might notice that whenever the Prime Minister changed there was suddenly an identical photo...with the new minister replacing the old. John felt less British just looking at it.

When they entered John wasn't the least bit surprised to see his parents entertaining guests. The reason for the room's nature was the same reason why they had moved to the States in the first place. John's father, a portly man with a once handsome but now creased face was a businessman. Specifically he worked in sales and marketing so frequently he had guests over that he wined, dined, and sold stock or product from the electronics company he worked for. The number one rule for these events? John didn't exist.

As John and Death watched his father and mother laugh, drink, and tell stale jokes to their slightly overweight business-type guests he realized that this was how it had *always* been. John had never wanted to move to the States, but that was what his father wanted and so they had. John had never wanted to go to Church, but his father insisted and so he continued to go even after he entered college and was supposedly out from his family's influence. John had wanted to pursue some sort of career in the sciences but his father insisted on a business degree, so he had headed down the path of a business major.

"And that's when she threw the champagne in my face!" It was the punchline to a story John had heard hundreds of times while he sat in his room trying to drown out the sounds of his parents faking enjoyment of the company of people they barely knew. John wasn't a funny story and apparently even boys in their late teens weren't appropriate or entertaining company while having company over.

John remembered what came next at the exact moment that his younger self, appearing hardly

any different from his current self, walked in through the guest room where he had been watching television. “Dad, can I ask you something?”

The overweight guest looked startled, but the real reaction was Mr. Smith. His face turned a shade of red that nearly crossed the boundary into purple and he coughed into his drink. “John! Company is over, this isn't the time to be intruding.”

Young John stopped in his tracks. “But I just had a quick question for you. I'm not really getting in the way if I just ask one question am I?”

John's father took a sidelong glance at the confused businessman and knew that boredom would set in shortly. If not that, the alcohol's effect would drag him down to the point where he couldn't logically respond and make a deal. So, with his shrewd calculations concluded, John's father gave his response. He stood up and waved his drink in his son's face. “John! This is not the time! We'll talk later, do you understand?”

John's seventeen year old self bit his lip to stop the sarcasm from flowing and retreated to the guest room. The businessman looked carefully at Mr. Smith as he sat down and queried the Englishman. “Your son eh? He seems like a decent sort of boy.”

This was the moment that they were here for. John could remember hearing it from the guest room before he had closed the door. John's father, still a little frustrated by his son breaking an established house rule, had only one thing to say. “Well he's a boy at least.”

“That seemed a little harsh.” John didn't reply to Death. He was too busy thinking about what he had just heard. It was an answer to Death's question, wasn't it?

Seeing it now, John realized how much it hurt. When a stranger asked about John, had given him a slight compliment, John's father had only been able to say that he was “a boy at least.” Whereas some fathers might take the moment to boast or at least agree to a positive statement John's father had been entirely noncommittal. The only description of John's merit that his own father could muster up was that he was “a boy at least.” Nothing more, nothing less. John was, for all intents and purposes, just

a gender in his father's eyes. "Let's go back Death. You're right. There's no point."

"Unfortunate, but that's the way it works. For the record, you seem like a decent sort of fellow to me." Death snapped his fingers and without even a bit of fanfare the living room was gone, replaced once again by the endless white universe.

"I could take you to your happiest moment if you'd like to try again. Senior prom, first sexual experience, high school graduation, won an award...something like that?"

"If I could think of something like that then I'd ask you to take me, but there's nothing. Nothing but the blandness. This world is as vastly empty as my life was. Nothing of value, but nothing bad either. I give up Death."

"Elias."

"What?"

"My name. It's Elias, not Death. It was a pleasure to meet you in person John Smith, even if not in the flesh."

"What now? Do I linger here in this purgatory forever?"

Death laughed, it was a merry and heart-warming laugh that seemed so out of place John couldn't help but smile. **"Goodness no. It isn't purgatory at all. This is sort of a loading zone for data. This is the computerized world where your consciousness, as stored by advanced technology, lives on. I'm no good at this stuff, but Lyra will be along eventually to explain everything. Until then...well try not to go crazy. It gets boring in a place like this."**

And with exactly as little fanfare as the universe had changed Death, or Elias, vanished. John was once again left in the cold void all by himself.

“So what now?”

“Let him stew for a little bit. Observe the data we gather while he's in this state. Then we hit him with the next part and explain how hopeless his situation is.”

“Where is God anyways?”

“What does it matter? He's completely incompetent and nobody, his family least of all, will miss him. In fact if he accepts after the third stage, we can replace God with this John Smith copy. That way we get the same quality of work done without having to actually pay anybody anything. Win win for us.”

“If we log him as Jehovah Allan God but aren't paying him...where would his pay go?”

“Consider it...a small bonus for hard work.”

As he stared into the void John found himself contemplating his own life. For the past three months he had been an underpaid waiter for a mediocre restaurant that served mediocre food to mediocre people while simultaneously he was a 'slave' that provided food to slave masters according to the words of an underpaid alcoholic narrating his life according to the wishes of who knows what. He wondered if some other 'superior' life form, likely an underpaid writer somewhere else in the Universe, was writing the story of the day that John Smith, a human worried about his sanity, spoke to God for the first time, died a meaningless horrific death, was restored as a copy, and came to terms with the meaninglessness of his own life.

Probably not.

