

Here Between and Beyond

Part 1 - Here

The half-filled bottle of Jack Daniel's whispers an assurance of escape. Through its glass throat I listen to my preferred liquid soothsayer murmur promises that if I continue to drink it will, at last, burn away the icy darkness that clings to me like a wet jacket. One more sip, it pledges, and it will ignite a heat within ridding my mind of the disquieting memories that have beckoned me back to this run down bar on the north shore of the Monongahela River.

There's no other way to put it, The Watershed is a shit hole that sits two blocks where the Monongahela and the Allegheny converge and the two rivers become the Ohio. Typical in this part of Pittsburgh, The Watershed is a narrow, shoebox shaped affair with barely enough room at the bar to accommodate five patrons as long as said patrons hadn't indulged in too many pierogies or Primanti Bros. sandwiches. The middle of the joint is home to an unused, dingy, white and black checkerboard dance floor; a vestige to an age where people still danced to music pumped through speakers removed long ago.

Until today, the ironic location of this dive had eluded me. On the surface, I'd convinced myself I'd sojourned here to immerse myself any place she'd frequented, no matter how long ago, in the faint hope I might pick up on the unmistakable crackle of electricity that had always been present when Mae had still been alive. She'd possessed unmistakable electricity that emanated from her like a beacon, even when the chemo had been coursing through her veins.

Staring out the only window, watching the dirty water of the Monongahela slide by, I realize like The Watershed, I too, am stuck on the bank of my own dirty river of misery. In what has become a daily routine of self-deprecation, I ponder how I'm just as much a shit hole as this

place, maybe worse. The Watershed didn't have free will. It couldn't move. Then again, I don't either. Ever since Mae lost her battle with cancer I not only lost my wife, my best friend and everything I held dear, I also lost the battle to keep my will my own.

As a result, I too sit tauntingly close to an emotional convergence that could take me places beyond the forlorn shores into which I've anchored myself. If only I had the balls to let go, cast off, and float downstream. But what if those new shores didn't hold the same memories, or worse, overwrote and erased the memories I have? Memories, even bad ones, are still memories and memories are what I have left. Turns out, I don't have the balls.

Glancing into my empty tumbler, I realize I'm just drunk enough to realize I'm not yet drunk enough to continue down this path of thought until I'm numb drunk. Heeding the glassy whispers of the bottle, I motion the AI to get me two fresh ice rounds. The robotic tender slides down the bar and in mechanical efficiency swipes my glass, replacing my half-dissolved ice rounds with two new dingy spheres. This place really is a shit hole. They can't get water clean enough to make clear ice. How fitting.

"These rounds look about as clear as my thoughts." I say trying to sound lucid, but can hear in my voice I'm trying too hard.

"Whatever you say, Mack" the AI replies in the monochromatic voice typical of bargain basement AI's everywhere. I watch as he slides back down the short bar to attend to a young punk-ass who'd just sidled up onto the next stool over. I give the punk-ass a quick glance. Wiry, thin, with hawkish features set upon a pockmarked face that is otherwise unremarkable except for the scraggly beard he's trying to grow to cover his moon face.

Turning my attention back to the task at hand, I pour the Jack into my glass and listen to the heat of the liquid fracture the ice and watch in half-drunk fascination as mini fault lines zigzag across their cloudy, frozen circumference. Sitting here in this dated, dusty dive, trying to stay connected to Mae I detect, for the first time, rifts within my mind widen with each pour of the bottle.

Self-conscious, I turn toward Punk-ass who's already gotten what I assume to be a Roy Rogers or a Dr. Pepper with a cherry. He looks too young to be in this place. Content Punk-Ass isn't paying any attention, I turn back to the tumbler of Jack and take a long sip, relishing the liquid burn as it clear cuts the forest of darkness within, savoring the decontamination, relishing the sear of internal sterilization.

There was one remaining obstacle the whiskey, however potent, couldn't quite erode. Nothing could. To move past it, I had to give it a voice, my voice. It had become more than a daily ritual it had become a mantra of my deepening depression.

"The day I married her," I mumble, "I'd become more than a somebody, more than just a husband, I'd become her husband. With her gone, I'm worse than a nobody. I'm a nothing. A non-entity. Less than a zero."

The verbal flogging worked. It always did. Free from focusing on how small I've become, I'm free to focus on something else. Although late afternoon light spills through the window, everything within The Watershed is darker, the shadows deeper, inkier. I catch sight of a single mote of dust float across the sharp boundary between black shadow and the jaundice shaft of light. In my stupor, trying to disconnect from my pathetic reality, I imagine myself miniaturized, able to ride that mote to wherever it was headed. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Damn, I miss her.

