

# Stumped

A story of an absurd struggle with the unimaginable

## Chapter 1

Ethan, is standing in his Garden. He is a quite extraordinary man, extraordinary not in his ability, but in his sense of being very extraordinary, which defies his ability to see how completely average he is. This contradiction within himself, being so off with his reality, throws him off so much, that he thinks of himself as so disastrously lower than he actually is because he can't attain the standards which he believes himself to be able to attain.

Ethan stands before a problem, quite a tricky problem as it defies his sense of what the world is, breaking the logic which he has come to be considered as true, and put him in a state of irrationality about the situation at hand.

What is this? He says to himself

What is this that has just appeared in my garden?

What he see's before him is a stump, its branches like fingers, that seem to claw into the ground around it, not letting go.

Obviously, quite perplexed, he checks to see if there are remnants of a tree anywhere around him, but none are there. This quite confusing predicament is made more so by the fact that he has not seen a tree in this spot in the five years that he had been in this house.

He asks himself whether the stump has always been here?

He asks himself has he just merely been unaware?

In any case, the tree is situated in the center of the garden, and is quite ugly, and Ethan would really like to put a fountain there. He goes to into his shed to find a fork to attempt to bring up the stump, getting under to gain leverage he pushes down. However, the stump seems to attach itself to the ground more, the knuckles which the branches has seem to tense, clawing into the ground rerooting itself.

Ethan scratches his head, pinches himself and says, I must be in a dream, right, this sort of thing doesn't happen.

Ethans resolve only grows stronger with his failure, he goes into his shed to acquire an axe.

I'll chop off its knuckles, he says to himself, then the stump won't have a chance to grow back.

But as he's rummaging around the shed to find an axe he hears a noise coming from inside the house. He goes in to investigate, and finds that a leak has sprung out from the ceiling in the kitchen. There's even a little crack with a hole opening out from it pouring water all over the rubbish, which has created a pool of water that is making a foul smell.

He sighs a heavy sigh, how did this even happen?

He goes upstairs to check if the bath is running but it isn't.

Then he looks outside and notices its raining, but it wasn't a moment ago, he thought.

He even checked his clothes which are dry.

He searched around to try and find a ladder which he eventually found but then he hears another crash from downstairs.

He put a hand on the banister of the upper landing by the stairs to steady himself for yet another unexpected problem in this most unfortunate day he was experiencing and said to himself, what now?

Ethan goes downstairs and finds a naked individual had fallen over in his kitchen from the smelly rubbish rainwater leaking from the ceiling. He didn't really know whether to ask if he was okay, or grab something from around the kitchen in case he needed to subdue him. One thing he did notice however was his outrageously long penis.

Ethan thought to himself that maybe he was a robber who robs people naked to throw them off whilst he steals.

Although Ethan thought that he could be wrong, and judging him incorrectly in this moment, and may just be a person lost and trying to find his way. But before Ethan could decide what to do the man sitting on the floor jumps up and stares at Ethan with a blaze of fire in his eyes and says, Hello.

Ethan didn't like the way he said hello however, for it seemed confrontational and attempted to subdue him in the smelly rain water that was pouring down from the ceiling onto the rubbish.

Eventually in the tussle the man said, wait, I'm American.

He said this in a French accent with inflections that denoted that he has lived in England for quite some time, which led Ethan to suspect he was a poor liar.

This isn't a silly game, said Ethan, why are you here?

Ethan had managed to get this man into some form of head lock at this point and his struggles he matched with ease.

The man seemed to have accepted he had been caught in a position he couldn't find his way out of and said, or rather shouted, I'm here from a distant world here to warn you of impending doom!

Okay, Ethan said, I really don't have time for this, can't you see that my roof is leaking.

Ah, yes, the man says, time, yes, i am also from another time, honestly, things are very bad, and i am here to warn you!

Ethan answered, can't you already see that they're fairly unreasonable at the moment, how can they possibly get any more worse!

Why Ethan was arguing with this man he did not know, the man's lack of an answer made him conclude that he was mad, and his display only a means to get out of the situation. The situation he almost forgot he was in as the ceiling leaked over himself and the man, which he thought he could seek a specialist to fix. But the man that was currently in his grip he couldn't fix, although he couldn't hold him here forever either, so he said to him, can i let you go and if i do, will you leave?

No! the man said, I'm here to help you!

What? Why? Ethan responded.

Can't you see that your roof is leaking?

Well, yes.

Then let me go.

Ethan couldn't see the mans face to be sure of the disposition he was in to make sure that the man wouldn't be trouble if he let him go, but under present circumstances he didn't have a choice in the matter. He found himself in a stale mate.

Okay, Ethan said, I'm going to let you go, but i want you to leave.

But what about the tree stump outside, don't you have an issue with a stump?!

How do you know about the stump, Ethan answered, surprised.

Ah! As I said, I am from the future!

Okay, Ethan sighed, he didn't believe him, but the longer he held onto him the worse the roof was leaking.

So Ethan let the man go.

The man just sat there for a moment, stretched a little and rubbed his neck.

After a moment of silence, Ethan asked the man if he would like a towel and some clothes, at which the man seemed to have taken great offence to, his breath rising and rising to indicate that he was getting more and more frustrated with something. He eventually said, sure.

Ethan went upstairs to grab a towel and some spare clothes but by the time he got downstairs the man was gone. There was a note however, and it said, good luck with your problems, I was here only to remind you of them.

What? Ethan thought, what is going on?

Suddenly he hears a noise from the front room, there seems to be a series of women with highly exaggerated bodily features dancing erotically and arousing each other by rubbing each other's genitals. The rain caused their clothes to cling to their bodies. It seems that their display was intended for Ethan as they stared at him through the window. Ethan blushed, being a fairly frigid man, he just stood there, not really knowing what to do, whether to stay, or go and fix the ceiling in his bathroom that was still leaking.

One of the women however seemed to have made the decision for him and did the impossible and managed to step through the window, which there was one previously. Perhaps she was merely a figment of Ethans imagination, an imagination that Ethan hoped that created all the set of circumstances today. But no mental illness he thought had been prevalent in his family, which makes him conclude that he is not going mad but that this is a dream that he needs to wake up from. At this point in his thinking the woman was next to him, looking up into his face seductively. He felt aroused, but doubted his arousal, trying to keep a distance to it as she unbuttoned his trousers.

Again, he thought, what was going on.

Again, he questioned how ridiculous this day is whilst this woman was sucking his penis.

This experience made him think back to a meeting with a woman called Venessa he had a few days ago, a woman that he was mildly obsessed with, but he wasn't sure why.

He met her a few days ago whilst he was walking to get some shopping from the shop.

Venessa saw Ethan walking up from the road, she knew that he would be walking up the road this time of day, because each day he would walk up the road to get some shopping, she knew this because she was mildly obsessed with this man but she didn't know why. She wanted to say something, but couldn't quite think of anything to say because of her mild obsession with Ethan made her mildly nervous to the encounter that was about to happen, an encounter that may break the fantasy that she has of him.

So she asked her friend next to her what she should say.

Her friend said she should say hello.

So as the man she was ever so mildly obsessed with came down the road, she said hello to him.

Ethan stood there, seeming to be in a state of mild shock to this woman saying hello to him, that she herself was put into a state of shock, at his shock. Although Ethan wanted to answer he didn't as he intuited something off with the way she said hello, almost as if it wasn't her speaking the words but nevertheless torn, because he was attracted to this woman. As the tension in the air lingered the silence continued and eventually Ethan just walked on.

Confused, Venessa asked her friend, what happened, why didn't he say hello back?

He's probably gay, her friend answered.

Doubtful of her friend she questioned whether it was the way she said hello that had put him off, or perhaps it was the way she looked. She pulled out a mirror and checked her hair, criticised the shade of pink on her lips thinking that it was a bit too dull a shade for the complexion for her face and her dark hair. Maybe she could get injections she thought for a moment but soon dismissed it wondering why she was so mildly obsessed with a man that would provoke these thoughts in the first place.

The man she was mildly obsessed with was wondering why he himself didn't say hello, he sensed something inauthentic about the way she said hello, leading him to think wrongly that she intended to ridicule Ethan in some way because of her lack of sincerity. His own mind jumped to his own appearance that was provoking this kind of judgement from another person, perhaps it is the shade of jumper he is wearing, maybe it is his shoes, or maybe he needs to go to the gym more. Then the absurdity of

these thoughts occurred to him, and decided to buy some biscuits with the soya milk that he was about to purchase.

This interaction occurred to Ethan as this girl was strangling Ethan in his front room, he eventually came, and she left. He was now alone with his trousers down. His front room with no window and his roof with a leak and a monstrous stump in his back garden, wondering, what had just happened this morning.

Eventually, he pulled up his trousers, it seemed to have stopped raining so he cleared up the rain water on the floor, took out the rubbish, and called a window fitter, a stump removal expert and a roofer.



## Chapter 2

The stump removal expert came round the next day. Ethan explained to him his situation at hand, that the stump couldn't be removed from the ground it was in.

Ah, the stump removal expert said, as he inspected the stump, what you have here is a new kind of stump, one that develops out from a pre-existing stump that was already here.

Ethan thought for a moment here, about whether to keep concealed his lunacy but then again what would the damage be? He would only be seeing this man once in his life so his reputation would still be intact, so he said, but, I am doubtful whether this stump has ever been here before today.

That makes perfect sense.

What?

What you have here is a special variant of the kind of stump that is parasitic of other stumps, for it infects your sense of memory aswell, making you doubtful of your reality around you.

Ethan thought about showing the man the hole in the ceiling to make sure that was real, but he doubted the mans judgement, for obvious reasons, as his interpretation of events is absurd. Although, Ethan thought, his story is at its heart absurd, so perhaps this man was just taking pity on him, which Ethan thought he would do in the situation. Breaking the delusion may entail the deluded to become defensive and confrontational.

Instead, Ethan asked, How do we get rid of this then?

Right, so what you need is this magic spray, the man said motioning into his coat to withdraw some, he shows Ethan the spray and says further, It stops the roots from being held into the ground so it's easier to lift out.

Okay, Ethan replied slowly, how much.

Ah now.

Here we go, Ethan thought.

That's the thing, the man continued, it isn't easy to come by this miracle spray you see, it's from a mountain very high up, extracted from the rarest of plants.

How much, Ethan said flatly.

£50

Oh, that's very pricey, Ethan acted as if surprised.

I know, but times are hard.

Don't worry, I'll take it.

The man smiles, and sprays the stump, and puts back the liquid in his jacket and says, you have to wait a week for the spray to take effect.

A week?

Yes, then i'll be back to help you out with removing the stump.

Why not now?

Ah yes, so the liquid doesn't kill the stump in any way but puts it into a very deep sleep, much like when you anaesthetise a patient going into surgery.

