

PRESCHOOL in the FOURTH DIMENSION

Cate Desens

Two scientists sat at a bus stop near a deserted parking lot, and they watched an old man attempt to steal an old Ford.

The man made worried, surgical circles around the old Ford, like a terrier around a rat hole. He sniffed the tires. He peered in the back windshield. He checked his thin hair in the side-mirrors. His bald spot was painfully pink.

But he was meticulous; never did he touch the car; never did he acknowledge the scientists, even though surely he can feel his audience, and surely they are impeding his crime; but he moved in rapid circles without pause.

“There’s gotta be something valuable in that clunker.” PK¹ said to the Shad, offhandedly throwing a pebble to punctuate what she said.

Shad also took up the game, and he tossed a pebble underhand. It landed neatly on a rotted wooden beam, one that used to mark the spaces between cars.

“Two points!”

“Two?”

“Two points if it lands on the beam. One point if you just hit the beam.”

His friend shrugged. They were both dressed for the weather: she wore a green LEGAL OBSERVER baseball cap, and he wore a bucket hat. With their eyes shielded, they could easily observe the old man, even in the noonday glare.

The old man had crouched down to examine the Ford’s undercarriage, and as he got up his belly jostled like a great bowl of jell-o, and his salmon pink T-shirt rode up and revealed a fantastically furry belly.

PK had thought his densely hairy calves were the bodily exception, but her new hypothesis held that this old man was hairy everywhere but his head.

“I wish we could see inside this guy’s head, figure out what he wants so bad.”

¹ Short for Pike

“I’d rather see inside that clunker. I mean, come on, a gasoline engine? Anyone who can afford gas isn’t gonna be out here, 30 miles from nowhere. Yet there it is.”

He threw another pebble. “4-zip! Eat it!”

“I think Chumster is tryna work his nerve up to break a window, but he’d rather the owner turn up and scare him off. He doesn’t look like he’s stolen a thing in his life. 4-2.”

“He does look like a Chum, that’s a good nickname.”

“He couldn’t steal trash from a dumpster, Chumster,” PK continued. She rooted around in her pack, took out a Camelbak, and swallowed two large gulps of metally water.

“Can I have some?”

“Sure, but it’s not great.” She handed the bottle to Shad. When you’ve been friends a long time, it gets impractical to worry about germs. He gutshots some lukewarm water.

“Thanks, I’m already out. I’ll need to buy more water when we get to the conference.”

“If this shuttle ever gets here.” PK dragged her sneaker² in the powdery dust, uncovered another pebble, picked it up, and threw it with such velocity it whizzed past the wooden beam and almost made contact with Chum’s thick left thigh. “Still 4-2. Wanna play to 5?”

“It’s starting to creep me out how Chumboy won’t even look at us. I mean, we’re right here. You nearly plugged him with a rock.”

“Let’s go ask him if he needs help with any crimes.”

“Oh, jizz!” Shad exclaimed out of nowhere. “I’ve gotta good idear for a game.”

She laughed despite herself. “You kiss your kid with that mouth?”

“I keep Gar far, far away from all potential jizz factories. Anyway, back to the game. It’s a twist on the group hypnosis experiments we did at the lab. Remember those?”

² (it’s a dressy sneaker.)

*“we’ve got a ton of the twist
but we’re fresh out of shout.
lEt’s PLAy a NEw gAme
but you’re freaking me out.”³”*

“Damn, I always forget you can actually sing.”

“I remember someone humping an armchair. That was about as weird as it got, with my group.”

“This round will be just us. It’ll figure out what’s going on in that man’s head, and what’s inside the truck. This is a game with the fourth dimension.”

Somewhere not far away, the Yamara river slid by. And beyond the river, the mountains crumbled very, very slowly.

“Ohoe! 4-3, suck it Shad.”

“Yeah,” Shad said to his friend, and he waited. He knew impatience was a virtue of hers.

She tossed another pebble and missed the wooden beam by a good five feet. “Ok, fine!” She said. “I’m game, but I don’t know anything about the fourth dimension.”

“That’s even better, actually. We’ll use an idear model.”

*
**

On a small brown sign near their bench:

THIS WETLAND BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE GOVERNMENT. SAY THANK YOU
(donation box below)

Behind the sign, a pile of car tires abandoned like notes in a scale never perfected. Allegedly, the Yamara was just beyond that sign.