“Who yous missing n’at? Girlfriend? Old lady? Boyfriend?” the mange bearded Punk-ass interrupts in thick Pittsburghese.

“S’cuse me?” I reply in my best stay-the-hell away from me accent.

“I don’t mean ta be nebbby, but it seems like ya huntin’ fer sumpin.”

“Just some peace and quiet if you don’t mind.”

“Oakaley-Doakaley. But if ya lost somebody, I’m da guy that can help ya find’em.”

I take a long, hard pull from my glass. The acrid flames from the whiskey burn the back of my throat. Gritting my teeth, I turn toward Punk-ass trying to keep myself from grabbing his dingy denim collar and head-butting him in the face.

“If I were you,” I hiss, “I’d choose my next words carefully.”

Without missing a beat, Punk-ass leans in close and I’m hit with the noxious smell of onions, B.O., and stale Aqua Velva.

“I’ve seen a hunnerd speds like you. Yinz all look alike. I’m sorry fer ya loss n’at, but I can help you reunite with whoever ya lost. Besides, I heard ya mumbling about being a nobody, n’ I can help ya be dat somebody again.”

The bottle had whispered promises of escape. Punk-ass is trumpeting nonsense about helping me find Mae. I look away from him and stare down into the amber liquid, not ready to give up on its promises, but also not stopping Punk-ass from continuing.

“Alls I need is her Between image, 200 creds and I’ll be able to hook yous up.” He pauses for half a beat, “If she’s even got a Between or a place in da Beyond that is. I assume she does or you wouldn’t be dis bent about her being gone.”

He’s right, but hearing the truth from somebody else is crushing. I think back on the day Mae had told me she’d been born into privilege and prestige and had been automatically gifted a place in The Beyond which guaranteed her place in what amounted to a digital plot in the boundless electronic graveyard. With it came The Between which is just that: the intermediary straddling revivification and The Beyond.

As I’m sure Punk-ass already suspected, I had neither privilege nor prestige and I wasn’t rich enough to have bought my way into The Beyond. As soon as Mae had known I didn’t have a place in The Beyond we both knew we shouldn’t continue to see each other. She, with a life already planned out for her, I would never be a part of that plan. She was a somebody and somebody’s weren’t supposed to fall in love with nobody’s and certainly not get married to one.

The gravity of his words has more pull than does the whisky. I look at him and notice his eyes are whiskey-colored. Again with the irony, it’s everywhere.

The desperate part of me wants to unload everything I’ve bottled up in the six months she’s been gone, talk non-stop about her, about us, about our marriage. About how the first time I saw her I knew I would marry her. How before that moment the world was fine, but after seeing her everything had become a more focused and clear place. A place she’d filled with wonder, a place she’d filled with laughter and a place she’d filled chock-full of purpose.

I resist the urge allowing logic to usurp emotions knowing Punk-ass doesn't care about me, Mae or about the pain and loss that weighs on my heart, filling it with liquid concrete every moment of every day. All he cares about is getting 200 creds.

"What're you selling?" I ask in compromise.

"She's dead, pal. Nothing can change dat, at least not yet."

That hammer blow of truth shatters the fragile defenses I've constructed of glass, ice and booze. I bristle but remain strong, whiskey strong, bolstered by curiosity what he'll say next.

"That narratives been written. Wha I'm offering is da opportunity to write ya own narrative so ya can at least have a chance at being with her n'at. I can get you to her Between."

He can't be serious. "You can get me to her Between?" unable to keep the incredulousness out of my voice. "Are you suggesting you can hack me into the Revivification Grid?"

"Yes. All's I need is her Between image n'at. If I don't have her Between in my library, I can git that too. Once I have it, I's got alls I need. Alls yous need."

He pauses, lifts the tall cylinder of liquid to his lips, and takes a long drink before setting it back down on the condensation ring it left behind. I wonder if what he said is even possible. Ever since science and technology eradicated ancient notions of life after death in mythological places like Heaven or Hell, stories of people trying to hack into the man-made Revivification Grid, home to all the Betweens and The Beyonds, were just that; stories, conjecture, wild rumors.

"Tell me," he continues, "yous gots a Between image? Yous gots yer own Beyond plot?"

I take the final slug from my glass and slam it on top of the bar causing the dirty ice to rattle inside. The AI spins on his spinal axis, ready to slide down to wipe up any spill. Detecting none, he stays put.

“At’s what I figgered. Even better. So ya interested?”