We need to do this because you can't kill the stump, it will regrow merely becoming larger and anchoring itself more firmly. So we will put it to sleep and then attempt to remove it, hopefully not waking it in the process.

Hopefully?

Nothing is a one hundred percent science, but in any case our methods are to prolong the life of the stump, for this is a very rare species, and we will plant it again somewhere that it can flourish.

The man, Ethan thought, was obviously slighting him in some strange self righteous way about the stump. Like it had a life of its own or something. He pinched himself again, which drew a confused look from the man, obviously he can't see the ridiculousness of this situation.

Why are you pinching yourself? You aren't in a dream, believe me, the man winked.

Ethan sighed and said, whatever, and led the man out of his home.

The next day the roofer came over, a little man, looking as though he couldn't do much in the way of roofing, let alone even lift the ladder to get up there. But Ethan thought better to make assumptions, for looks can be deceiving and today everything seemed to be doing so.

What's up? The roofer said, giving a little chuckle.

Ofcourse, here we go again, Ethan thought and said, Hello.

My names Jacob

Right, and my names Adam.

The roofer laughed and said, I hear you need a roof fixing.

Yes, well I, Ethan faltered.

Well? what's the problem?

It's going to sound absurd

Don't worry I'm used to it, i spend my how life ontop of houses after all.

Okay, that's funny, said Ethan

But Ethan didn't think it was funny.

You know, together we can transcend this little debacle that we find ourselves in.

Right, okay, said Ethan wondering whether he was amused or irritated by this little old man.

Sorry if my little anecdote is annoying you, you see its very boring being a roofer, for as long as i have, you see, I never wanted to be a roofer, but i have a wife and kids to provide for, so the story is something that makes the job seem worth it.

Ethan saw instead of a little story but a slight manipulation for him to feel some pity towards this little old man, so he said, Sorry mate, but I really just need my roof fixing, not this rendition of a frail old little man that you are performing.

There's no need to be like that, I'm only trying to start a conversation here.

Ethan sighs, Sorry, long day

That's quite alright, if i had a leaky roof, which I don't because i'm a roofer, I would be having a leaky day, but you know, you can always count on a ray of sunshine through the thick of the clouds to show you the way.

What way?

Well the way to fix that little leak you have upstairs.

Ethan wasn't sure if he was being literal or figurative here.

The little man continued, for we all have little cracks in our lives that we don't attend to, that are left in the shadows of our consciousness, and the more we look the other way distracted by simple pleasures, those cracks become fissures and eventually they start to leak.

Well that seems to be what has happened, hasn't it, Ethan said sarcastically.

Yes, it is, and don't worry, I Jacob, have come with my ladder to plunge into the depths of this leak and restore order to the situation.

Ethan thought that it is a shame that this mans talent is wasted in being a roofer.

Okay, let's get to it then, said Ethan wanting to get this whole thing over and done with.

Hold on, there's no rush here is there, do you not want to hear my tale of how i came to this position, my struggle, a struggle i have made for my wife and children as you may already know, a struggle to overcome my fears, to command my mind and body, to reach the very highest point in my life, higher and higher each and everyday.

Ethan at this point didn't think he could stop him.

But you see it's not always about attaining the heights, I've had my lows, its really up and down being a roofer you see.

The roofer chuckles

Ethan stares blankly.

You see when we really get into the problem, we don't see appearances, we see structure, how things are made, and through this we can strip away the corroded parts and with care and attention fix those problems which lay deep.

Ethan has now realised why he's a roofer.

And with my help, I'll not only fix your roof, the body and its organs, but through that I'll put your mind to rest, a happy home is a happy home dweller, as the saying goes.

I don't think that's a saying.

Every saying needs an origin doesn't it?

I guess so.

Yes, so for the mere price...

Here we go, Ethan thought.

Of an amount of money, I'll fix this roof for you.

And how much would that price be?

Well I'd like to work that out after the fact.

Sorry, but I'd like to agree on the price before hand.

Oh but you know, this business isn't without its chance happenings, when delving into the nuts and bolts of something hidden surprises lay everywhere.

Hidden surprises you should be able to predict, no, with your experience that is.

Are you calling me old. Because it's the 21st century and I've had enough of the stigma against the old, its ageist i tell you, said the old man

I'm just saying, you seem to be so good at talking about your craft so you must be good at it, Ethan said, sarcastically.

The roofer gave Ethan a look.

And I trust that your great experience has built great judgment to predict a price of how much it will cost, Ethan continued

You know what mate I don't really want to fix your roof, the roofer said and left in his van.

Great, now I'm left with my roof leaking, Ethan thought.

Ethan decided to go into the roof himself and investigate the situation. He didn't know when the last time he had been in there has been, never the less, he found a ladder and went up. There's no light as he hadn't installed one so he brought a torch with him. He looks around with the torch and finds that there's all kinds of things that he has forgotten. Boxes full of Records, board games and toys from his childhood, there's even some drawings he made when he thought of himself as an artist, how idealistic I was that's becoming famous and how unaware of the reality of such things entailed he thought to himself.

Ethan looks across the loft and found a dusty shield in a corner, he didn't know where this had to come from, it seems quite old.

Was it with the house when he got here, Ethan thought.

It has a three headed lion on it covered in snakes and the lion is trying to shake them off but seems to fail to do so. He tries to pick it up and it's really quite heavy. In the process however he sees something underneath, a little lock box, he goes to pick it up but as he does so the pitter patter comes in harder from the roof from the rain hitting it.

Oh bugger, Ethan thought.

He quickly shines the light around trying to find the source of the leak. Eventually, he sees it running down from the roof and below a set of wires ready to short circuit.

In the rain Ethan quickly went to the shop to buy some expanding foam to plug the hole, On the way he meets Vanessa again, the girl he is slightly obsessed with.

Hello, how are you, she says to him.

Okay, Ethan said in a somewhat more high-pitched voice than he's used to.

Aren't you going to ask if I'm okay, she replied.

Ethan really wanted to say how this really isn't the best timing and explain the situation he is in but instead of admitting to the situation, which he thought would have made him seem like he couldn't keep his affairs in order, he said, yeah, okay, how are you?

I'm fine thank you, so fine infact that I feel as if this is going to be a very fine day.

Ethan at this point is caught between a rock and a hard place, he felt himself getting sucked more and more into the conversation but didn't have the time for it, as his house is falling apart. So instead of carrying on the conversation, he said as blandly as possible, That's good, I'm happy for you.



She obviously looked quite disappointed in Ethan's response, as disappointed as he is himself of his response to her. Ethan wanted to go back in time and do it all over again, do over this entire few days, but instead what emanated from this interaction is a void in the interaction, a void that neither of them knew how to fill. Instead of this emptiness being a stop in the conversation, much like a rest in the melody, it produced an awkwardness, which led to Venessa walking away with a feeling of further turmoil on top of their previous interaction.

Ethan thought, that he probably wasn't going to see Venessa again, the conversation creating some existential dread that couldn't be overcome.

Ethan walked on, and went into a shop, where a shop assistant and another fellow were discussing the current climate crisis and blaming the ever-increasing rainfall on it, but really it's always been this wet in England and always will be, the same as a penchant for moaning.

Hey you, the stranger said confrontationally.

Yes? Ethan replied

Don't you yourself feel as though the climate situation has gotten out of hand, a situation causing the crisis that we find ourselves in?

What situation specifically?

The world is going under I tell you, and the underworld is rising up.

That was pretty vague, Ethan thought, and being ambivalent in argument tends to provoke in his experience, rather than leading to any truth. Not to mention fooling for such things merely shows your lack of control and naivety in the world and an inability to solve your own problems.

Ethan just ignored the conversation and said to the shop assistant if she had any expanding form.

Over there, the shop assistant replied.

Ethan went over to the spot she pointed out and on the way, he managed to accumulate a box of cereal, toothpaste, butter, some vegetables, a pork loin, some dog food (Ethan didn't have a dog) and a milky way. He took all these things back to the counter and paid for them.

Ethan went back home with the things he had just bought, into the loft and fixed the roof by spraying the can into it. It seemed to work as a temporary measure whilst he spent his time finding a more reasonable roofer. Now he just had to fix the hole in the ceiling, which is a long old job, and a slog, like writing a book kind of slog, like ripping all the plaster board out of the ceiling and replacing it kind of slog. Which takes a while.

At this point the door rang, and inside came three women, Rachel, Dianne and another woman Ethan didn't know. Dianne was the eldest out of the two, not necessarily by age, but she was the most mature.

Ethan asked who the other woman was that came with them.

This is Charlie, she's here to tag along with us today, is it alright if we come in? we thought we'd just pop by, answered Dianne.

Considering Ethan had no front window it really wasn't a very good time to come, but he knew he didn't have much choice in the matter and Dianne was asking out of politeness but meant the question rhetorically.

It smells a bit in here, what's been going on? Rachel asked.

It's a long story, and its really perplexing and difficult to put into words, do you really want to know? Oh, okay you're nodding your heads, okay, i'll tell you.

Ethan continued to tell them the story.

That's absurd, said Dianne.

How did you even manage, I couldn't have managed, said Rachel ever doubtful of herself.

You could have, Dianne said, reassuring her.

You know who would have ripped that stump right out from the ground, Drew, Drew wouldn't have broken a sweat, Charlie said.

Can Drew come around then and rip it out? Replied Ethan.

Oh no, he's far too busy.

What, ripping out other tree stumps? Said Dianne

Well, no, actually, he's got a job, you know, a good job, and that makes him so attractive, God I would just like to fuck him, you should see him, he goes to the gym five times a week and has a sports car.

Ethan thought that this girl wasn't the type to know a guy like this and is doubtful whether Drew actually exists, but what he can't work out is how to interject without sounding jealous. A state he is in by her intention he thinks. This thought however made him think of himself as arrogant, but why else would she bring him up in the first place other than to provoke.

These sort of mental backflips go through Ethans head all the time, he thinks it has something to do with the hazy edges between the ideas of power and love, but isn't too sure.

If you like Drew so much why aren't you with him, Ethan was very happy Rachel had said this.

I've got better things to do, replied Charlie superciliously.

Like coming round here and helping me with an issue that has me stumped, Ethan said, rather chuffed of himself.

Both Dianne and Rachel laughed, even Charlie gave a little smile.

How long have you had this problem, asked Dianne.

Just today, every crisis that could have happened to me, has happened.

I wonder why that is, said Rachel.

We've known each other a while Ethan, and to be honest, you are quite prone to these things, said Dianne in a caring tone.

I know i'm not the most organised or together person, but i really don't think that this is my fault, i mean, do you remember this stump being here?

I don't, said Rachel, but then again i don't think i would ever take any notice of a stump, did you hire someone to remove it?

I did... began Ethan.

Go on, said Charlie.

What happened? chimed in Rachel.

