

Photographic Memory

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for Mary Ellen Will

Five years after my post-doctorate degree in post-contemporary history, I had still not landed the plum. I hadn't despaired, but the prospect seemed ever more remote. My sole virtue was the piddling persistence that persuaded me to send out one resumé and curriculum vitae every week. The only less satisfying task was liberating little rocks from big ones with a fifteen-pound sledge, a job I took one summer to keep from being evicted again. I could've done a paper on how many miserable jobs are out there, but who'd care to read it when they were busy with their own pathetic occupations?

I'd lied, embellished, or misrepresented my life, identity, and skills on so many applications that I'd need a refresher course in who I was before showing up for an interview. I was African, female, a Hispanic homosexual, or whatever else I thought might advance my cause with a particular employer. Oh, and I spoke more languages than are known to exist. I counted on no one bothering to check.

My friends reminded me my dishonesty—a harsh word—would be obvious the moment I set foot in someone's office for the interview. That did not concern me. Maybe I hadn't thought that far. But you're not going to land a job until you get your foot in the door. You're not going to pluck the plum until you've been invited to the orchard. Besides, I am whoever I say I am. No one would dare dispute my self-identity or I'd have NIL, the National Identity Laboratory, all over their asses. *I am what I am*, as Popeye used to say.

The day the letter arrived, I nearly tossed it in the bin for junk mail in the vestibule. It was all junk if you asked me, and if the lazy super didn't empty the bin soon, the discarded mail would avalanche to the floor and out the door. I had no recollection of having applied to The Institute for Advanced Hindsight. My specialty was the future.

I walked to Café Kundalini over on First Avenue to use their wifi. There was a fresh scratch in the table where I usually sat. I took the empty mug from the next table and set it on mine, and thereby escaped without having to buy anything. Though I had to pee, I didn't push my luck, and waited until getting back to my fourth-floor apartment on Avenue A.

The Institute for Advanced Hindsight had only a one-page website which declared that, as a think-tank devoted solely to history, they harked back to a time before the Internet was invented by the fellow from Tennessee. I had no idea what they were about, and the nearest book library was in a quaint upstate hamlet called Bovina Center nearly a hundred-fifty miles from the city. My memory was excellent, but I'd no idea how I learned of them nor what I'd said on my resumé. But if this were the fabled plum, it wouldn't matter. They'd be waiting for me.

The Institute occupied the tenth through thirteenth floors of an eight-storey limestone Gothic tower on Riverside Drive. I confirmed this discrepancy with the elevator operator who wore a red jacket with gold epaulets and who chomped on a cigar with its paper band still attached. He shrugged, jiggling his gold tassels..

The aroma took me back to the corrugated tin shed behind my grandparents' house in New Mexico. Grandpa went to sneak a smoke behind Grandma's back and I always went with him. Streaks of rust dripped from the nail heads, each one as distinct as a fingerprint. Grandma invariably took me on the side and asked whether Grandpa had smoked the whole cigar. She kept a tally on a scrap of paper taped inside the pantry door. "Counting coffin nails," she'd say.

The thirteenth floor was the penthouse suite of offices. The waiting room was clad in heavily-varnished wainscoting, above which hung paintings and watercolors of clouds. I had to look away. The clouds seemed to be moving across their frames and it made me dizzy. One of them flashed lightning.

The corner windows commanded a view towards Mrs. Grant's tomb, the one she shared with her husband, the General. But the vantage was much higher than the lighted buttons in the brass elevator cage had indicated. As low gray clouds rolled in off the Hudson, the traffic and streetlights below dissolved into nimbuses in the pervasive fog. The perspective suggested I was dozens of storeys in the sky, but thirteen floors seemed impossible enough in an eight-storey building.

"Mr. Six Thorson?" asked a female voice from over my shoulder. I hadn't heard anyone enter.

She wore a glistening red dress and chrome earrings like tiny hubcaps. With her volume of wavy blond hair, I decided she was a sportscar convertible, probably a Miasma. She smiled, and asked the origin of my unusual name, leading me down a carpeted hallway to her office.

"Norwegian," I replied. "It just means a son of Thor."

She laughed. I realized too late she meant my given name. My heart pounded.

"I guess my parents grew tired of assigning their children names and simply called me 'Six.'"