Not knowing where to look, I turn my unfocused gaze out the dingy window pane, wondering how long it’s been since soap and water touched any part of its brown-caked surface. I’m just as dirty. What Punk-ass is offering is a cheat, and I am interested, how can I not be?

“If I could afford a plot in The Beyond” I answer trying my best to let a flippant tone infuse my voice, “or if I were enough of a somebody to have a Between created and reserved for me, do you think I’d be sitting in this shit hole on a Tuesday afternoon listening to nonsense from a punk-ass like yourself?”

“Looks here,” Punk-Ass says unfazed, “jus gimme me her Between image and I’ll meet’s ya tomorrow dahn behint da Point State Park fountain and I’ll give ya allsa details. Jest be sure to bring em’ 200 creds, ya know, in case yous interested.”

My resolve fractures, my heart betrays my mind. Hope, for the first time in months, flows unabated onto the shores of my stained soul. I bask in the freedom it brings. The freedom in knowing however dirty, however wrong, however tainted, regardless if rooted in truth or conspiracy, no matter if it was corrupt or stained was, at the end of the day, still hope. Like a gem covered by layers of dirt and grime, once uncovered and washed is still valuable. Maybe even priceless and I refused to let this jewel of hope slip through my fingers.

I hear myself blurt out her Between image, one that is just as beautiful and tranquil as the life it reflected.

“A farmhouse with a wraparound porch,” I begin, “clad in crisp, white siding with dark gray shutters. It stands atop a small hill amid an ocean of wheat fields. It looks like a lighthouse on a rocky promontory.”

I stop talking as abruptly as I’d begun, the heat of embarrassment spreading like an electric current through every nerve ending, diffusing the effects of the alcohol pulsing through my veins.

Punk-ass looks at me, a Cheshire smile cleaved across his countenance. I notice a gleam in his eyes, one I hadn’t seen and I’m not sure what to make of it. I decide he’s looking at me as a used Hovercar salesman might look at a helpless old lady desperate or foolish enough to step foot into his showroom. Hungry, predatory.

“Tomorrow, 3:00. Stairs at da Point Fountain.” He says dismounting the stool and slinking out of the doorway and disappearing into the late afternoon.

In the void left in his wake, only the bottle remains with its whispers. I don’t hear them. Hope, for the first time since Mae died is screaming in my head drowning out all other sounds and I yield to its cacophonous serenity.

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Even when Pittsburgh had been the center of the robotics universe, the Point Park and its fountain had been the one place generations of city leaders were determined to keep from being

overrun by technology and ensure it held on to its old-school charm. As a result, the park and the fountain had not changed since its dedication two hundred year ago, back in 1974.

Sitting on the concrete stairs, looking at the Ohio bend around the emerald green hills beyond, I focus on the water and wonder how long it would take to float along Ohio's southern border, glide into Indiana and Illinois and be deposited into the Mississippi. What would I see as I drifted past?

Feeling the fall breeze tickle my face, I inhale what I guess to be the smell of maple and oak leaves. I can't remember the last time I'd taken the time to enjoy such a simple thing as the breeze and the subtle smells that nature holds in its palm, at least not since Mae. Any proclivity for such whimsicality seemed to die with her, but perhaps that was about to change.

Before today, sobriety was only hours long and filled with anxious anticipation of its impending demise. I was still a rookie drunk, not seasoned enough to be deemed a functional alcoholic.

"Ya made it." Punk-ass says startling me out of my reverie. I hadn't noticed him approach.

"I'm sitting here ain't I?" I answer trying to sound annoyed. Half of me had wondered if he'd show, while the other half, the fledgling alcoholic half, hoped he wouldn't so I could heed the bottles siren whispers back to The Watershed.

"I found her." He said sitting down next to me.

Those three words impact like punches to the throat. I can't breathe. Shock and excitement flood into me with equal measure. Several seconds pass before I'm able to inhale

and with that inhalation, excitement quickly transforms into an enthusiasm I'd only experienced once before.

On the day of our wedding, the sight of Mae as she rounded the corner and headed toward me down the aisle, clad in her simple but elegant wedding dress, a bouquet held in front of her, she radiated an ethereal light of beauty that captivated my mind, body, heart and soul. Before that moment I'd not known what enthusiasm could be, but in that moment I understood how enthusiasm, in being her husband, transformed my world.

"Where is she?" I blurt out.

"Correction, I founds her Between." he says holding up a small rectangle of dark blue plastic.

"What's that?"

"Thumb drive. Ancient, I knows, but untraceable, n'at. Only thing dese days that isn't. Dhat's houscome this whole thing cost so much. Data is cheap, even meaningful data. It's da storage of data, or in yer case, da transferring of data, aht's the real expense."