So there was this guy, Ethan began.

Yes, they all said in unison.

And I bought some spray off of him.

And what does the spray do?

It puts stumps to sleep.

What? Said Rachel confused

What? Laughed Charlie.

What? Sighed Dianne, with her face in her hands.

It needs to be put to sleep so it doesn't claw into the ground more.

Claw into the ground? You're not making any sense hun, said Dianne

I mean, I would show you, but I can't touch it otherwise I might wake it up, I know how this sounds, it sounds absurd, but look at this.

Ethan puts his hand onto the window only to find that it's still there, the women are now looking at him in a confused manner, he really didn't know what to say.

Are you okay? Said Charlie in a patronizing tone.

Ethan sighs, and sits back into his chair and says, Honestly today has felt as though it has been like some kind of dream that I've been stuck in, in fact, this has been going on for quite some time, without you guys even realising it i think, i've been doubtful of what even is real, authentically real, because I've felt as though I've been so out of touch with the reality around me.

Has this happened ever since you had this operation? Said Dianne

Yes.

But that was so long ago, said Rachel

I know, but it still effects me everyday, and my life seems to be what i feel like in myself.

And what's that?

A mistake.

You aren't a mistake, said Rachel.

Ethan thought he must be in a bad way if Rachel is reassuring him, he however thanked her.

You have seemed to have been trying to overcome something for quite some time, it's never gone too well since that moment in your past.

Yes, Ethan answered.

Suddenly, a man runs into the room, it's the same man that Ethan wrestled before and he's still naked. Everyone freezes and doesn't know what to do. The man is wide eyed, and suddenly shouts.

Who are all you people!?

What do you mean who are we? Who are you?

I'm here because there's a crisis coming and i'm warning you that it's happening!

Yes, you mentioned that before, but what crisis? Said Ethan, slightly anxious as to how to engage with him.

The crisis that's always around the corner.

The man is very emphatic with his gestures, almost as if he is enacting the crisis that is about to come. The women however didn't seem to mind, their eyes firmly fixated on his penis, which seemed to be flapping around as much as his hands.

God, I think it's bigger than Drews, muttered Charlie.

Wait, who, what, what's going on here, Dianne said suddenly snapping out of it, I've met men like you before, that sparks fear into women to have them grow attached to them, and i won't fall for it, no matter how much, or how big, that is.

The man is still wide eyed, blazing with sheer intensity, an intensity that's very unsettling but at the same time intoxicating. He stared right at Ethan and said,

You.

Me? Ethan answered, nervously.

Yes! You, you know, don't you.

I know what?

You know what happens, you were at there at the point it happened.

What happened?

I can't explain, but now you know and have experienced it, and now having experienced it, it is bound to recur in front of you, but only if you remember it coming to be happening.

At this Ethan raised an eyebrow.

I'm so confused, said Rachel.

You are not the only one, said Dianne.

It's so big, whispered Charlie.

Don't let these silly females convince you otherwise!

What?! Rachel and Dianne said in unison, Charlie didn't seem to care at all and carried on staring.

That's right, you ladies don't understand anything of the unfolding of war and crisis, how it comes about, what to do in the situation when it occurs, it takes a man to rectify the situation as it occurs.

That's a bit sexist, said Ethan, although he thought he did have a point.

Historically war has been a male endeavour but that is changing, and you're mistaken that that it's not in the power of women to resolve a crisis as it's happening, said Dianne

No, the man answered

No? Wish to elaborate?

No, men gravitate towards crisis, its in our nature to seek it out, women shy away from it.

Who actually wants to go to war anyway? said Rachel

Attention seekers go to war, because politically their position is wavering and all other methods are failing, they resort to a means that will garner that attention from others, it's the antithesis of love, the man said, or rather, seemed to pontificate, Ethan thought.

It sure is, says Charlie.

Dianne looked confused, he seemed to have just turned on a dime of his opinion and she didn't know how to answer.



So he continued, when one of these men arise, which fatefully always is bound to happen, they need a response that only a man, who has swam through crisis after crisis can meet, to act as a force, a force to oppose the other force that only see's the spectres of evil outside of themselves, and this is a road that only a man can take, a single man, a man with a sense of responsibility.

Wait? Are you saying this to me? Said Ethan.

Yes, I am.

Ethan looked around the room, the women laughed, he laughed aswell.

Look friend, I've just been put on this earth to fix a few things as they crop up and maybe have a moan about them.

He looked at Ethan, his eyes now any minute ready to pop out of his head and said, Yes!

Yes?

Yes, we all have to start somewhere, some small crisis, and then the road opens up, and you will meet your Cain, then you will battle, battle and battle, until one of you reaches the top!

So why can't women join in, by other means?

The women are silent, leaving Ethan to talk.

Other means? said the man.

Creative methods, like art, and music, like Napoleon was met with Turner.

But did Turner actually have any real effect of Napoleon, or was it the russians who disregarded their homes and their towns, and Napoleans

ideals of grandeur that led them to stretch themselves too far, need to be met with a force equal to that themselves, and can this not only come from those of the same sex?

So what you're saying is that it takes a man to battle a man?

Yes?

But then where do women have involvement in this? Or do women not have an involvement, and that's the issue? Asked Ethan.

Yes, men only desire women, said the man cynically.

At this point point Dianne yawned, wondering whether she left the hob on.

Maybe that's the issue though, when women aren't the object of attainment, when men try to build their towers.

The man seemed to be getting more and more ecstatic as he said, But the tendency towards war and battle, the energy that comes through from it needs to find an object other than it, to fashion and mould it into something productive and when this direction fails within a culture, maybe because of a crisis of some kind, we regress to archaic methods.

Like how a starving man may rob when no other option is left, said Ethan

The conversation petered out there, then what came over Ethan is the absurdity of this situation, made even more so by the fact of this man being naked in front of them.

So Ethan asked him if he wanted any clothes.

Which he replied, no, in a quiet voice, and ran out of the room.

What was that all about? Says Rachel.

I think he was reminding us of something, Ethan replied.

What's that? Have you had some form of epiphany during the conversation? Dianne said sarcastically.

Ethan sighed, he thinks he knows what everyone thinks in here about him, that he's a useless individual that can't amount to anything, that lives in doubt, and has an inability to overcome even the smallest of difficulties in his life. He found however, a vestige in the depths of his unconscious and fathomed something he would later recognize as willpower and said, Yes, I have, and what I'm going to do first of all is fix the thing that has stumped me all this time.

He goes outside, with a pickaxe, he didn't even know until this point that he had a pickaxe, and positioned it under the stump. With a great heave he pulled and pulled but it didn't come out. He looked at the women around him for help, and together they gave a heave ho and out came the stump, they all rejoiced, very glad with themselves.

### Chapter 3

All four of them, after removing the stump, find themselves surrounding a hole, a very deep hole, that doesn't seem to end.

Your salvation lies down there, Dianne joked.

Ethan gave Dianne a look.

Wait we're not really contemplating going down there are we, for whatever reason would we? Said Rachel.

Dianne went over to Ethan, gave him a poke in the ribs and said, I thought someone wanted to be a man, and overcome his fears.

He's still a pussy, said Charlie.

You were just chastising me for buying magic spray and now you're telling me to jump down a hole?

Yes, said Dianne.

Ethan feels like he is stuck in a catch 22 in this, he either jumps down the hole and justifies he is mad, or he leaves and justifies that he hasn't got any courage. Either way, he is screwed.

Okay, I have a rope in the shed, I'll go and get it and I'll absail down, he says after a moments deliberation.

Just jump, it doesn't look that deep, we'll find a rope and get you out after, goeded Dianne.

Wait, you aren't coming with me?

Hmmph, a hole is no place for a girl, said Dianne.

Tell that to Lewis Carrol, said Rachel.

Exactly, what was with the speech back there about womens empowerment, it seems to become an issue only when the situation permits doesn't it, said Ethan.

Are you going to jump or what? Said Charlie.

Fine, said Ethan, and jumped down the hole.

He immediately regretted his decision, it wan't quite like he thought jumping down a hole would be like, although he never wanted to imagine what that might feel like. Instead of landing solidly on the floor, his trepidation at hitting the floor made him cling to the sides and scrapped and tore most of the skin on his way down, which was quite far. Far enough to be thankful that he clung to the edge to suffer the wounds on his arms, wounds that he couldn't see, which made him anxious. Judging however by the pain they were bad, although this was much like judging the temperature of water by looking at it.

Are you okay down there, Ethan heard Dianne say.

Yes, he shouted, although there was an echo, and he thought that this may drown out his voice from going up the hole.

Hello, we can't here you!

His assumption is correct, he shouted yes louder, and received an okay back, and that they were trying to find a rope to get him out. Ethan is convinced, that Dianne merely wanted to see if he would jump, and also thought how far he would go for her.

Suddenly however he became aware he is down a hole, a hole which could have anything down it. He kind of nudged around as his eyes adjusted more to the surroundings around him, the room unexpectedly is quite large,

not a cramped hole. Luckily as well there are no bones of any kind at the bottom to suggest people drop down here becoming trapped. A faint glow around the edge of the room started to form as Ethan's eyes adjusted to it, like an illumination of some kind coming from the rocks, it is magical, he thought to himself. He followed the wall around until and he found an arch where the door was.

What in the world, he thought, is this a door?

He looked around and saw that there is a peacock above it, and a small handle. He rubbed his eyes, doubting what he saw, wondering whether he was inside some sort of children's novel.

No you're not, this is real, said a voice.

Wait, who said that?

Me.

Who?

Here.

Where is here? I don't see you.

Down here.

A small creature was there on the floor, but no ordinary creature, it is a candle, with arms and legs and it is moving. It seemed to be struggling to find its way around as much as Ethan is however.

What. The. Fuck. Ethan said.

The fuck, yes, that's what I've been asking myself for quite some time.

What do you mean, you're a candle, walking.

Am I?

Huh, do you not know who you are?

Ofcourse i do dummy, I'm just being disingenuous, It's just that i don't know why I am.

What? A candle?

Yes, do you know what it's like to be a candle, especially one that isn't alight?

Wouldn't being alight hurt in some way for you?

Do i look like i have nerves?

Well, no.

Well, I do, and you're getting on them.

Sorry.

The candle sighs, Don't be sorry, why are you down here anyway, I saw you jump down from the hole, that was a bit silly now wasn't it, how did you know you wouldn't die?

Well, I didn't, some people i was with dared me to do it.

Wait what? Do you not make your own decisions in life?

I, errr, Ethan began saying, but before he could the candle said, maybe try making a few, then you won't find yourself down a hole.

You're down here with me.

That's besides the point, the matter at hand now is what you're going to do now.

Why are you asking me? Weren't you just lecturing me on making decisions?

Yes, but you need to grow that side of yourself, so you have to make the decision.

Silence.

