

CONSTANTS:
AREPO

Written by

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DONALD

I read an essay while I was waiting at the bus stop. The rain had just started. The drops were cold and sudden on my skin. I was momentarily more concerned about staying dry than personal space. I took a backward step without looking and in that same instant the man behind me was moving forward. He was rushing onto the bus and was quickly attempting to gather his belongings. My encroachment must have crossed his wires because he left part of his work behind him. The bus disappeared before I could flag him down, and I was left holding a standard manilla folder crammed full of papers. For whatever reason, in that moment I felt an obligation to the man I hadn't even known existed a moment earlier. I wanted to return his folder. The importance of the work made no difference to me. I needed to find him.

Beat.

DONALD

I shuffled through the files looking for a name, a telephone listing, an address, a business card or anything I could find to contact him, but there was nothing. I sat down on the bench, checking my watch. The entire allotment of paper stood slightly taller than the height of the folder itself making it perpetually open. I thumbed through more. Finally, shoved somewhere in the middle of the stack was a title page. It read "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?" by Nick Bostrom. Nick Bostrom is a name I had heard before, I was sure of it, I just couldn't place it. It would be very difficult, I would imagine, to work at a college and not have heard his name at least casually in conversation.

(MORE)

DONALD (CONT'D)

But I've also heard of Bertrand Russell and I have no idea what he actually does, so maybe that theory has flaws. The title of the essay was circled in purple pen. Purple was an odd choice. You don't see a lot of purple pens. There were notes scribbled in the margins. Most of them in purple too. A few in green.

Beat.

DONALD

This wasn't the first time this has happened to me. This desire to return someone's misplaced stuff, of course. Once, again while waiting for a bus actually, a lady abandoned her birdcage as she stood up. It was gold-crested and complicated. I was fascinated by it. The only information I had about her was that she was a professor at the same college I taught at. I've seen her sitting on campus, reading. She usually kept her hair pinned up. I specifically remember because when I first saw her she was reading *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. She was in engineering, at least I think, and I was a professor in the Communication Arts department. That's all the information I had. I put up flyers on campus. I asked around with different department heads. More than my due diligence. Finally, I was able to track her down and return the birdcage. Her forehead creased, her eyes darting down to the birdcage and then back up to me. She shrugged her shoulders and chuckled and then she told me she already bought a new one. And then she asked me if I wanted it. It was old anyway, she told me. It was her mothers. And now... I have a birdcage. And a bird in it. I named him Faraday, which I find very funny and no one else does.

Beat.

DONALD

After I found the title page circled in purple pen, I started shuffling everything into it's proper order. Page four was upside down, and behind it was page 17. And then the appendices. I was fixated on how the papers original order could have been mangled so badly. I assumed it must have been dropped at one point. Dropped and then forgotten by it's owner. Rough day. I stood there and reassembled the entire goddamn essay.

Beat.

DONALD

And then I sat and I read it. I read it while I waited for my bus to arrive seven minutes late, and while I rode the 62L8BN home, and when I took a bath later that evening, when I fed Faraday and while I lit up a joint on the balcony and again before I laid in bed that night watching baseball and wrestling with my mind trying to fall asleep. I switched the World Series off after the Marlins took it in extra innings. I'm originally from Miami. That's where I went to college and where I met my wife, Kate. She was there to study Latin. She had two semesters remaining when she passed away. And that's when I left south Florida for the first time. I don't know why I decided to move to a place with all this goddamn snow.

Beat.

DONALD

I flipped on the news, fearmongering cycling through an endless loop in the background. A war we can't get out of. Rising gas prices. Glowing embers being spotted near a hospital in Grand Junction. Modern news, thanks to 9/11 and the twenty-hour news cycle is mostly bullshit. Venom television.

(MORE)

DONALD (CONT'D)

I flipped it back off and stared at the ceiling. My therapist told me to concentrate on the most relaxing thing I can think of when I can't fall asleep. Motionless I laid, arms at my side, listening to Faraday's toes tapping against the bars of the cage. Ever since he became a part of my life, I always listen for the birds when I step outside. It reminds me that there is another species sharing this Earth and I know nothing of their existence. It makes me feel like I am a small part of this collapsing universe. I visualized the Earth imploding. Finally, after hours of fluttering eyes, I drifted off for a bit.

Beat.

DONALD

My elementary school lunch room. Bathed in a greenish-yellow hue coming from bulbs on thin filament. I'm sitting at a table with two other kids in my class, Katie something-or-other. Brown hair, glasses. And Ryan Williams. Big shoulders for his age, awkward smile. He opens his Gunsmoke lunchbox and pulls out a pre-packaged brownie, the kind with the sporadic, multi-colored sprinkles wedged into the top. He stares directly into my eyes and says, "you will never know what this tastes like." And then, without breaking eye contact he shoves the entirety of the brownie into his face. Through a mouthful he smiles and says "I hope that doesn't bother you." But it did. It had always bothered me. I would lay awake as a kid trying to digest the thought of something existing and me never having an interaction with it. Like that brownie.

Beat.

DONALD

The next morning I went to class, hoping to make sense of what I had read. I questioned everything I normally ignore on my morning commute. Is this bus a product of computer code? Is the cold air coming from overhead jets a construction? Can I upload my thoughts onto a file-sharing program like LimeWire and allow other users to access my brain?

Beat.