I couldn't take my eyes off the thumb drive. Seconds ago it had been nothing more than an unrecognizable piece of plastic, useless. Now, knowing that it contained everything necessary for me to immerse myself in the digital river of circuits and find my way back to her, it had become priceless.

"Didja you bring the 200 creds?"

I had, it was all I had but I didn't want to let Punk-ass know that. Not right now. "How's this whole thing gonna work?" I ask stalling.

“Once I verify the 200 creds are legit, we go back to my lab n'at. I'll put'cha in a state of hyper-sleep which takes ya as close to death witout dyin'. Next, I'll do a consciousness scan. Armed wit'dat, I can sync yer data with her Between data, basically splice ya into hers. If she's still dere and hasn't ventured into da Beyond, ya can join up with her and yinz can literally live happily ever after, digitally speaking of course.”

The pulse in my neck thumps with excitement. It took everything I had to keep myself in check. “And what happens if I get to her Between and she's not there? What happens if she's already gone into the Beyond?”

“Aht's da rub. I'm not rilly sure. It goes without sayin' this is a non-authorized entry to da place between life and death n'at. You've not been given proper access. It's a birthright or ya hafta buy yinz way in. If she's already gone into da Beyond, The Authorities will know ya there n' you'll likely be terminated.”

“Let me get this straight,” I say trying to wrap my mind around every probable outcome. “If you successfully synch me to her Between, she may or may not be there.”

“Uh, huh.”

“If she's there, she and I will head into The Beyond together?”

“Yup.”

“If that's the case, my body here...”

“Is terminated.” Punk-ass interrupts. “Ya won't have any use for it. Your consciousness, your awareness, your memories, everything that makes you, you, and her, her, wills be part of da Beyond. At least in digital form. Don't worry I have an incinerator for your

shell in the basement.” He says the last part as if throwing discarded corpses into an incinerator was as commonplace as charging your hovercar.

“Lovely thought, thank you.” I say, braiding in a thick strand of sarcasm. “If she’s not there, then the Authorities will terminate me?”

“In all likelihood, yes, but I suppose der’s a slim chance I can git ya back in time before dey terminate ya.”

“Okay,” I begin in summation, “in either scenario, the likelihood I’ll be terminated is high.”

“Yup.” Punk-ass says matter of fact, all business.

I turn my attention back toward the Ohio flowing away from me, watch the muddy water snake around the landscape. I reflect how water is always cutting, eroding, slicing and reshaping the surface of the planet and how time, like water, is always meandering around the topography of one’s life, reshaping and remolding its surface. This time yesterday I’d been lost, unaware there was a possibility of ever reuniting with her and now here I had the opportunity to not only reunite with her but in so doing escape this hell on Earth and be with her in The Beyond. If unsuccessful, I agree with Punk-ass, The Authorities would terminate me. But was I alive now? Was I really living or instead was I existing until I succumbed to the call of the bottle?

With my gaze set straight down the middle of the Ohio, I answer with no hesitation, “When do I go?”

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Two hours later, after validating the 200 creds were legit, Punk-ass leads me through the front door of a rundown house on the outskirts of an abandon city nestled at the base of the Laurel Highlands Mountains and we step into what can only be loosely defined as a lab.

“Ideally situated,” Punk-ass explains closing the door behind us. “Dis place is far ‘nuff away to keep dem pryin’ eyes from caring whats we’re doing, but close ‘nuff to the city so I’s can access da data storage facilities without patchin’ through too many redirects.”

We walk through the single living room, then through a narrow doorway at the back and into a larger room which I assume must’ve been the dining room. In the center sits an antique dental chair which provides a stark contrast to the surrounding walls which are packed with servers and all sorts of other components I’m not able to identify. Blue and green lights blink everywhere and the constant buzz of cooling fans give the illusion we’ve stepped inside a bee hive of electronics.

“Jest sit der whilse I get set up,” Punk-ass directs pointing to the chair.

Easing onto the contoured couch, the cold of the antique vinyl seeps through my clothes sending chills down my spine. I try to dispel comparisons of the icy chill of the couch to the frigid hand of death that may await me within the next few moments if this doesn’t work out.

“Now, I’s gonna set up an entry and exit point,” he explains as he types on an archaic keyboard. “I’ll insert ya into her Between at the foot of the driveway that leads up to da farmhaus. That’s how ya’s know the splice was successful.”

Those words stoke the gray matter of my mind, feeding the ravenous excitement inside me. Like coal being shoveled into the locomotives of long ago, I find the engines of my heart and mind insatiable; there isn't enough fuel to satiate. At the very least, the stoking of my excitement takes the edge off the chill from the couch.