Well, my friends are finding a rope for me in the mean time, Ethan said eventually.

Oh running away from responsibility now are we?

Wait, no, I just want out of this hole.

Escapes an easy way out of any situation.

Okay then, whatever, what's through this door?

I don't know, do i look like i can reach the handle?

Well no.

Exactly, and that's why I've been stuck down here for as long as i can remember, I don't know much about what anything is anymore, and the more time that passes the more as if i'm starting to feel as if i am loosing something, the candle said, seeming to trail off as it spoke.

Sure, right, I guess we could see what's behind this door.



Good idea, the said perking up again.

Ethan opened the door.

Slowly the door opens creaking as it does, in an unnecesarily dramatic manner, Ethan thought. The door opened into a corridor, a very, very long one, with no real end, and mirrors on either side, so they both reflected infinitely on the both sides. The corridor had no light aswell, to light the space that they currently find themselves in.

So that's what i look like, said the candle.

Ethan however wasn't really paying attention and started to walk down the corridor, slowly at first, but picking up his speed as the end didn't come into view immediately. The candle soon began to follow and caught up with Ethan. The corridor seemed to go on for some distance, and the more it did, the more anxious they became. The prospect of going back however diminished as they went forward and the more they went, the more they became determined to reach that end, which replaced the anxiety of finding it.

After what seemed to be miles of walking, an illuination caught their eye, becoming brighter and brighter, until it was too bright and the closer they got the the source of light, the brighter it became, and the more they wished to turn back. The light became hot, so terribly hot, and the hotter they got, the slower they walked, and the slower they walked the more they didn't want to turn back because they didn't think they had the energy to do so. So they carried on, into the unknown. Further and further they marched into the blistering heat.

Are you going to be okay? Ethan asked the candle.

Why do you ask?

You might become a puddle of wax soon.

I'm pretty sure by the time i start melting, you'll start burning, so perhaps it would be best to focus on yourself to get through whatever this is.

The candle was right, Ethan thought. They carried on ahead, just as all seemed to be lost, as the heat became too unbearable and they were about to collapse, they found the end of the corridor, opening out to an endless desert as far as the eye could see.

They both looked at each other, incredulous at what they saw.

Now what? Said the candle, rhetorically.

At this point, Ethan didn't know how to begin a thought to describe what he was seeing, so detached from his sense of himself he didn't even stop to realise that he was thirsty. He just looked out, out into the endless desert, but he didn't yearn for home, he was in this moment just in a state of tranquility existing such that he couldn't explain. A room bounded by walls he felt he could finally step outside from, a space that had been endlessly restricted in, a molasses that when he tread through he sunk further into it. That he couldn't escape from. Comparable only to this heat that he's experiencing, a heat that feels on his skin like the dread he feels at going back home. He thought guilty because he still cared for his friends but he always yearned for a little more, and felt as though he was missing out on something really important in life.

So do we just walk, or do we plan this? Ethan asked the candle.

Plan? I've never been in a situation like this before so how do we plan?

True.

Ethan walked out, and around the door, which seems to come out from a rock in the middle of the desert. They both decide to climb up ontop of the rock to get a better view of the desert. They soon found their way to the top of the rock and found the stump expert at the top.

Hey, it's you, said Ethan.

Hello, said the stump expert.

You owe me money! That sleep spray didn't do anything, it was a rip off!

A rip off?

Yes, I pulled the stump out without the help of that spray, I didn't even have to wait the full time.

But you did pull the stump out did you not?

Yes, but that's...

And you've found yourself here haven't you? To this place, that seems to defy all logic.

Wait, did you have something to do with all this?

Even if i did, what would be the end result in you finding out such information? And what would I gain in letting you know?

The pleasure in filling me in.

Filling you in with what? Knowledge? And do you think that this will satiate some feeling you have, or bring understanding to it?

What feelings do you expect me to admit to in my position? My admission would give you power over me, I admit nothing, I feel nothing.

Nothing? You don't seem to be feeling nothing.

However you interpret me being I'll deny it.

Why?

Because I'm not like you.

Like me?

Yes, a person that falsely sells someone sleep spray.

This again...

I want you to admit you deceived me, because through the deception you have power over me, and admitting my position in regard to you would be qualifying that I accept what had happened not to be an injustice.

And through not admitting to any feelings you think that you are deceiving me?

No, I'm just not playing a part of your reality anymore.

Well if you're so determined then I'll be no help to you.

Who says I need... Ethan started, but the candle interjected.

You two are going around in circles here, and we need help, just suck up your pride and ask for help.

Well what if i made the decision not to, you did say i need more agency in life, replied Ethan.

The candle started at him blankly shaking its head.

The stump expert was smiling.

Ethan saw him smiling and said with suspicious eyes, perhaps this is part of your whole game Mr stump expert.

Maybe, but maybe this game is something you're imagining, keeping your position of subservience to me not able to make your own decisions.

Fine, you know I feel thirsty, got any of that special spray?

Yes, but only for a tidy sum, he laughed.

Ethan sighed.

A short time passed, a moment that within it an infinity passed when no decision is made, It's passing leaves its destination behind, a destination in an endless ocean of time and space that these individuals find themselves in, completely lost, completely out of existence. A space which has within it an endless nothing, rather than the repetition of a listless something. Something to escape from.

How do we get out from this desert, Ethan said eventually.

The question is where would you like to go from here? What would be your wish from here? What would be your wish from this point forward? An end being an end only if you decide it to be.

Wait, so what what you are saying is this is some kind of virtual space where anything can happen?

No, not really, this isn't some kind of heaven.

But what you are saying is that this is something, that you are aware of this space that you are in?

You're leading the conversation in the direction that i am somehow master of this, the stump expert faltered searching for the right word but eventually settled for, space.

Aren't you? You sound like you have some consciousness of the situation at hand.

Maybe i have consciousness, but the object of consciousness that you think I have is maybe different from the one you intuit I have.

So what you are saying...

What I am saying is that the direction experience is leading you isn't the same one as I have experienced, but in experiencing it through me your consciousness is leading you to understand the self same object.

So this whole conversation is about what it is to understand? That the nothing of experience can be replaced by the something of understanding?

And in the endless void of a desert, what else is there to experience rather than to philosophize about experience?

Okay, okay, said the candle, what you two need is some purpose to your lives other than delving into the infinity of the mind which you two seem to be doing.

What like?

Anything, just anything... exasperated the candle.

We could try and find a way to light you, said Ethan.

What? Me? Set alight? That burns.

What do you mean? You are a candle.

Who says i want to be set alight, it's a bit of a stereotype for candles to be set alight you know.

But then you're resisting your own purpose, which is itself a purpose I guess.

Maybe you're right, so, have we admitted that we have no purpose, or that our purposes are absurd?

Hey don't drag me into this, said the stump expert, I have plenty of purpose.

Only because you've experienced what we are experiencing and now you are showing us the way, acting as a guide.

That way, however, is not determined.

Okay let's not start this again, said the candle and continued by saying, basically, you both don't want to succumb to the fact that you are both trying to get one over on each other by playing these games, which isn't allowing you to see the reality of the situation.

They both stared at her, like she had rudely interrupted them in the middle of something important.

The stump expert breathed in slowly and said, what might that be then?

Well maybe the headache you are causing me!

Oh, well, sorry, the stump expert said, but without much conviction to imply he meant it.

Ethan thought that maybe the candle didn't really have a headache and merely said what she said to rid him and the stump expert of the endless argument that they seemed to be stuck in. Which was just understanding understanding, a paradox that didn't seem to have a dialectical end. Other than when either part becomes exhausted by the pursuit. Ethan thought however how the world would be if only two individuals were in it,

unrestrained by any limits and with any outside forces controlling them, if they both would infinitely escalate to a point of destruction. At these points you would hope you had some kind of distraction.

Suddenly Ethan and the candle spotted a shine coming over from the horizon, they look at each other, except the stump expert, who seemed to be in his own state of tranquility. Ethan looked at him, his temper through the conversation seemed to Ethan in the moment to be irrupting with his, but him suddenly being within this calm state made Ethan come to the realization that the stump expert was merely following Ethan's temper, which made Ethan all the more curious about this man and what he has experienced.

The candle and Ethan decide to walk up to the Sand Dune to see what's on the other side, highly expecting a city, and not too surprised when a city manifests itself on the other side. They walk down to take a closer look at its walls.



## Chapter 4

It's a long way down to the wall, and on the way the city within their view becomes more observable. It looks as though its a hexagon split into different sections, with each section having an array of buildings inside. The buildings seem to go up, so that some of them are towering over others, so that some space is left for farmland between them. There isn't a central area, and it all being the same coloured brick it doesn't seem to have been separated into different classes. It's very bland, almost brutalist. Just sandstone blocks ontop of one another, perfectly utilitarian.

They both eventually reach the walls, disconcerting because they were so high, what could they possibly be keeping out, or in, Ethan thought.

There are no doors, and window-like openings of any kind on the walls, nothing that could have been described as an entrance into this citadel, looking back they had lost sight of the stump expert, so only forward they could go. They followed the perimeter of the building, following further and further, without really knowing where they were on its circumference. A mirage seemed to appear up ahead, a figure of some kind who's contour was just visible. As they walked closer to the figure it became more dispersed, until it eventually vanished.

What do you think that was, said the candle.

I don't know, could have been anything really.

It wasn't anything that you need to concern yourself with, said a voice behind them.

They turn, spotting the voice coming from a small man, they double backed, surprised, but not much so, the man is very small, and not too intimidating. His clothes were plain and posture straight. His smile was perhaps too overly friendly, and his eyes tired which spoke of some lie to it.

His smile left his face however when he spotted the candle and said, Is that a candle, with eyes?

Yes, Ethan replied.

Why do you have a candle?

I'm right here you know, said the candle.

Ethan looked at her, the candle just shrugged, so he said, Long story, but we travel together.

If you want to keep matters to yourself that is okay by me but just so you know people aren't too keen on candles of your sort around here.

Of my sort?

Yes of your sort.

So some form of candle discrimination, Ethan almost laughed.

No, not at all, it's just...

Just? Said the candle.

You seem, decorative.

The candle didn't really know how to take this but just gave a puzzled expression on its face.

Decorative? Ethan questioned.

Yes, people don't take too well to it.

Why?

It's a long story, but it should become more apparent as things unfold, you aren't in any danger however, everyone mostly keeps to themselves and doesn't allow their prejudices to become known.

Okay, and these people, where are they?

Oh, just over this wall, shall we go in? Follow me.

They turned a corner and low and behold, a door. They step through, but as they do strange sense of foreboding came over them both, as if stepping through the door some great calamity is about to happen, or has happened and through here is an answer to it.