My words were getting stuck on the roof of my mouth. My interviewer invited me to sit in the tall leather chair opposite her desk. The room was lit not from any lamps or fixtures, but rather the walls and ceiling, and even the furniture, seemed to reflect more light than they absorbed, as though they simply shone. After getting caught in the rain, I wondered whether I had a fever.

After introducing herself, Hypatia Diggs spread the pages in my folder out before her into an evenly-spaced fan.

“It says here you possess photographic memory.”

“I said that? Yes, I said that. I guess I do.”

“Would you mind demonstrating, Mr. Thorson?”

“Uh, I guess not.”

I can't imagine why I would have claimed such a fatuous ability as photographic memory on a resumé. I normally had a pretty accurate memory, but I doubted it was photographic.

Ms. Diggs' blue eyes were mesmerizing, piercing. She placed before me a large binder with various size pages on a variety of papers, and began turning them faster than my eyes could focus on them. I looked up at her to see whether she was serious or punking me.

“Please pay attention, Mr. Thorson. This is an aptitude test.”

She flipped a dozen more pages and then clapped the leather binder shut. My eyes ached, the way I often felt before a pounding headache ensued. A steady rain streamed down the windows behind her. The binder was no longer on the desk.

“Page forty-nine, if you please.”

I shut my eyes, convinced I'd only be looking at the inside of my eyelids. But there it was, perfectly clear.

“I'm afraid I can't read the cursive Cyrillic alphabet,” I told her, though I'd probably admitted to speaking Russian on my application.

“That's all right, Six. Could you reproduce it without understanding what it said?”

I was aware of her calling me by my first name. I could feel her heat—or was it mine?

“I think so,” I said, gulping air.

A sheet of paper and a pen lay before me though I wasn't sure when they'd been placed there. I shut my eyes and looked at the flowing writing. It was beautiful, like calligraphy. Putting pen to paper, I set down a few words, closed my eyes, and wrote down several more. When the page was full, Hypatia Diggs produced the binder again, turned to page forty-nine, and lay my handwritten copy, the writing I saw, next to it. The match was perfect, even down to reproducing the exact penmanship and crossings-out.

“See?” she said, beaming from one of her flashy earrings to the other. She flipped her hair to one side. “We often don’t know of what we’re capable until we give it whirl. Page fifty-five, please.”

The rain grew audible, pelting the glass as hard as sleet. The world outside was absolutely black. I closed my eyes and searched through my recent memory.

“It’s a sheet of music,” I told her, “I can’t read a note of music, but it goes like this.”

I whistled the tune, which seemed Middle Eastern, and drummed my fingers on the edge of the desk. Ms. Diggs followed the score in the binder and nodded.

“Note for note,” she told me. “I’ll recommend your employment to our board of directors. You’ll hear from them extremely soon.”

She stood and extended her hand. Unlike her aura and her red dress, it was as cold as marble. Hypatia Diggs walked me to the elevator.

“Please don’t concern yourself with trying to recall what you said on your application, Mr. Thorson. You never sent one. The Institute for Advanced Hindsight selects its employees, rather than the other way around. To be invited here is, generally, to be accepted.”

The elevator dinged and a fog of cigar smoke wafted out. Ms. Diggs disappeared into it.

“Where to, buddy?” the elevator operator asked, putting his hand on the brass gnomon that indicated the floor. It currently pointed to a raised dot between 65 and 70.

Feeling he was the sort with whom I could joke, I gave him my address on Avenue A. I expected him to laugh, but he merely closed the fanciful brass doors, exact scaled reproductions of the Florentine baptistry, and pulled the lever. My stomach surged upward.

The doors opened onto the sidewalk, now covered with grimy slush, in front of my building. I turned to ask the elevator operator what the hell had just happened, but I stood alone at the curb.

I shook off my coat in the lobby and, out of habit, took out my mailbox key. A single envelope, from The Institute for Advanced Hindsight, postmarked two weeks ago, awaited me. The letter thanked me for the opportunity to interview me and went on to congratulate me on becoming their newest employee.

I read the letter three more times on the way up to my apartment to make sure it hadn’t been written in disappearing ink. Every word was still there the next morning.

* * *

My first assignment sent me to Koblenz, Germany. I had never left North American soil before except when swimming. I sure passed a lot of water getting to Europe. When I'm nervous my mouth gets dry and the steward didn't seem to mind bringing me more bottled water.