"Jest walks up to the farmhaus," he continues, "go on in n'hopefully she's dere."

Just as his words had stoked the fires, his last sentence snuffs it, shocking me back to the reality of the cold vinyl that has seeped into the marrow of my bones. I notice the dank smell of mildew, likely in the walls. The chill, along with the mustiness, work in tandem stifling any remaining excitement or thoughts of a successful reunion with Mae.

"Don't worry," he says with a dismissive wave of his hand, "If she ain't dere, just go back out the way ya came."

"I thought you said if she isn't there, The Authorities will find me and terminate me." I blurt out, feeling my jaw quiver, telling myself it's because of the chill from the chair, not fear.

"Dere's dat." He says turning toward me. He holds a plastic headband, wires of myriad colors connected to almost every inch of its circumference, each one snaking to various components along the wall next to his terminal. "Put dis on and we'll be alls ready."

No turning back now. No need, there's nothing to turn back to. I grab the headband, slip it on, sit back and stare up at the water stained plaster ceiling.

"Okay," Punk-ass says, "T's gonna initiate in 10 seconds. For da record, I hope ya find what ya lookin' fer."

“Thanks, Punk...,” I stop, clear my throat then continue, “My name’s Vello. I never got yours.”

“Name’s Baxter.”

“Thank, Baxter; for finding her and finding me.”

“I’s only located her Between data, yous da one that gaht to find her. So do that. Ready?”

I inhale what could be my last breath of real oxygen. I’m perplexed why it no longer has any mustiness to it, but the faintest bit of sweetness hangs in the air, a smell reminiscent of fresh baked bread. As the world of The Here closes in a tightening loop of darkness around the periphery of my vision, I realize I must be smelling, not the air of The Here, but the wheat from Mae’s Between.

Darkness rushes in and for several seconds I’m shrouded in complete blackness, then nothing.

Part II - Between

A gentle wind causes the wheat fields in front of me to sway in rhythmic waves that juxtapose the rumble of thunder clapping against the distant horizon, encapsulating how I feel; grateful Baxter has spliced me into Mae’s Between, yet knowing in the deepest parts of my soul that I shouldn’t be here, knowing I’m an imposter.

Mae’s Between was designed to elicit feelings of serenity and a profound sense of peacefulness. Instead, distressing thoughts stab my conscience. Trying to calm the worry that bleeds into my troubled mind, I change my focus.

Standing at the foot of the only hill that punctuates a flat sea of wheat fields that stretch horizon to horizon, I look up toward the farmhouse with its crisp, white siding standing vigil over the oceans of rustling stalks and wonder if Mae is in there, waiting. Would she be able to wait? Was that allowed or would she have been forced to pass into the Beyond? Why had I not asked Baxter those questions? I hear the rumble from the distant thunderstorm and pick up the faint, yet unmistakable scent of ozone.

Crackle of electricity! Mae! Those two thoughts tear into me with jolts just as powerful as the bolts that rend the space between thunderhead and ground. Was I finally picking up that unmistakable electricity she'd possessed? The question cleaves action from paralyzing inaction. I sprint up the dirt driveway toward the farmhouse.

Reaching the front door, I throw it open unconcerned with being discreet or polite.

"Mae?"

No answer.

The foyer is empty, devoid of furniture, carpet or any adornments hanging on its walls. A staircase winds up to a second story, reminding me of the path the Ohio River takes beyond The Pointe. I bound up two at a time.

At the top of the stairs, a hallway leads left and right. There are two doors to the left of the stairway, three on the right. I choose left, sprinting down the hallway yelling out her name. No one answers.

Throwing open the first door, the room is as empty as the downstairs foyer. I turn, head to the last door, throw it open and once more find the room empty. “Mae?” I yell again, desperation filling my voice.

Heading back down the hallway coming to the first door along the hall to the right of the stairway, it, like the rest, is empty. As is the second and the third.

Panic and anxiety pulse in my neck, the poisonous mixture threatening to extinguish the fading hope that had coursed through the same veins moments ago. I knew there had been no guarantee she’d be here, but I was sure I’d picked up on her unmistakable crackle. It had been there. A clap of thunder rumbles in the distance and I’m struck with the thought that perhaps what I’d picked up on was not her, but had been nothing more than ozone that is created by lightning from the storm.

Dejected, I descend the stairs, this time one at a time until I stand in the vacant foyer looking out at the driveway leading to the road. I contemplate heading back out and letting Baxter take me back to The Here where at least I had memories that were vivid and alive unlike this empty conglomeration of data points made to resemble a farm house.