Through the passage the buildings seemed strange, they were tall, with not many doors but connecting bridges, linking each building to the next. The ground around them is farmland, with crop that hadn't quite grown yet, harvest season Ethan assumed had just had passed. There doesn't seem to be any kind of stalls, shops or restaurants in this place, just towering structures, with no telling signs that they were of any importance.

They wandered around the streets for a while until Ethan said, Where are we going?

Well, how do i explain this, I'm just an individual that shows you the way through the first door when you are ready, it is up to you to find the second, said the small man.

How cryptic, Ethan thought.

What do you mean the second? There doesn't seem to be many people around, said the Candle.

In fact, there wasn't anyone around.

Oh yes, people, they'll come around, when you are ready they will, I would however concentrate on finding the second door.

But why, aren't your people excited to meet new travellers? Asked Ethan.

They neither do, and they neither don't, life is perfectly balanced here, a new traveller merely means a disturbance to it, which is settled by the travellers exploration of the space.

Ethan thought he knew what the small man was saying, although it was unnecessarily riddled he thought, but Ethan wasn't much for the time you had to spend with riddles and wanted answers quickly.

Okay, is there some sort of central administration i can go to to ask where I am, Ethan said.

You need to trust me, I don't like to be called an authority but I'm the closest to it you will find for the moment, and let me tell you, you are in the right place you need to be, said the man, slowly and carefully, so as to not cause offense.

Ethan huffed, obviously irritated and said, well, can i have some water then?

Ofcourse, they turn around a building through an alley, at the end of it it opens out to a clearing, where a well is centered. Standing around it are three individuals.

Well, well, well, what do we have here, one of the three said, which provoked laughter from the other two.

These two want some water, said the little man.

You can, you can, if, you solve a riddle, one of the men said.

Okay, what's the riddle, Ethan asked.

What grows thirsty, but has no mouth?

Ethan thought for a second and answered, a car.

A car? What's a car, one of the three men said.

An automobile, it runs on...

The small man coughed and said, I think this fellow has solved your little riddle, why not allow him some water, no?

They all looked at each other disappointed that they couldn't continue playing their game that they seemed so terribly amused by and walked off down an alley.

The three of them walked up to the well pulled out some water and drank, Ethan looked at the candle and said, wait, you drink?

Guess so, not that great however is it.

Sorry if our water isn't up to your standards, said the small man.

It's fine, really, and he shot a look to the candle and she shrugged.

They wandered around, occasionally they would find a person come out of a house, tend to a crop, and then go straight back in. Each time they say one, they thought at how thin and malnourished they were. As they walked they noticed, or rather didn't notice any discernable features about the buildings. This made Ethan ask, There's no real distinctive features, no signs that give me a sense of place.

No, we decided that signs and symbols generate some form of meaning structure that the inhabitants become far too attached to, this in turn

creates rifts because not everyone can agree to the meaning of these symbols, consciously or unconsciously so, this tends to sow the seeds for violence in the future. So instead, signs were abolished, leaving no discernable trace of anything historical or possible through them, answered the small man.

So a sense of time is destroyed?

Not destroyed, as we still have memory, but that memory hasn't had the chance to be documented, so its ever-changing.

But why? To know where you are in time, you need a history.

But that history can create difference in itself.

So difference is a problem?

Yes, in this society, the sole aim is to dissolve difference at every level, having unity under the ideal of unity itself, in the absolute moment, the small man said.

But then how would other cultures find a means to understand yours, and you them?

Well that's easy, it's not for us to find other cultures, but for them to find us.

So you've completely given up on exploring?

What would there be to explore?

He's got a point, considering they have abolished meaning itself, Ethan thought

If there's no symbols, how do you know what time of day it is? Said the candle.

We don't structure our days like that, in fact, there is no structure needed, replied the small man.

What about food production? Surely having a sense of seasons helps with regard to that.

We've found that it being close to the homes we can tend to it directly, having a more direct sensitivity to the plants needs.

But droughts? Famines? Pestilence? These can be taken care of to a degree with agriculture.

Yes, but we only grow enough to feed ourselves individually, and if we fail in this respect, we grow ill, and we die.

Wait, you die? Ethan said, surprised at the small mans emotional detachment from this comment.

Yes.

With no real attempt at solving the issue?

What issue?

Of death.

Why is it an issue? When you're not attached to the world, the issue of death isn't one, if our time comes our time comes and we move to yet another state of existence.

So you're just accepting that you can't do anything?

Yes.

That's absurd, and deeply nihilistic.

Perhaps, but perhaps the perfect society doesn't have a need for anything.

What if an individual does want for something beyond subsistence for i don't think you can eradicate greed.

We have our ways.

At this Ethan raised an eyebrow, but before he could question it a door appeared in one of the houses. They decided to walk through and found themselves in a simple dwelling with yet again, no discernable feature, no furniture, just three people. One of them being a child, just standing there, quite aimlessly, doing nothing, not even looking up to greet their visitors as they came in.

Hello, said the candle.

Hello, the woman said in a weak voice not looking up.

A moment passed.

How's it going, said Ethan in what he thought was a bit too enthusiastic for the sombre tone he was sensing.

The mans eye twitched, he motioned to say something, the thought growing in his mind, but as it did the willingness to acknowledge it seemed to leave him. He didn't answer, nor did the other two, they just stood there, motionless.

Ethan decided not to press them and had a closer look around the room, there really was nothing, even the clothes they were wearing had nothing mentionable about them other than that they were clothes, very bland, very boring. They even looked themselves, average, not ugly, not beautiful, just average, Ethan thought that if he saw them walking down the street he would have noticed only how unremarkable they were.



So.. do you like it here, said the candle, in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

The woman just said yes with no intonation that would carry enthusiasm or hidden angst at their situation, they just seemed, to be.

Do you get up to much? said the candle again.

They didn't seem to understand the question.

Do you work? she asked.

Work? Said the man, this seemed to arouse him.

Yes, work, when you do something for someone else and receive compensation for it, Ethan said.

For someone else? the man replied.

Yes when its not necessarily something you want to do.

Want? He asked, and the couple looked at each other for a moment before casting their eyes back down to the ground.

Yes desire, you desire something else that another person has, so you trade something with them, but you have to work to attain a thing to trade in the first place.

Ethan did feel ridiculous having to explain the reason for working, its one of those things that is common sense so its not needed to be explained, only when you try to explain it do you realise how complicated it is.

The family became non responsive again so they walked on, from room to room, each family in the same state, non responsive. One after the other, no furniture, no decoration, nothing to give an idea of their individuality.

Ethan being frustrated at this point turned to the little man and said, what's going on?

What do you mean what is going on?

What i mean is, what are these people doing?

Not really much of anything it seems, the little man said dryly, almost sarcastically.

But why, why aren't they doing anything?

Because they have everything, don't you see?

No, they have nothing.

Yes, but in having nothing, they have no want for anything.

But do they know what is out there, what could be for them?

No, the small man said bluntly.

So they don't know about pizza?

No but let me ask you, do these things make you happy?

They bring pleasure.

Yes, simple pleasures.

But this, this asceticism, this is the complete eradication of pleasure and desire.

Yes, but they however don't consume much of anything, just what's necessary.

What about dating and all that, love, relationships, there doesn't seem to be much of that going on either.

No, they're paired from birth.

Huh? Ethan said, he understood the answer, but just couldn't fathom it in practice.

Yes, they are together from the moment that they are born.

Who decides this?

Not anyone in particular, they just seem to gravitate towards one another from birth, they become soul mates, and these bonds aren't easily broken.

They don't seem like they're soulmates.

Every culture is different in their ways.

Ethan thought that answer was a cop-out, and a insult to his intelligence. He was careful of what he said next because a sense of foreboding was creeping up on him.

What about you?

I'm an individual that didn't pair early on so i carry a different kind of responsibility in life.

And what's that?

Welcoming travellers.

Right, Ethan said, not believing him.

All of a sudden a crash came down from next door, they rushed towards it and inside one of the rooms one of the individuals was flailing about, his arms mad and his eyes wide-eyed. He swung his arms, picking up anything he could find, although there wasn't much, and flung it across the room. The mans family unresponsive seeming not to care, nor doing anything, not even trying to comfort or calm this man that was in some sort of rage.

The little man went up to him, and started mumbling something to him in a language that Ethan couldn't understand. As he mumbled the man seemed to calm down, his movements becoming slow and his eyes loosing the blazing rage they had just a moment ago.

Sorry you had to see that, the small man said when he had finished with his patient.

What did we just see?

Well, I would be lying if i said that our society is perfect, you see, each and every on of us carries something of a darker nature, a demon as some cultures call it, and occasionally this demon comes out.

And then you ameliorate the situation by, talking?

Something like that.

Isn't that quite controlling?

Hmmm, I never thought of it like that, I would say they do become out of control.

And then you quell them through control.

A better question would be to ask why in the first place our darker natures come out.

Okay, Ethan thought he was being led into this but went with it nevertheless and said, why doesn't your darker nature come out?

Years of training.

The riddles continue, mumbled Ethan.

Pardon me? said the man.

And do you allow this training for these individuals and their families? Ethan said.

Well, no.

It seems like there is a power structure here after all.

Maybe, but those that find structure within the family don't have the ambition to learn this structure aswell, unless its learnt beforehand.

Structure?

Yes its a way of learning.

Sounds a bit like a cult, do you have a temple? Said the candle, after some time being silent.

The individuals here are able to leave, if they would like.

Out into the endless desert.

Yes, an unfortunate position we find ourselves in.

Especially when you don't have a door, said Ethan.

The way is revealed when you are ready, the small man said.

I'm not one of your disciples, I want straight answers, Ethan said, becoming more irritated by the riddles.

The small man sighed, unfortunately not all of life's questions have straight answers, I understand your resistance to our ways however, being a visitor with different morals than ours, you have come here for a reason however, and I'm here to help you find it.

Or to keep us from seeing something that we shouldn't.

You're insinuating that there is something nefarious going on here, and yes, you're right, there is, but there is always, something ineffable in every culture unknown even to its inhabitants, there's really no reason to be so paranoid.

The small man's pleadings fell on deaf ears however and Ethan said, you walls and your unwillingness to divulge your secrets seems to me a paranoia, not my scepticism about your true intentions.

We saw an issue in our culture and we found a way to resolve it, there is no secret here, you think of us as illusion creators, but we are just trying to make sense in a non-sensical world, look around you, the land is hardly livable, some of us need to be able to see this.

So what you're saying is that you are at a distance to what is going on, that you are an island?

I think of myself more as a mediator between people.

Can't things like art and music function as this sort of thing?

Yes but with the limits of our society those things can lead to an overindulgence, what we have is a set of responses that work and keeping out anything that can disrupt this pattern is key to keeping order.

But what about freedom, these people have no freedom to live.

We tried freedom, and it just leads to the same thing.

What?

Hierarchies, some having, and some not because of the limited resources, and a set of individuals take advantage of this and generate wealth.