Tom, a professor in Economics, hops onto the bus. He's aging. He announced his upcoming retirement at the end of the term. He's taught here for thirty-seven years. Is *Tom* real? My mind kept playing out the lunchroom scenario from my dream the night before, except it was splintered. I cycled through all of the different outcomes that could have been. Slight variations. What if it had happened differently. Where would I be right now? I removed the essay from my bag and started combing over it again. I read the notes in the margins and started a list to look up when I was able to get to the library. I kept returning to one section, circled in purple on page six. It read, "The basic idea of this paper can be expressed roughly as follows: If there were a substantial chance that our civilization will ever get to the posthuman stage and run many ancestor-simulations, then how come you are not living in such a simulation?" I read it over and over again with the words echoing in my head. The idea of life having no substance. The meaninglessness of every single thought and action completed, every day, unrelenting, forever.

Beat.

DONALD

That afternoon I taught my morning lecture on the "Principles of Modern Communication Through New Media." I met with a handful of failing students in need of a pep talk, I grabbed some coffee from the student union, listened for the sounds of the birds as I walked through the courtyard and then I retreated back to my office to revisit Mr. Bostrum's work and the scribbled ramblings of whoever misplaced it. My list of words to research was getting longer. There were so many I didn't recognize. Illustris. Parallax. Nuremberg. There were dates and coordinates and more than I could wrap my head around.

Beat.

DONALD

That night I couldn't sleep. The Marlins won again even though Brad Penny had no control, but I hardly watched any of the game. I still had so much research to do. I lit a joint and put on some coffee and started researching. One by one I went through my list. Did you know that Nick Bostrum is only thirty? Thirty fucking years old he wrote an essay capable of making me spiral out of control. I listened for the sound of Faraday's feet against the cage for comfort. He was still. No movement.

Beat.

DONALD

Are you familiar with the Sator Square? Sometimes it's referred to as the Rotas Square, but rarely. Honestly...rarely, if ever. But that's not my point. In one of my classes I give a lecture on the history of written communication. Why it's important. How it shapes who we are and what we believe.

(MORE)

DONALD (CONT'D)

In that lecture, I speak about the Sator Square or, again, "Rotas Square" existing as one of the first known occurrences of a palindrome. There are five words etched into this stone that was found in the ruins of Pompeii in around 79 AD. The words are lined up to create a palindrome forward and backward and diagonally. Sator, Arepo, Tenet, Opera, Rotas. It also reads as a complete sentence in any direction, adding to it's complexity. It's written in Latin, which I don't speak, but a lot of really intelligent people, more intelligent than myself, do. Kate... did. Now, here's the thing, the text allows for four of the five words to be easily defined. Sator translates to a planter, a field worker. Tenet means to hold or become skilled in. Opera is care. Rotas are just simply wheels. And then there's Arepo. Arepo was written in the margins of the essay. Circled, multiple times, with a purple pen. I need to tell you about that word.

Beat.

DONALD

Arepo has no Latin translation. It appears nowhere in Latin literature, making it's usage in an otherwise structurally complex writing, well, very unusual. Now, many scholars have looked at the Sator Square for years and have studied it's meaning, myself included. I'd say that most of my colleagues and those who have written about it in literary magazines or educational journals believe that Arepo is a human name created or adopted from another known or unknown language. If that suggestion is correct, that would mean that the words written on the stone translate to "The Farmer named Arepo ploughs his field for his work. Or employment." Pretty straightforward.

(MORE)

DONALD (CONT'D)

An otherwise innocuous sentence crafted in an incredibly intricate arrangement. Some scholars suggest that the word Arepo is entirely made up. It's not a name. It means nothing. It was included there simply to make the palindrome work. If you subscribe to that way of thinking, I would make the argument that Arepo then becomes the most important word used in the square. It's sole purpose and the reason for it's creation is to make something incredibly sophisticated work properly. And yet, we still refer to the piece of historical relevance as a Sator square, or as I mentioned before, sometimes, but rarely, a Rotas square. Arepo is the crux of everything, and it's an afterthought.

Beat.

DONALD

Now, what I can't understand is how a thirty year-old Postdoctoral Fellow can write a paper on the other side of the world suggesting were all made up of code. By the end of the year it will end up in the hands of an unknown bus traveler who will misplace it for me to find. On that paper, amongst inane rambling and cryptic dead ends, was the one single word that could realign me. The likelihood of all of this is beyond my comprehension.

Beat.

DONALD

It was morning all of a sudden. I don't remember falling asleep, but I'm sprawled out on the couch with a quilt thrown over me. I flip on the TV and see highlights from the baseball game last night. I flip it off and look over at Faraday. He's still for a long while. Just staring. I step out onto the balcony and light a joint, my eyes following each flake as it falls to the earth and then disappears.

(MORE)

DONALD (CONT'D)

Gone. Never to exist again. I
breath in the cold air. (chuckles)
Arepo. If we - you, me, whoever -
believe that there will be a time
when our technology has advanced to
the point where we could create a
simulation, then it's possible if
not likely that we are currently in
a simulation - by that
rationalization. And if thats the
case, does anything we do matter?
Are we arepo? Just a function to
help the whole operate properly?
Are we the crux of everything? An
afterthought? Whatever the case, we
still feel it. It's real to us. I
feel it the way that Faraday is
real. And that lunchroom brownie is
real. And Kate was real.

Beat.

DONALD

Tom, from Economics, rides his bike
past my house. I move my hand down
behind my back slightly to hide my
weed. Tom looks healthy.
Surprisingly upright. Like an
upgraded version of himself. He
waves as he passes and I return the
gesture. I wonder why he's not
taking the bus today. I take one
final breath of October air and
turn to go back inside. I have a
lecture today at noon. A big one.
The one I look forward to every
year. My eyes turn to Faraday for
comfort. He stares forward at me as
I walk past. He's perfectly still.
He has been for hours. And then, as
I walk past his cage and down the
hall, I hear his toes against the
perch.

Arepo

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Additional Music by Taūv
Sergey Cheremisinov
Blear Moon
myuu

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Cineidola (2019)

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