Unable to sleep for more than half an hour, I busied myself by reading an English-German dictionary. I didn't understand the first principle of German grammar except that the meat of the sentence—the verb—wasn't served until after dessert and coffee. The Institute sent me with a letter of introduction in what I hoped was perfect German, right down to the Umlauts, which I'd previously thought were an indigenous Alaskan people.

The train to the restored Koblenz station passed through scenery that suggested a Wagnerian backdrop. I checked into a small *Pension* near the confluence of the Rhine and Mosel Rivers overlooking an enormous statue of Kaiser Wilhelm I on his high horse. Its predecessor had been blown to smithereens by American artillery at the of World War II. It reminded the gunner of his great uncle, whom he detested.

Afraid I might sleep for days once my head hit the pillow, I asked the landlady, a stout and sturdy *Hausfrau*, to wake me at nine o'clock. I was kept awake through most of the night by the thought that in my tortured Teutonic, I'd probably requested nine alarm clocks be placed outside my door. At some point before dawn I dozed off, but was awakened by nine raps on my door. Close enough.

Though I'd memorized a detailed map of Koblenz, my recollection was the mirror image of the actual city. It didn't take me long to get disoriented. But the Institute provided a very generous travel allowance and I caught a taxi. In any event, I was in no shape for the climb to the heights above the Old City.

My appointment was at a baronial mansion overlooking the Rhine that had never been modernized to include electricity, heat, or plumbing. The grand pile of stones had been in its current occupant's family for centuries. It suffered not a scratch in the Second World War.

I was relieved that the Institute had been unable to arrange a meeting with Graf Ernst von Streichholz. My German was not up to it. A servant in livery from a previous century showed me to a windowless library in which books towered to height not commensurate with any structure I saw on the outside. I wondered whether it were an optical illusion.

"No, sir," the man said in perfect British. "The perspective is genuine. We have a great many books here. Raise your arms, please."

"Pardon me."

"The agreement you signed on your way in. No recording devices of any kind."

"OK," I replied, raising my arms.

I received a thorough pat-down that included what felt like a grope, but I wasn't sure. He smiled, and shone a light from a small probe into my eye to ascertain whether I had an iris camera implant.

Satisfied I was clean, Wolfgang walked me to a desk on which stood a tall kerosene lamp. He turned it up. I sat in the brocaded chair. I know he hadn't told me his name so I wasn't sure how I knew it. I'm not sure how he knew what I'd been thinking, either.

"Is this the volume you wish to examine, Mr. Thorson?" he asked, holding it before me with white-gloved hands.

I nodded. Wolfgang instructed me to put on my own gloves. He set a polished brass bell beside the large leather-bound book on the desk and invited me to ring for him if there was anything else I needed.

"A water fountain," I replied.

"Did you not see it in the courtyard on your way in, sir? It is world-renowned, though few have ever seen it and photography, as you know, is not permitted."

"I mean a fountain for drinking water."

Wolfgang arched his eyebrow and looked strangely at me. Then he turned on his heels, clicking them together in Prussian fashion. He returned with a glass tumbler and large flask of water.

"The water closet is that way, sir, behind *Biographie*. Do you require anything else, sir?"

"No, Jeevesy, old chum. I'm good."

He bowed and left.

My hands trembled as I opened *De Texendo Fabularum*, a Thirteenth Century vellum manuscript in Latin, translated roughly as "Concerning the Weaving of Tales." I was told nothing further about the book except that its sole copy disappeared four hundred years ago.

I'd been instructed to peruse the volume at a searching reader's pace, not at the photographic shutter speed to which I'd become accustomed to read recently. Running my gloved hand down the page would further enhance the impression that I was a studious historical researcher. It would seem I was looking for something specific, rather than latching onto every syllable in sight and tucking them away where only me a God could find them.

My task in Graf von Steichholz's *Schloß* was completed in about two hours. They returned my phone, watch, and clothes on the way out. I appreciated Wolfgang's frequent

stoking of the fire in my corner of the library. I noted the architectural fountain in the courtyard, but there was no structure anywhere on the baronial grounds as tall as the upper reaches of the library. Wolfgang was full of it.

I collapsed on my bed at the *Pension* with a head-squeezing headache and ignored the call for supper. Though I could barely speak, I thanked her.