Let me guess, these individuals are you?

Yes, we soon got to the point where we took all the wealth from these individuals not because we wanted it, but because they gave it to us in the end, we even tried to implement a form of redistribution of wealth, but this merely enabled a greater consumption of resources. You see this citadel was once surrounded by rivers and oasis, it had music you speak of and traders of all kinds, but the water soon dried up, and the will of the people with it. Some even believe that a fountain will soon appear, a spark of some kind, they were once called idealists, but as time went on they became known as lunatics and have themselves to be reasoned with, until they became unresponsive.

So you've given up.

The small man let out a breath, himself seeming to become frustrated with Ethans pointed questions and said, we carry on, in the only way we know-how.

Why don't you leave?

Because my fear of the unknown outweighs my curiosity of it, plus I'm small and old.

Ethans feeling towards this man began to turn from an indignancy on behalf of the people of this place, to more of a form of pity for him, a pity for the responsibility he has.

He said, It sounds like you're attached to your people, even though you speak of a detachment as an ideal, this contradiction is an impossibility you are trying to convince yourself of.

The small man thought for a moment and said, you may be right, but at this point there may not be any way through it.

It sounds like you've given up.

You're in no position to judge me, you haven't lived in my shoes and walked my path, but, i don't know what to do, obviously i do wish for new vitality for myself and this city but anyone who could solve these issues leaves, and you can't blame them, some of them think they are going to find answers to bring back, but they never do.

Suddenly a clink was heard from a room over, they went out to investigate and what had appeared was another door leading down some stairs.

Oh, what's this, said the little man.

Wait, you don't know? Said Ethan.

No I've never seen this door.

Do you think we should head down?

I do have my responsibilities here.

Weren't you just talking about needing some answers to the issues you are having?



You may be right, let's go.

Ethan thought he didn't need that much persuading.

So they descended the stairs, until they came to a room, with a table on, on this table seemed to be a child wearing a queens outfit, a dog, and an older man in some kind of robe. Near them was an aquarium teeming with toads, armour scattered around and doors leading in four opposed directions from where they entered. As they approached the old man looked up, the girl seemed to be absorbed in playing a card game by herself.

Ah, visitors, said the old man.

Yes, ummm, where are we? Said Ethan.

The heart of the issue at hand, or well, so I believe myself, for i can't seem to go beyond entertaining this little lass here, he motions towards the girl who doesn't look up.

Say hello, the old man said.

Hello, the girl said, flatly.

Hehe, what can you expect from children this day and age.

What's with the toads? I didn't think anything like that existed anymore, said the little man both curious and excited at seeing them.

You know, a little hobby of mine, just to keep myself sane, the old man chuckled.

And what is it exactly you are doing around here?

Well I'm teaching this young lass here.

Teaching her what exactly? the candle said.

The ways of the world, and her position of great responsibility within it, but obviously she's at an age where she doesn't really care all that much, the old man chuckled.

The young girl carried on with her game, not responsive to being talked about, to which the old man shrugged his shoulders to.

What responsibility are you teaching her? Said Ethan.

Well, she is to be queen, why do you think i dressed her in this costume anyway, laughed the old man.

What's going on here? Said Ethan.

Where are her parents, said the candle, almost in disgust.

Her parents couldn't handle her, you see, she rebelled from a very young age, younger than usual, and as you may know the people are not of a strong will around here and the girls parents being no exception to the rule couldn't handle her unruly attitude, this led to her being very troublesome around the city, so i took her.

The three looked at each other then at the old man and the girl, he was sitting there smiling some kind of ironic smile.

So you kidnapped her? Said the candle.

You could say that, or you could say that I have taken the responsibility of turning this child into a queen.

By dressing her in queens clothing, pointed out Ethan.

Yes, the first thing a queen must be able to do is dress herself.

How do you even know she is a queen, asked Ethan.

Well, I had a dream, he began, but stopped himself mid-sentence when he saw that the three of them were attentive, and then burst into laughter, when he calmed down he continued, but I've been searching for something my whole life that can see a way out of this issue I have and she, i think, is it.

Or you could just be another creepy old man, maybe we should take her, said the candle.

Oh by all means take her, but are you willing to be responsible for her?

Well, no.

Hmmm, I thought as much, if you're still so concerned why not ask her yourselves what she thinks.

So Ethan did, hey little girl, is this man doing something he shouldn't here to you.

The little girl looked up to Ethan with a frown across her face, gazing into Ethan's eyes for a few seconds and then proceeded with her game.

I guess that answers your question, said the old man.

Are you saying this girl here could be our salvation, said the little man.

Well I wouldn't go that far, better not to put all your eggs in one basket, but she does show some ambition, so she might do something.

Do what exactly?

Well anything really, just not destroy, which is what i am trying to teach her, you see, its easy when you have agency to want to destroy everything around you that you don't like, but it's far more difficult to create.

Ethan thought why he was here with these crazy people.

And before you say anything, I do have a plan, my first lesson for her is to tame this dog, the old man said as he motioned towards the dog.

Where did you get a dog? Said the candle.

A stray turned up at my doorstep, pregnant of all things, and lo and behold I met this little lass here around the time the dog gave birth.

What an absurd coincidence, said Ethan.

Story of my life, laughed the old man.

Story of my life, thought Ethan.

The girl seemed to wake up out from being absorbed in the game she was playing and said, I'm hungry.

The old man smile at her, well then little miss, you know where to kitchen is.

No, I want you to make my food.

Who do you think I am? You farther?

This made the girls temper grow but she seemed to be able to calm herself down surprisingly well and said in a polite tone, Please may you make me some food?

The old man laughed at her, I'll give you that, you are polite, but do you think being polite is going to be enough? Really?

The little girl huffed and ran out of the room into the kitchen.

The old man chuckled to himself and said, quite the little queen she's going to be.

Ethan couldn't work out what this man was getting out of this situation, whether he was teaching this girl seriously or whether he is getting a kick out of playing games with her.

The dog barked and ran out with her.

Quite loyal that one, if i do say so.

Yeah, It seems so. So, really, what are you doing with that little one? Said the candle.

As I said, I'm teaching her the ways to be a queen.

But you have no experience in such matters, or do you?

Well now that you mention it, the old man said, he doesn't look up to them but twirls a cup in his hand on the table.

Ethan is incredulous, he couldn't be he thought, he doesn't look like he comes from royalty, although Ethan doesn't exactly know what royalty looks like.

If you are from royalty where are you from? Said the candle.

I tutored Charles I himself.

Didn't Charles I get beheaded? And all faith in the monarchy lost after...

Details, details, Charles was a troubled and sickly boy, always in the shadow of his brother who he tried to live up to and couldn't, destined to run amuck of the crown because of his misaligned sense of self.

A plausible psychological explanation, said the little man

You were still his tutor however, said the Candle. And this girl here seems to be your second attempt.

You could say that, don't we all need second chances?

Well, when the boy you are tutoring gets beheaded, started Ethan

Again, details.

Suddenly a crash came in from one of the doors and the little girl came running in with a little helmet, which in Ethans eyes would have made her look rather adorable if it wasn't for her entourage of children following her. They all had little swords and torches with them and she ran up to the table, brandishing her sword and screamed in a high pitched voice, I have come to liberate!

Liberate? Liberate what? The old man said, holding himself back from laughing.

These people and those frogs from your dastardly ways! She replied

And what ways are those?

Enough talk, on guard! She ran up to the old man, who reacted and stood up, towering over the little girl. This move must have intimidated her for she fell off course, tripping as she swung her sword, straight into the tank full of frogs. The children behind her cheered but dared not to approach the old man, who wasn't at all concerned about their presence but seemed to have an expression of lamentation over the state of his frogs. The little girl

looked at the old man, then the frogs, then at her entourage, then at Ethan and blushed, looking deeply embarrassed. But soon shook off her shame, lifted her sword, eyes blazing again and shouted, the frogs have been liberated! In her small voice. Then she proceeded to run out of the room with her little crew.

How ridiculous, grumbled the old man, losing his previous cheery demeanor. Does she not know how difficult it is to acquire an aquarium out here.

You are teaching her to be queen after all, Ethan said sarcastically.

So you believe me now?

I guess so, said Ethan. The girl does seem to have quite the talent, not many people can get so many children together, especially at that age.

And she can move freely through doorways, said the old man.

Can she? Does she not cause trouble? Said the little man.

Oh yes, all the time, but not too much, I've managed to get her to direct all her attention to me once she really gets going.

Are you sure you are going to be able to control her like that for too long? She did just swing a sword at you, said Ethan.

Lets say i hope that she finds something greater than I to sublimate all her energy towards before that time comes.

Yes let's hope.

Ethan absorbed by this little theatre suddenly came back to himself and said to the old man, why am I here though, what's with these doors?

Oh don't worry about that too much, you've been a great help here really.

Ethan suddenly felt his intelligence is being undermined by the old man whose encouragement was made hollow by the repetition of it over the years.

The candle here sensed Ethans small mental slip and said backtracking, So what's your plan here? To live life as a Royal tutor when all is good and well?

No, no, you don't really understand tutors, do you?

I am a candle, after all, enlighten me.

Considering you taught an individual that ended up being beheaded I would say you haven't proven yourself to have yet, said the little man.

What a burn, said the candle.

Ethan laughed.

Oh look, he laughs, said the candle to Ethan, surprised.

What do you mean?

You don't seem the type, said the old man who was chuckling a little.

Why are you laughing? Surely you feel guilty for the King you failed.

Oh, you can't dwell on the past, if you allow that vortex of regret to hold you down you'll eventually end up doing nothing with your life except worry about every action you make.

Sounds like this comes from experience, said the little man.



The old man chuckles, yes, how do you think I ended up down here?

Wait yes, Ethan said. I forgot to ask you all, how did you end up down here? I jumped down a hole.

Ethan regretted what he said as soon as he said it.

Why would you do that? Asked the little man.

Oh, don't worry, it's no... Ethan began but the candle interjected. Because a girl dared him to!

Surprisingly the little and the old man didn't laugh but merely nodded and said, makes sense.

Ethan felt so inferior in this moment for a reason beyond his comprehension but didn't dwell on the thought. Wanting to change the subject at hand he said, so, how did you all come to be here?

Well, the old man said. I was chased out of England when the little king was beheaded, not too forgiving those government officials really. Then I wandered through France for a bit, being a king's tutor doesn't give you a warm welcome in the lower casts I soon found out. Then I made my way to Italy, after trying to be murdered in France, you know when to call it quits after a while. I ended up falling for an Italian woman, but I wasn't for settling down, which the woman soon caught onto after a while and turned the town i was staying against me. Granted I did think of myself as a little Don Juan at the time. No, what? Don't look at me like that, you don't believe me? Why would I lie I have quite the captivating tale.

Okay, then what?