Standing still, contemplating my next move, I notice the road that runs parallel to house blur ever so slightly. I close my eyes, rub my finger across my lids, and open them again only to see the blurring has not only gotten worse, but watch in horror as the blur becomes billions of individual pixels before finally dissolving into a black abyss.

Dazed with fear I watch as the road, then the driveway, one pixel at a time, is swallowed by the ever expanding black hole of nothingness. The Authorities, I realize, know I’m here and are coming to pixilate me.

I race from the foyer and make my way through the empty living room and into the kitchen in a last-ditch effort to leave no stone unturned. Nothing. The kitchen has no stove, no oven, no refrigerator, no table, no chairs, and most certainly no Mae.

Above the din of my footsteps echoing off the bare floor and walls, I hear a new and much more ominous sound, the sound paper makes when you ball it up. It's getting louder, coming from just outside the kitchen door. I turn toward the sound and watch in shock as the door becomes millions of tiny squares. I turn and rush toward the back door hoping it will lead onto the back part of the wraparound porch, throw it open, relieved the porch is still there, turn left and sprint down its length.

Hearing the crumpling paper sound of pixilation coming faster behind me, I know I have only seconds left before The Authorities will catch me and I too will become nothing more than a conglomeration of pixels and done away with.

I want to quit running, want to stop and accept my fate. I'd broken the law. Had entered the revivification grid illegally, a place reserved for those deemed worthy, so why fight it? Why not accept the consequences and be done with it?

Exhaustion spreads like a warm blanket. I want to succumb, want to wrap myself in its cozy tendrils of oblivion. As I near what I know will be the final corner a deeper part of me, one I hadn't known existed, demands I turn that last corner if only to know that I'd tried to the very end. Know that I'd exerted myself and spent my last moments as somebody who searched for love when it was at its most difficult, as somebody who hadn't given up, as somebody who hadn't quit.

Rounding the corner, the air behind me is nothing more than a vacuum with a gravity all its own, tugging on my shoulder trying to suck me into its black void. Mid-way between the corner I'd just rounded and the end of the porch, I see Mae sitting in a white wooden rocking chair rocking back and forth.

Her gaze is set out beyond the sea of wheat fields at the thunderstorm that blurs the line between ground and sky just as effective as the reality in front of me blurs the growing abyss behind.

The crackle of her electricity punctures into me when she turns her attention my way. All thoughts of pixelization, all fear of being dissolved into nothingness disappear as her rich brown eyes, upon seeing me, blaze forth with a light brighter than any bolt of lightning thrown from any cloud.

She stands and faces me as I close the distance between us. I stop short of running into her unable to blink, breathe or utter a sound afraid she's a figment of my imagination. Nothing more than an apparition, a nebulous iteration, a gossamer image so fragile any superfluous movement would cause her to dissolve or disappear.

She smiles. And with it, I'm reborn. I reach out to place my hand on her milky smooth cheek and notice that the tip of my finger blurs. The sound of crumpling paper crescendos as I see the tip of my fingers, then my hand, become millions of tiny squares. I try to lunge for her, but my legs are no longer my own having become digitized blocks of data.

The look of shock and pain on Mae's face as she witnesses my transition into nothingness racks my soul to its core. I see, for the second time, a ring of blackness encroach upon me, only this time it's composed of billions of black squares. I fall into a well of absolute nothingness. I

try to scream her name, but there is no sight or sound. For the second time there is a totality of nothingness.

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Light: white and scorching blasts through the black nothingness. As quickly as my world had pixilated, I see my hand and fingers reassimilate in the same pose it had held. Instead of Mae being inches away, there is nothing but the yawning space of an empty room.

Getting my bearings, I notice the light is coming up from the floor, white and sterile, casting no shadows. The only furnishings are a table and a single straight-back chair, both pieces emitting their own light, not to help illuminate the space but to cancel out shadows that would otherwise be there.

Turning in a slow circle, I notice there is no door or windows. The walls are curved forming a uniform surface with no detectible lines of joinery.

“You may take a seat, Vello.” A deep bass voice rumbles, the sound coming from everywhere instead of a localized direction.

Still, I look for the source of the voice. “Where am I?”

No reply. I continue to stand for several more seconds looking for anything that will give me a hint where I am and who just spoke to me. Resigning myself to answers I hope to come later, I acquiesce, walk to the chair and sit down.

“Thank you,” The voice says. “Now then, how did you get here?”