The darkness was punctuated by flashes on the inside of my eyelids. Each was a page of the manuscript I'd committed to memory, though I could not understand a word of it. In fact, its nearly cursive calligraphy suggested a foreign alphabet. At last the flashes stopped and I got some sleep.

Since I'd been unable to so much as untie my shoes the night before, at least I did not have to struggle getting dressed the next morning. I wanted to shower, but knew the stream of water would strike my head like hailstones on a tin roof. I could not have borne it.

I felt a little better knowing I was flying home. The sandwich and soda provided made me sleepy. I awoke refreshed, but there were four hours of the flight to JFK left.

I wasted most of that time speculating on what "The Weaving of Tales" might be about and why The Institute for Advanced Hindsight wanted to add it to their extensive collection. After rejecting the other equally unverifiable guesses, I decided the ancient tome was a treatise on how to influence the masses through propaganda. No doubt there were also incantations and formulae to add to the mischief. It was probably no accident that it resided near the heart of the Third Reich.

Tired of this pointless exercise, I reached into my jacket pocket for my reading glasses, ready to pick up the latest issue of *Vapid Magazine*—Where Everything That Doesn't Matter Matters™. There was a piece of paper in my pocket I did not recall putting there. It was from Wolfgang.

"Not a bad surmise on 'The Weaving of Tales,' Mr. Thorson," it read. "But the National Socialist German Workers Party needed no help. They were evil entirely on their own."

It was creepy. How'd he know not only what I was thinking, but also what I was *going to* think? The Institute would find this quite interesting.

As I folded the letter, I saw the careful script disappearing. The oldest trick in the book: disappearing ink. Except that I couldn't explain how he knew exactly the moment to have the writing disappear. I gave up before concocting another migraine. Tomorrow I could spend the day in bed. The Institute granted a brief furlough after assignments, as Hypatia Diggs put it, "to decompress." I would not have to show up until Tuesday.

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My debriefing at The Institute took nearly two weeks. They couldn't just hook me up to a printer to reproduce "De Texendo Fabularum" as I saw each page in my head. I had to write down every character by hand without understanding a word. It was as exciting as watching pixels dry. Each night, I was rewarded with a headache and crazy dreams of galloping bronze statues and Mozart conducting the *Requiem* with a red-hot poker.

When my brain-crunching ordeal was over, Hypatia sent me to a quiet retreat in upstate New York for a week's convalescence. It was a convent run by the Benedictines: Saint Monica's Home For Recovery and Redemption or, as one less-reverent nun put it, Saint Monica's Home for Soused Sisters. The Catskills were coming into bloom, a season that also brought on a plague of mayflies and maple pollen.

I was assigned to Sister Hildegard von Binghamton, who had not taken the vow of silence. I believe she instead had taken a vow of chattiness. I suspected she also concealed contraband whisky somewhere. She wobbled along the cloister with me in tow, speaking incessantly about convoluted and interconnected theories such as extraterrestrial infiltration of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

I learned way more about Saint Monica's than I found interesting, going back to its establishment as the summer estate of a Nineteenth Century robber-baron philanthropist named Biggs, founder of the present-day Vorax Corporation. She was especially proud of their eighteen-inch Newtonian reflector, which she demonstrated for me one evening. We huddled for warmth in the observatory and I swear she groped me while I looked through the eyepiece at Uranus. But I wasn't sure. Either way, I was reminded I had to pee.

By midweek it occurred to me I was likely already at the sight of my next assignment, though I'd received no instructions. One evening as I awaited my supper in the small wing reserved for male clerics, a knock came at the door. No one was there, but a small parcel in brown paper lay at my feet. There was a note attached.

Dear Brother Thorson,

I was instructed by Mother Superior to provide you with these logbooks from the observatory, years 1890 through 1893. I request that you return them as soon as your research is completed. These are the only copies extant.

The logs are not to leave your cell at any time Please know that I am available to help with any questions you may have.

*Sincerely,
Sister Hildegard*

I nearly passed out when I leafed through the logbooks. Each page contained column after column of astronomical notation and indications of time, ascension, declination, and other data in a small, often shaky hand. I could hear a headache rumbling in the distance, lumbering toward me like an angry bear.

The only question keeping me awake that night was whether I should chew a little off at a time or devour the whole thing in a single sitting. If I did the latter, I could linger in the quiet of Saint Monica', nursing my headache, while I pretended to do my research at a measured pace. I'd have a second recuperation owed me once I coughed up the logbooks back at The Institute. I chose to jump into the icy water all at once.