Right, so, she tossed me out, so I went to the old colosseum and just sat there for a while, eventually getting kicked out, same with any Basilicas and churches I visited, they just wouldn't have me.

You were homeless then?

Yes, homeless, with nowhere to go, no institution wanted me, although maybe I thought of myself above them, I taught kings for goodness sake.

Obviously, the Italians didn't think as highly of you as you thought of yourself, said Ethan.

No, well anyway, I was asleep one day in the street corner with this other individual, he played music whilst I told passers-by tales of old war stories, we had a pretty good thing going on until I was hit on the head one day, then i woke up in an endless desert.

Quite the story.

What about you little man?

There's not much to tell, I was born here, and your histories aren't making too much sense to me.

That's makes two of us, said the candle.

We are all here for a reason, it doesn't matter what our origin stories are, we just don't know that reason yet, said the old man.

What about me? Aren't you going to ask me? Said the candle.

Oh dear yes, I do apologize, why are you here then, said the old man.

Because I got turned into a candle.

Truly a revelation.

There's no need to be sarcastic, it's quite the trauma to be turned into one don't you know.

What were you before? Said Ethan.

A woman.

A woman? Questioned the old man.

There are no telling signs, I'm not surprised you mistook my gender but neither am I offended.

By her tone, Ethan could tell she was offended.

At least you're reasonable, said the old man laughing.

The candle shot him a look.

Anyway, I was in my bedroom, happily being a girl, then suddenly, I'm a candle.

Riveting, said the old man, already growing tired of the candle.

There must be something else? Said Ethan.

Well, perhaps it's karma, this one time I really wanted to get one back on Richard, this boy in school, he cheated on me with this girl, or well, the girl was his girlfriend, and I was as well, and I soon found out, so I filmed us having sex and posted it onto the internet.

Wait, you posted a film of yourself having sex on the internet? Aren't you ashamed? Said the old man.

Ashamed? Although I'm not exactly feminine looking you should have seen me, she stares into the distance, idealising herself in her imagination, which makes everyone uncomfortable.

You don't all seem guilty here, but you all do seem like useless lovers, maybe because you are so in love with yourselves, said the little man.

A little narcissism never hurt anyone, said the old man.

Except when it ruins your relationships with women, which in my case maybe it does, said Ethan.

It's like you've all lost your touch, and you are here to find it again.

It's a long road it seems, Ethan said.

The old man nodded in agreement.

Maybe you all are just not the settling type, you yearning to escape yourselves doesn't allow you to commit to something or someone, seeking that connection outside, for a sense of place but the conflict lies in that once you've found it, you wish again to move on, and escape, the little man said.

Shouldn't you be saying try traditional roles and settle down, Ethan replied cynically.

I generally would, but I don't think you can fight this urge when it arises

You might be right, said Ethan.

Ethan does have this nature, but what he doesn't realize is that it is this tendency to not settle before going out that is his problem, that before he reaches a point where his being has relaxed he's off doing something else. This creates within him a state of perpetual stress, and the world falls apart around him, without him even realizing it. All this for someone that he's slightly obsessed with, that he thinks would impress them. The little man's interpretation is good, but it's only half right, when you settle, you come to a

leveled sense of place that allows Ethan to see himself, and the world around him for what it is. This is something he cannot bear to do.

To be honest, all this love stuff stinks of something, I feel as though there's more to this, I've been in love, it sucks, I've had casual sex, it sucks, it fills a hole for a moment of this sense of longing but never forever, and when it passes you start questioning what exactly it is, trying to explain it.

Right, and what is it, said the old man encouraging the conversation.

Absorption, being so entwined within something that you just can't see anything else but that other individual, and you get lost in them so intensely that it hurts, it actually hurts.

And when it's over you can't bear to go back to it, said the candle.

Yes.

And when it's over, you just hate everything, when that spell is over, it's like being lurched into the reality of somewhere, somewhere that has all the reasons as to why it didn't work out, and you blame everything around you for it instead of looking within to make those changes that you need to make, said the old man.

It's not always our fault however, said the candle.

No, but when you blame nothing definite and concrete, it's nothing but your own consciousness folding in on itself, not willing to see your own face in the mirror.

But should love produce this self-consciousness that can't be seen outside of? This vortex we're in, right, a vortex that has led us into a tunnel where no discernable time and space can be realized, when we look outside our own history for answers to our time and place, an ever-changing time that we lose track of as we delve into that of love, of looking into the reality of

another far too much, and lose the world around us, coming back to it, to reality itself, we find that we are out of joint, Ethan said.

If being in love with another person causes this then maybe you shouldn't be in love, maybe it's just too much for another individual to handle, shaking the foundations of existence itself, said the little man. If it's an intoxication, it doesn't sound healthy.

How can you say that? Said Ethan. Even if it is like a drug, it's worth it, isn't it, otherwise, there's just, nothing.

Did any of you get into drugs yourselves? Said the little man.

A little, said the candle, but I stopped.

Same, both the old man and Ethan said at the same time.

I've had experience with addicts, and it's that seeking, seeking a feeling outside of yourself, looking for a different state of being, a disturbance, but only being disturbed from an original disturbance that you can't explain.

All of a sudden the little girl came crashing in again with her entourage and said, I have come, to liberate!

Liberate what this time?

She stared, she has no real idea of what she wanted to liberate but she is still determined, and through it, she found her object and said yourselves! A very astute proposition if she actually had an awareness of the situation at hand.

What do you mean ourselves?

You talk talk talk but nothing happens, you don't do anything.

Ethan thought she had a point, but resisted the temptation to be swayed by a little girl's words, they just looked at her, almost mockingly. The little girl sighed saying, all you boys are stupid.

Hey there now young lady, said the candle.

The little girl stared vacantly at the candle, assessing what was occurring in the moment, was she more surprised that a candle is speaking, or that the candle is responding to her in such a manner. She weighed her options in her head, calculated answers, and weighed them in respect to each other by the speculated replies they would provoke. This looked as though what was going through the little girl's mind as she stared at the candle.

The candle however sensed her hesitation and spoke before she could formulate something, You listen here, you don't know what love is yet, these guys here have been through some really hard shit, really, it hurts so much to see them this way, they have gone through love and come out of the other side broken, and I feel their pain, I really do.

Ethan can't tell whether the candle is sincere or patronizing them.

The candle continued when no one spoke, and you're far too young, far too naive to understand us.

Honestly, this has been the part I've been afraid of, the part where she becomes aware of all this, so please don't lay it all on so thick, said the old man, rubbing his hands on his eyes.

The girl gives a harsh look to the old man and to the candle, meanwhile, toads are hopping around her trying to find a more damp area.

Whatever, she says.

Behind them, they hear a door open to a chamber, a quite distinct smell of sweat comes through from it, along with a lot of steam. Quiet groans are

heard down the corridor and they all peer through. The toads venture in sensing a more damp climate for them to reside. They decide to follow the toads, suffocated by the steam as they walk into it. The groans and the moans are becoming louder and louder until they come to an opening. Speechless, they seem to have come to a chamber full of people having an orgy, quite vigorously, not paying attention to the newcomers that have just arrived.

What is this? Said Ethan.

Ah, I've heard about something like this but never thought it actually existed, said the old man, although the others couldn't hear the old man very well over the moans and the groans occurring in the background, creating a form of groaning melody like some form of primal archipelago band.

Ethan stared, he stared because they weren't just having an orgy, but these people were beautiful, unseemingly so, not one person ordinary, but individually attractive incomparable to ordinary life.

Oops, better cover this one's eyes and ears, said the old man referring to the young queen, who was herself gawking.

The candle at the same time gave Ethan a nudge who was also staring.

Wah, yeah, who are they? Ethan said.

Why don't you ask? Said the little man, obviously unwilling to ask himself.

So Ethan did, he went up to one of the couples, who were in the middle of it, and he coughed, to grab their attention, but they didn't respond, so Ethan ventured a hello amid the thrusts.

Grunt, is all he got back.



Errr, Hello, he said, more emphatically this time.

A much more vigorous grunt came from the man as he thrust the woman harder, Ethan also tried the woman but to no avail.

They seem very absorbed in what they're doing, almost possessed, commented the old man.

Much of the same responses came from the rest of them, one of them even gave Ethan a seductive look and grabbed him. He perhaps under different circumstances would have given to the charm, but matters beyond himself seemed to be stopping him from joining in on the fray.

A woman then peered around from the piles of bodies and said to them, Hello, you're not from around here, are you?

Well no, first of all, we're clothed, chuckled the old man nervously, with no knowledge of where to put his eyes.

What is all this, asked Ethan.

Well, this is... She took a moment to search for the right answer and said, Paradise, I guess.

Paradise?

Yes, where all of your fantasies can come true, she said as she gave them a wink.

Ethan felt there is something slightly different about her, there is a knowing gaze in her eyes to the situation, rather than the individuals just going at it around him. He found himself being attracted to her for this quality, although, it would be hard to find someone that wouldn't be attracted to someone that is both intelligent and beautiful. Ethan noticed her red hair,

long, that hasn't been cut, her radiant green eyes, and then her body, at this point he blushed and said, you have no clothes.

Why does that matter, she asked.

I mean, it might be easier to converse with you if your breasts didn't move as you do, they're very.... Distracting.

Oh, okay then, do you have any?

Here, said the old man, and gave her some cloth to rap around her, although it mustn't have been very clean Ethan thought, but this didn't seem to bother the woman and put it around her like a tunic.

So... said the little man shyly. What's happening here, I for one have never heard of a place like this.

I don't know, I woke up here, she said breathing seductively between every phrase. I noticed that there's something in the water that makes you like this, so I stopped drinking it.

Something in the water? That's very cliché.

Yeah, it makes you want to join in.

Ah, an aphrodisiac perhaps, said the old man.

What's your name? said Ethan.

Name?

Yes, something to call you by.

Call, like a phone?

No, to refer to you as.

Hmm, Eva.

Okay Eva, how long have you been here?

My whole life.

Okay, I think I know what's going on, said the old man, looking very delighted in himself.

Everyone paused for an answer.

Yes, basically, these are the people that wouldn't find a place in society above, for their beauty would far outshine anyone else, so they're brought here.

Why would that be a problem? The candle said.

For the same reason anything decorative, ornamental, or expressive is banned, for it distracts, attracts, and through that feelings such as jealousy are born. Why do you think this space here works? Because no one is jealous, no one competes with each other. I heard that we do something with the attractive children, but I didn't guess it was anything like this.

So they just perpetually have sex?

Seems that way.

Ethan looked at one of the men going at it, and didn't really know if he felt jealousy towards their position. There was no mistaking it, the woman is by far the most attractive woman he had ever seen, and with a body like no other. But to be in this state perpetually...

What do you eat? said the candle, noticing Ethan staring.