I look toward the ceiling hoping to find the familiar sight of a circle denoting a speaker however it, like the walls and floor, are smooth and free of any seams.

“I’m not sure where here is?” I answer.

“How did you gain access to Mae Deckard’s Between file?”

Had The Authorities placed me into this interrogation chamber to question me? Had they spared me hoping to catch Baxter? Couldn’t they read my digitized thoughts? Couldn’t they just access my synched memory?

“Synched data. At least that’s what I was told. I’m not sure how that works.” I answered. I had nothing to lose and was not fearful of any repercussions from Baxter.

“Who did you get the data from?” The voice pressed.

“Guy named Baxter. I never got his last name.” I realize I don’t have the vaguest notion of how much time has passed or if time is a quantifiable data point here. “What day or year is this? How much time has elapsed since I saw Mae?”

“Time is irrelevant here,” the voice answered. “Why did you agree to be spliced into the Revivification Grid?”

Without the slightest hesitation, the answer came loud and clear, “Life.”

In the interminable silence that ensued, I wonder why I’d used that word to describe my motivations.

“Funny,” the voice finally answered, “you say ‘life’ and yet here you sit, in The Between straddling life back in The Here and death in The Beyond. You’re neither dead nor alive.”

“Is that a fact?” I shoot back, defiant.

“Correct.” the voice responds calm and cool. “Access to The Here has been terminated. With that pathway blocked, access to your fleshly body is no longer possible.”

Stunned into silence so complete, I hear nothing. No matter how hard I try, I cannot hear the usual pulsing of blood in my ears, no ringing, and no sound of my breathing, nothing that would indicate I’m alive. Although the room is bright and the seamless walls, floors and ceiling give an illusion of a large space, claustrophobia wraps a noose around my neck.

“As of now,” the voice continued devoid of any emotion, “you’re a prisoner of The Authorities subject to termination pending the conclusion of this investigation.”

The noose tightens incrementally upon hearing the words ‘prisoner’, ‘termination’ and ‘interrogation’. My breathing becomes labored, but I’m relieved I’m able to hear it again.

“For the last time,” the voice demands, “why did you agree to be spliced into the Revivification Grid?”

This time I hesitated, held onto the thought that burst in my mind, ruminated over it before answering again, “As I’ve already stated, and for the official record, life.”

This time there was no protracted pause. “Explain.”

“Define life?” I answer. “You say access to my physical body has been blocked. The instincts that are a part of my consciousness, a part of any sentient being would recoil at that thought, but as I sit here processing this, I’m wondering if that matters? Did I feel fear? Am I experiencing emotions in The Between just as I would in the Here? Yes.”

I gather my thoughts and continue. “Is it really necessary, therefore, to possess skin, blood vessels, fingers or toes to be defined as being alive? If the brain and consciousness it contains, along with awareness and perception is digitized and placed into this mainframe grid, what use do I have of a physical body?”

This time there is no reply. In the silence, my thoughts turn from the metaphysical, aware of the most critical constituent of my being a human, the one thing that sets all humans apart, my emotions. Like a rushing tide, they quickly flow onto the shores of my mind.

“Also,” I continue unfettered, “what I feel remains intact. My emotions are patent. The pain of losing Mae and the resulting feelings of isolation and of being reduced to nothing more than a collection of cells just waiting to die are still very much a part of who or what I am.”

Excitement courses through me, knowing that my body has transitioned from the biologic nucleotides A, G, C and T to a technologic being composed of nanobits and nanobytes. Although what I’m feeling is an illusion provided by technology, it’s an illusion I lean into and accept as reality.

Feeling the impetus gain momentum, I continue, “If perception is reality, then reality itself is but a perception. As to what is life? Life is love. And I have loved well. I have loved with ferocity and in return have been loved with equal ferocity. And when that love was taken by cancer, there was a vacuum so profound I could not grasp its dimension.”

I let those words hang in the cybernetic ether, letting them reverberate against digital ears that I hoped understood.

“So in answer to your question,” I said with finality, “I came here to find that love again. Without Mae, The Here had become nothingness. At least now, in The Between, I had a shot, I had a chance, had the opportunity to be reunited with her. She’d waited for me. I saw her. And in seeing her, even if it was for a moment, she’d remained as I’d remembered her; luminous, radiant, absolutely lovely. Yes, I broke the law, but it was well worth it.”

“And before you embarked on your illicit activity,” The Voice countered “did you ever consider that The Here you’d been experiencing was, in actuality, somebody else’s Beyond? That you’re nothing more than a set of data points to make that specific Beyond more believable to the owner of that domain plot?”

My head spun.