* * *

When I returned to the surface, I lay flat on my back beneath a blinding examination lamp. A rock-hard headache was all there was room for in my head. I'd no idea of time or place.

The light dimmed and a familiar voice spoke soothingly.

"You'll be fine, Six. Just another episode. I'm going to raise you up."

Hypatia Diggs rose into view. A strand of her hair tickled my cheek. She reached across me to check the pulse on my unencumbered left wrist, brushing across my penis. I couldn't tell if it had been inadvertent, but it got his attention.

"Where am I?"

"Red Willow, New Mexico. You are to take as long as necessary to recover. This is beautiful country," she said, slowly parting the curtains.

"My grandparents lived just outside of town in The Meadow. I've been here before."

"Yes, we know," she said, displaying her dimples. "Your next assignment will be near here, the most important of all."

"Here? I have not been back since my grandmother died when I was thirteen. My grandfather lived another thirty years, but I did not make it to his funeral. He attributed his longevity to his fondness for cigars."

Hypatia's expression revealed nothing. She glanced at her sparkly chrome watch.

"You may relax, Six. We've already obtained the information from your previous mission."

"Thank God for that. How is Sister Hildegard?"

“Who?”

“You know—at Saint Monica’s.”

“Where?”

“Look, Hypatia. I know what’s up. That astronomical log from Saint Monica’s, from the early 1890s? The observatory didn’t realize what it was witnessing, but it kept meticulous records. They had logged the comings and goings of numerous interstellar craft. They sketched these in detail, described their motions, and even managed to expose a few photographic plates. This is the first recorded evidence, by multiple scientific observers, of what we now call UFOs.”

“Six, I’ve got to run. And you know I cannot comment on past assignments. Think what you want. Take your time getting better.”

Hypatia kissed her fingertips and placed them on my forehead. The coolness of her touch soothed my fevered brain. I did my best to smile as she waved from the doorway, but I wasn’t sure what I’d conveyed. I felt disconnected from my many far-flung parts. I wanted only to sleep.

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It didn’t take long to grow restless at the rehab facility. I was the youngest of nine patients, all of whom had dementia of one flavor or another. They didn’t remember your name from moment to moment. Their estrangement from reality grew contagious. I’d forgotten I could check out at any time: whenever I wanted to commence work on my latest assignment from The Institute for Augmented Hindquarters, or whatever it was called. It still hurt to think.

On Tuesday one of my fellow inmates, having forgotten he’d just eaten lunch, devoured my entire tray when I turned around to watch some fellow who tried to levitate himself blindfolded. According to him, he felt himself rise up at least two inches. Even my cup of Jell-O was licked clean. That was the end.

I called the number on the card Hypatia left me and untied the package of civvies she stored in the cheesy metal wardrobe. I put on the brand-new Levi’s with difficulty. It was like getting dressed in cardboard. The denim shirt and cowboy boots were just as stiff and unnatural. I would stand out as the greenhorn gringo tenderfoot just off the bus from New York City.

My taxi driver looked mestizo, wearing long gray braids beneath a dusty black felt hat with little silver charms in the hatband. The denim he was clad in looked soft and comfortable, unlike mine, which might take years to break in. I lay across the back seat because I could not sit down. The driver never asked where we were going. I didn’t know anyhow.

From my vantage I saw only intense blue sky and occasional puffs of cloud. Shakti Pat, as I intuited his name was, took his turns rather fast, spitting up dust and gravel. He pulled the sandblasted forty-year-old Volvo beneath a makeshift tin-roofed carport that had never been defaced with paint. The house, a reasonably spacious two-storey adobe hacienda, looked familiar. At the front, anchored in the scrubby sagebrush yard, a weathered wooden sign with a faded New Mexican *Zia*, proclaimed *The Red Willow Museum of All and Sundry, Closed Sundays*.

I'd never stayed any place in Red Willow previously except my grandparents' house. When Shakti Pat opened the front door and took my bag from me, I realized it *was* their house. Though Gummy and Gumbo both liked collecting curios and they lived long lives, the rooms had never been so chock-full of *stuff*. I could not take it all in. My eyes could not focus.

I told Shakti Pat, several decades older than I, that I could manage my own bag.