We have this food come down from these holes, Eva said, motioning towards an opening in the wall.

So I assume the people above work to feed these people, seems fair, said Ethan, sarcastically.

However, the little man with his literal mind didn't pick up on Ethans twist of meaning and said, This isn't fair!

Well, what would you do with them? Kill them? Said the old man.

Well no, I would integrate them somehow.

How do you think that would work? Replied the old man, skeptical.

I, err, the little man wanted so much to come up with an answer, some idea that could place them into the chess board within his mind, some piece that would represent these people and how them being within it would unfold the game once it had begun. But the little man sighed, and said, No, no, I would have no sway over them.

Yes, because you are intimidated by their beauty, which would only mean they would dominate you and your little friends, and you would lose control.

So we just leave them like this? Said the candle.

At that moment one of the toads jumped into the baths where four individuals were having the time of their lives, interrupted, finally, when the merger little toad decided to let out a little belch. The individuals in the bath stopped and stared at the little creature. The woman started screaming, and the man started screaming because the woman was screaming, the toad now had his sights on them, sensing their fear, and began to chase them. As they screamed more people noticed and more toads came into the baths, the melody of moans has finally been broken. A cacophony of screams now replacing it. They all were now trying to maneuver so that

they were away from the little toads, but this seemed like a futile endeavor because of the limitations of the enclosed space. Meanwhile, Eva is giggling at the toads and the people running away from them, delighted at the display at hand.

So what now then? Said Ethan.

I don't know, I feel a bit like a colonizer that's interrupted a delicate eco system, or, well, this little lady has, but perhaps, this is meant to be, said the old man.

Now that the performance had been interrupted the old man lifted his hands off the little girl's eyes, who upon seeing all the naked bodies clambering about joined Eva in giggling at them. She then decided to chase them around herself, shouting, liberation! With her entourage, who came out of nowhere.

Maybe one of them will eventually find a door, said the little man. Low and behold, one opened for them, leading them into a corridor. Eva seemed to want to come with them, the others shrugged their shoulders and they all followed the corridor down.

At the end of the corridor they found an entirely different room, huge, but in the same sort of chaos as the previous. Instead of Baths, fountains, pillars, and flowers, however, Dirt, railroad tracks, rocks and rubble, fire and coal, chimneys, and suffocating smoke arose around them, suffocating their lungs in the smog of industry.

Little people were running around, with screams coming from the speakers. Sounding much like the screams from the previous room. They had the effect of calming the band of adventurers stepping into this room, but for these little people caused terror.

What have you done! Said a man running around the corner.

It's you! Said Ethan, surprised to find an old acquaintance in a place like this.

It's him? Said the little man.

You! He said back, it is the man with the long penis that Ethan had wrestled in his home, who seems to have finally found some clothing.

Why are you here? Ethan asked.

Why me? Why you? What have you done? You have ruined everything, you idiots! He exasperated, gesturing all around him to the chaos.

Why? What's going on? Ethan asked in a flat tone.

However, the man didn't seem to want to answer and ran off.

Who is he? Asked the little man.

Oh, a man that turns up at the most inconvenient moments, and who seems to be paranoid beyond all belief, Ethan answered.

After a moment or two the screaming in the speakers stopped and was promptly replaced by familiar moans and groans from the room prior to this one. This seemed to calm down the little people, who then carried on with doing their work, pushing coal, digging, smelting etc.

The man reappeared.

Go away! He shouted.

No, not until you tell us what is going on here, Ethan said.

Whyyyyyyy? he said like a recalcitrant child.

Because we are curious, said the old man.

Well, it's none of your business, he said back.

The little girl walked up to him sword in hand and said, you will tell us, boy!

Boy? he said back in disbelief at her bravado.

Please, said Eva, who asked, head bowed slightly batting her eyelashes.

Oh, oh, okay then, fine, I will tell you, he said finally.

Eva laughed a triumphant little laugh and thought to herself how easy that was considering she had clothes on.

It's coming, the man said.

What's coming?

The crisis!

Not this again, your existentialism is boring.

Well wait, perhaps his dread is justified, he did manage to organize... This, said the old man.

Okay, okay, acquiesced Ethan.

Yes, it is coming, and all will be lost, ALL, you will see, I must build a weapon, just in case he comes.

Who? Said the old man.

Ethan now had his head in his hands.

The one who is prothesized to come into this world, of whom I shall meet because this man is weak and puny, he said motioning his hands towards Ethan.

Ethan felt insulted but tried not to get angry, for that would he thought justify his fear, and Ethan's own inadequacy.

I don't know what you are talking about, said Ethan.

Of course you don't, you silly, silly man, but it is coming, and I shall meet it.

It sounds like you are going to be the cause of whatever it is that's coming, said Ethan.

Where did you find all these people, said the old man, who seemed to be scrutinizing them as they ran about working.

Oh no, grimaced the little man. If they have all the average people on the surface, and the beautiful in the other room, then these people must be...

Yes! These are my army of ugly little workers! The man with the long penis that is finally clothed laughed maniacally.

So they're your slaves, and you've charmed them with the moans from the people having sex in the previous room with some kind of contraption? Said the little man observing the speakers around the room.

What use of technology... said Ethan under his breath.

Technology? Queried Eva.

I'll explain later, said Ethan. More importantly however, what are they doing?



They're building a weapon, a machine! So that we can meet with the gravity of the calamity that is to come.

He then runs over to the edge, pointing down into the depths which the others soon follow, and there they see it, a huge robot thing, with rockets, machine guns, testosterone, etc.

Wow, that's a big weapon, said Eva.

Yes! Said the man.

How do you know it works? Asked the old man.

It will.

You sound very sure.

When the time comes, it will be ready.

For a moment Ethan just stood there, this man's lunacy was obvious, but what was less obvious is what to do in response to this man's position, which is delusional, but deep down Ethan understood on some level. Does he fight him, Ethan thought to himself, although this would just make himself his enemy, which would justify the man's delusion, or just leave, leaving these poor ugly people to their fate, of working to sexual moans, which seems to be motivating them towards no end. If he did however act, he would need to take responsibility for these little people, who through their conditioning he thought wouldn't change their ways so readily, if such things as sexual sounds motivated them.

But before Ethan could act the little girl screamed, Liberation! Liberation! Liberation! Which seemed to echo throughout the room to the slightest of responses from the little people. But it seemed to hit a nerve in the man with the... you know, who stood there anxiously, ready for whatever came his way, not seeming to in the slightest bit underestimate her. Ethan

commended the little girl's sense of injustice but then thought about how things would proceed if she did liberate them, a more sensible approach would be to unionize them and avoid any unnecessary violence, which in itself would just justify the delusion of the delusional man. So no matter what action was taken you're stuck in a catch-22, and because of this spiral, Ethan thought perhaps this man did have some truth to his fantasy but still didn't want to admit it. Something still wasn't quite right, he thought to himself, and he had an idea.

Say, why don't we go out and find this person you prophesize about?

The man gave Ethan a skeptical look and said, leave?

Yes. he's probably not going to be coming here is he, in the middle of nowhere.

Hmmm, he pondered.

The old man gave Ethan an approving look, apparently being able to see through his ploy, and said, Yes, the whole world is continuing on its course of immanent crisis whilst we are stuck here, which a man, any man out there is going to cause, and we may just only feel an echo of it.

Eva seemed to be getting excited with anticipation of the possibility of escaping this awful place and said Yes! A-N-Y-thing could be happening out there.

His skepticism it seemed from the relaxation of his face seemed to be breaking at its seams, so Ethan jumped in again.

What was your plan going to be after you complete it anyway? You have speakers, but do you have any way of communicating with the outside world? To see what's going on out there?

Well, no, he said.

So how are you sure that the crisis isn't happening out there already and we are stuck here hiding from it.

I'm not hiding!

I mean it's your party, your machine and it's your decision to make whether you go out there and face your fears head-on.

He looked at Ethan in a huff and then looked away towards the ground away from the rest of them to think for a moment and finally said, I have decided to stay here.

Ethan rolled his eyes and said, But you're living in uncertainty...

YOU BIG WIMP shouted the little girl running up to the man swinging her little sword at his leg, she even drew blood.

The man hopped back on one foot clutching the other.

Liberate! She then shouted after dealing with the man, although it wasn't that she won the duel more than the man didn't want to fight a little girl, never the less her entourage came from all the cracks and crevices of the room they were in.

Where did they all come from, were they just waiting there the whole time, Ethan thought.

They proceeded to breaking all the speakers to end the constant moans coming from them, possibly because they couldn't or didn't know about the control panel for them. After the speakers were broken and the moaning stopped, the little ugly men just seemed to stop there silent, looking around, seeming to come out of some sort of dream they've been stuck in.

One of them looked at the man with the long penis and wanted so very much to take revenge for the wasted time that they have spent here making

this huge machine. Unfortunately, the men were really quite small, and his enemy very much average, so there was no possibility for him to be beaten by them, nor anyone else, except of course the little girl.

What have you done! Said the man.

The little girl triumphantly lifted her sword, believing herself to be the victor and establishing her rein as the little queen. The man with the long penis ran to the machine and jumped into its head. The old man gave Ethan a look to say if he had it from here which he nodded. So Ethan ran into the helmet along with the man. However, how much Ethan wished to fight the man for control of the machine he looked at the dials and the buttons and was overwhelmed by their sheer complexity of the design. So he sat down in one of the chairs.

Noooooooooo, the man said, go away!

At that moment the candle jumped in as well and sat down.

Noooo, he said, once again.

And then Eva jumped in right behind but the man didn't despair in her presence but seemed to be happy she is coming.

Okay, you can come.

We all can come, right? Smiled Eva.

He sighed and groaned.

Ethan got up out of the chair and gave him a little nudge and said, come on, it'll be fun, what's better than having an adventure with friends rather than being alone.

Friends? He scoffed, Ethan thought that maybe that was a little too far.

But everyone crowded around him and way loaded with clichéd sentiment said in unison, come on!

He then folded and said bitterly, Fine.

Then everyone smiled, except the man, there were laughs and congratulations at hand. The candles wick even came alight, everyone then cheered, except the man.

These congratulatory celebrations weren't long-lived however because the road ahead of them is filled with endless desert, as far as the eye can see, and the main character is still filled with doubt as to whether any of this is real because of the absurdity of it all. But what has left him during this journey is a longing for something, something unreal to him, leaving him in a state of severe doubt, allowing him to see the direction ahead and to have interactions with people that weren't so painfully awkward. Maybe he could also see the essence of beauty in simpler things rather than fixated on a mistake that he couldn't quite see. Perhaps he finally feels more like himself, but we can never fully know that. But what is known is that these unlikely band of merry fellows, except one, will continue on the road to nowhere until they find somewhere to tell their tale of absurdity to people that probably won't believe them.

After of course, they found an end to this endless desert.