“Did it ever occur to you,” the Voice continued, “the only purpose of your existence is to make it easier for the owner of the plot to accept it as reality, one they’d known and not a generic electronic graveyard full of random data and random people?”

I was left alone to grapple with these thoughts, the surety of my arguments severed with a surgical precision to any connections of reality, digital or otherwise.

“Did it ever occur to you, you’re nothing more than a figment of Mae’s imagination? Someone she’d conjured up, and we constructed for her.”

I’m splintered. Desperate, I search the shards of remaining cogent thought, trying to thread them together into a cohesive rebuttal. Explosions of thoughts burst into the backdrop of my awareness, a kaleidoscope of vivid ideas bursting one after the other in brilliant clarity.

“If that were the case,” I begin capturing all the thoughts before they faded, “if I were only a digital model composed of nothing more than bits of information embedded in a digital mainframe, why would she get sick and die? Why would I have to go through the pain and horror of watching her fight and lose that battle? And why would I continue on for 6 months after my purpose had been fulfilled only to experience that loss and pain in a way that cannot be explained?”

A giant burst of thought, an order of magnitude bigger and twice as bright, flashes upon my heart and mind. All the reasons I would ever need, all arguments that would ever be necessary became clear.

“Love,” I continued with renewed confidence, “is not a set of data points. Love is not something that can be turned on or off with a one or a zero. Love is much more than that. It is equal parts everything and nothing. It just as easily gives as it takes away. It has the power to both empty and make whole. It is the grandest of emotions, one that ties the human experience to one another. It cannot be forced nor conjured out of thin air. Mae and I shared a love that was all of this and simultaneously none of this. It was both macro and micro in scale. Too big to understand and so small it infused every part of our collective being. She was, is, and will always be all the reasons for everything I’ll ever do.”

Silence. One second ticks to five. Five seconds stretch to ten, then ten to thirty, thirty to a full minute. No response.

Just as I’m about to speak to break the silence, another noise explodes around me, the sound of crumpling paper. I look down at my hand resting on top of the table and watch in terror as the table, then my hand, begin to pixilate. The sound crescendos becoming a deafening roar.

The familiar ring of darkness appears and just as before begins its march toward the center of my existence. The light is being swallowed, pixel by pixel, my vision reduced to a small coin of light. Within seconds, there is nothing.

No light, no sound until a single word, spoken by the voice, blasts into my consciousness, “Worthy.”

Part III–Beyond

Standing at the foot of the driveway that leads to the farmhouse, everything is just as it had been. Gob smacked, it takes several seconds for me to process and acknowledge I’d been saved from nothingness by The Authorities, deemed worthy and been given what I could only assume to be permission to be with Mae. And all of it attributed to the love we shared.

Love.

I run up the driveway, through the open front door, burst through the kitchen, out the back door, down the porch, and turn the corner. She’s still there. I knew she would. This time, there’d been no doubt.

Sitting in the same black rocking chair, face buried in her hands, my heart breaks knowing she’s weeping. I come to a stop and stare at her wanting to take everything in, savor every photon of light that carries on it the image of her long brunette hair cascading like a silken waterfall around her cheeks. Pressed against her smooth, alabaster skin, it provides the contrast needed to frame it in a radiant, ethereal light. Just as I’d been the first moment I’d laid eyes on her, I’m captured by the gravity of her beauty.

I approach, my footsteps not making a sound until I stand just a foot away. “I’m here.” is all I’m able to whisper.

I hear her inhale, but her face remains buried in her hands. I know my Mae, she’s too afraid to look up. Too afraid what she just heard wasn’t real. Too afraid it had been a figment of her imagination, a trick of the wind.

I’m obliterated and made new by her fear. “Mae, I’m here.” I whisper again, pulling her silken hair back with the tip of my finger.

She tenses, starts to recoil against my touch, stops, then lifts her head and looks up at me. Her brown eyes are tear streaked, glistening, each bejeweled drop a priceless diamond created in the pressures of love and loss. She looks at me for a long second before I finally kneel so we’re at eye level. “I’m here, Baby Doll.”

Bewilderment is etched across her face, too stunned to accept the reality. I place my hand on the side of her face, the look of bewilderment dissolves. She tilts her head into my hand, leans into it.

“How?” She finally asks.

Tears fill my own eyes when I give voice to the one-word answer.

“Us.”

One word, two letters. Yet it represents all that is possible, all that is wonderful.

She stands. I follow. She offers me her hand. Taking it into mine I cross an invisible threshold and know I've taken my first step with her into The Beyond. Feeling her hand in mine I smile, knowing it will remain there.... now and for always.

The End