"That is your choice," he said, in an accent vaguely Indian—East Indian.

"The quarters for staff and guests, of which you are one, are on the sixth floor. It's a bit of a haul. Perhaps you'd like to wait until after supper."

"When is that?"

"Whenever you like—past, present, or future."

"How about now?"

"As you wish, Mr. Thorson."

I hadn't told him my name, either. Shakti Pat gestured to the Victorian pressed back dining set, empty a moment ago. The table was now heaped with plates, bowls, and platters of food—each item one of my favorites, but in such quantity that I could not finish supper in a week. Towering at the back was a four-tiered platter laden with my grandmother's peanut butter cookies. I could smell them. I closed my eyes and tasted them.

The museum caretaker refused to join me, citing proper ceremony and protocol. Once he left the room, I reached across the table boarding-house style for a cookie. Though made of flour and peanut butter, they were shaped like fortune cookies. I cracked one open.

"Veggies B4 Sweets," it read. It was my grandmother's favorite saying.

I smiled at the clever trick. I figured they all contained the same message, but the next one said, "Don't B So Sure."

I don't remember what the other fortunes said. Was I losing my mind? I could remember astronomical logbooks and Latin formularies, but not simple fortune-cookie platitudes?

"Will that B all, sir?" Shakti Pat asked, standing B-side me.

The entire table had been cleared, not of plates and utensils, but rather of their contents—every last tidbit and morsel and smear of sauce. I'd apparently eaten it all and felt ready to burst my seams. One cookie remained at the back of the tiered tray.

"2 Words of Advice: B-Have."

I went up to my room, puffing by the time I ascended the six flights with my bag. It was my old room on the second floor, though packed with more bric-a-brac than I'd seen at a barn sale. In the midst of the clutter of objects on my old desk was the railroad lantern Gumbo let me have from the tin shed where he used to smoke.

The shed had rotted and collapsed in my absence, the corrugated metal now forming the roof of the carport. I recognized every rust streak—but I couldn't remember eating a twenty-four course supper. I'd wished I could say it had been delicious, but I'd no such recollection. I remembered only the peanut butter cookies.

I lit the kerosene lantern with a match from the match-holder. I turned it down and got ready for bed. I propped my Levi's in the corner, and donned a pair of longjohns and a flannel shirt from my bag. I remembered it got cold at night in Red Willow.

The lantern flickered and fluttered among the array of odds-and-ends, casting a parade of sinister characters and malevolent monsters around the room and across the ceiling. I pulled the scratchy wool army blanket over my head. Of course, I knew they weren't real, just filaments of my imagination, but daylight did not come soon enough.

* * *

The museum caretaker asked me whether I was ready to peruse that for which I had come. I said I was ready for whatever awaited.

I had no notion what to expect. I hoped it was not another *Voynich Manuscript* or *Codex Seraphinianus* in an unknown and indecipherable alphabet, something it would take months to unpack from my brain and leave it as spongy as a beetle-bored cottonwood tree.

Shakti Pat set the book on the oak table in front of me. He brought an old glass-shaded library lamp which was electric, fortunately. The light was perfect and the chair comfortable. *Omnia Omnium*, the thick book proclaimed.

"Do you know how this volume, *The All of Everything*, came to be here, Mr. Thorson?"

Nothing's to be gained pretending to know something you don't, so I said I'd not been told the book's provenance or the first thing about it.

"The *Omnia* was in the possession of your grandparents for at least a hundred-fifty years, nearly as long as I'd known them."

My head got stuck on the math, but I didn't want to interrupt his narrative.

"It came to the New World, to My Country, with the Spanish invasion, and was hidden away in an old mission not far from here. During rebuilding, they discovered the original cornerstone. Inside it, in a golden box, was *The All of Everything*. When it came up at auction to help with the mission's renovations, everyone bid on the golden casket. Your grandparents, fortunately or not, got the book, which no one, not even the priest, could read. They bid four dollars.

"No one knows where it was before the time of the Spanish invaders. I wanted to ask my nephew, who's good on the Internet, to look it up for me. But he's so busy with school. Maybe you will figure it out when you do your research. But I want to warn you about that book."

"How so?" I asked.

"It is not good for human persons to know so much. It is the Book of All Knowledge: the Mind of God. It is Everything, Past, Present, and Future. It has made all who read it crazy. My People say the Spaniards brought it here to be rid of it. They could not destroy it or burn it."

"What else does the legend say?" I asked, unable to keep from smiling.

"It is more than legend, Six Thorson. The last fellow to examine *The All of Everything* drove his car into the Rio Grande Gorge—six hundred feet down. He said a formula from the future could make anything weightless. He was going to become the richest man in the world, The Man Who Has Everything. They did not find his body. I loved your grandmother and grandfather. I promised I would watch out for you if you ever came back to Red Willow. You must promise to be careful."

Though touched by what the old caretaker revealed, I did not put much stock in his tall tales. I bid him a good night and got down to the *Omnia Omnium*. He watched me from down the hallway. The house was not large enough to have a corridor of such length. Its vanishing point was beyond view. But I determined not to be distracted or deterred from my assignment.

I began at the beginning, *In Principio*. Though I understood not a word of Latin or the other extinct languages in which the first section was written, I comprehended exactly what had been written. It was the Book of Life, the Akashic Record, a compendium of every event, thought, word, wish, or emotion that has ever occurred. I could not flip the pages fast enough.

No book could contain so many pages. There was not enough ink on earth to record it all. The Past continued to be recorded. I could not stop.

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When I regained consciousness, I was among a forest of chair legs, lying on my side beneath the dining table. I righted my chair and reclaimed it before the caretaker came around to check on me.

My Levi's had developed "whiskers" and wrinkles. The knees puckered and the thighs had become slightly faded. I'd only the one pair. *What was going on?*

I was as hungry as a raven and my stomach made as much noise as one. But, unsure how long I'd been out, I was eager to get back to the *Omnia*. A plate of waffles slathered in butter and peach syrup appeared beside the book. *Well, in that case...*

When I'd finished my breakfast, the empty plate and fork vanished just as quickly. I'd turned aside for just a second. Shakti Pat had a footstep I rarely heard, especially when in his moccasins.

I advanced now to the section on The Present, but the writing appeared and disappeared impossibly quick, as The Future folded into The Past. I wasn't sure my brain recorded a single impression. Despite the caretaker's warning, I decided to turn to the section on events that had not yet come to pass. *Who wouldn't be curious?*

The pages needed no turning, one melding into the next. The characters of the writing were both more languid and more liquid, as though the scribe had all the time in the world. It was tempting to see if there was any mention of me or The Institute in ten years' time. *Or why not twenty?*

By the time I'd delved a half-century into The Future, nothing made sense any longer, as though humans were an alien species with motivations with which I could no longer identify. The entire race had gone mad. They were rude, fractious, and mean. I was ashamed to be counted among them. Their latest technologies seemed intent on making life more complicated and frantic. It all spun into a vortex that pulled me in despite employing all my strength of mind to climb out.

I became stretched out long and thin like taffy, as though being sucked down a reality-bending black rabbit-hole. I was no longer who I was, nor anyone else. I was everyone and no one. I had ceased to know.

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I did not so much awaken as slowly regain consciousness. I sat in the wood dining chair, chin on my chest, staring down at my faded Levi's, so worn and tattered and dusty they could have outfitted a scarecrow. My hands, resting on my knees, were a scarecrow's hands.

The Big Book was gone. All the antique items I thought I remembered around the dining room had vanished. It was empty but for the rickety chair in which I sat. There were not even curtains on the windows. I watched a dust devil swirl among the scrubby sagebrush. Shakti Pat stood at my side.

“You understand, Mr. Thorson. I had to sell things to pay bills.”

I did not like it when people knew what I was thinking when I barely knew myself. The caretaker had been with me forever, so I overlooked his intrusion. He was the only person I trusted, the only one who was genuine. I learned from him that we had been together for a hundred-thirty-eight years, ever since my grandparents died.

There was no Hypatia Diggs or Institute of Advanced Hindsight or cloud-scraping elevators. I had never left my grandparents house, now ready to fall around our heads. I had never lived anywhere else.

Shakti Pat brought me a steaming bowl of soup made with unpronounceable roots. It never ran out and he never refilled it. He was good to me, as he'd promised my grandparents he would be. He never scolded me for reading the book I promised him I would not—the book that, like Everything, is in my head.

He came and took away the empty bowl full of soup. I looked out the window and watched the procession of clouds, calling each by name.