They sat on the bench. There was a sickly elm tree, some shade, and a convention of magpies. Or, Shad sat on the bench; PK sat cross-legged on the ground. He had bad knees; and she had an affinity for dirt.

“We’re not gonna miss the shuttle?”

³ This is lifted from LCD Soundsystem’s “New York I Love You, But You’re Bringing Me Down.” That’s the tune.

“It’s not due for another hour. We have time.”

“Jizzus! Good thing we’re together. So pray tell, Shad, how does one play *in the fourth dimension*.”

“First we’re gonna meditate and both go into a hypnotic state. Then we’ll use analogies to construct a kind of tunnel into the fourth dimension. And, we’ll construct a superstructure made from both our collective consciousness.”

“Cool.” said PK. Somewhere, a cicada screamed.

“The superstructure is, like, sentient, but it’s impossible to predict what form it’ll take. When I did this with Goonch from the lab, our superstructure was a fish.”

Before she would be able to meditate, she had to ask. “Is this dangerous? Messing with dimensional physics seems a teensy bit spooky. Even just to run group hypnosis experiments, we had to cycle every subject through a buttload of paperwork, and a couple people opted out at the last second.”

Shad straightened out his bucket hat. Out in the parking lot, Chumster had finally taken a rest. He sat in the sliver of shade provided by the Ford, panting like a sheepdog.

“Yeah, it’s dangerous.” Shad admitted. “Your biggest enemy is always yourself. And we’ll be going deep into the psyche.”

“Cool.” Said PK. They shared a few more gulps of water. The sun was still as a dead fly. There was no sign of the shuttle. PK takes off her LEGAL OBSERVER cap, flips it around, and puts it on backwards. “Ok, I’m ready.”

*
**

You are waking up from a nap. Do you know where you are?

Do I?

Look around. Where are you?

I’m staring up at the ceiling tiles, the dusty gridded kind you can remove with just a push, if only you could reach. That’s the kind they always seem to have in elementary schools.

You hear a soft sound, like a moth encountering a bell.

I am so sleepy and so comfortable. There's the smell of blue plastic mats, that must be what I'm lying on. The ones we get for naptime. I can feel the stiff plastic underneath my spine, it's nothing like a bed, but strangely supportive.

A moth encountering a bell.

My eyes are gunky with sleep. I roll them around like a magic 8 ball.

If a moth encounters a bell?

The bell vibrates.

Ok, what does this moth look like?

It's a luna moth.

Huge, graceful, powdery, mysterious?

Yes. And green.

Graceful, green, mysterious.

And huge.

There's a huge green cube in front of you.

Mysterious.

How many dimensions does its shadow have?

...

Two.

If the green moth cast a shadow, how many dimensions would it have?

Two.

If you flattened the moth into a line, could it fly?

No.

Why not?

A line is one dimension. It'd be unable to move side to side, or up or down.

So a dimension is a direction in which an object can move.

I'm inhaling, holding, exhaling, holding, like I'm swimming.

Back to the cube. Now it has four dimensions, a hypercube. How many dimensions is its shadow?

...

...

...

Three.

Look at the hypercube. What do you see?

I'm inhaling, looking into the hypercube. Exhaling, I am inside the hypercube.

I am within lines on every side, like I walked inside a giant spider's web. And sitting in the middle, still on the bench, is Shad. But something is different. His face is smoother, sexless, and he's a little skinnier. His hair is unruly, young people's hair.

He's ten years younger, the age we first met. Before he transitioned, and he was still going as Shay.

"PK! You made it! In record time, too. I'm glad to see you. I wonder if being friends made it easier for you to follow the clues I gave."

I'm a little dizzy. "Where are we?"

"Where do you think we are?"

“You look younger.”

Shad grins. “So do you.”

Just like in a dream, our surroundings are insubstantial, but I know where we are.

“We’re seeing each other as we did ten years ago.”

“Yes, and watch this.”

Shad squeezes his eyes shut like he’s about to shart,⁴ and a black beard sprouts from his face. It grows right in front of my eyes, like a stop-motion animation, waving like sea grass.

“This is me ten years from the present. I love hormones.” He says. “Once I finally got on T⁵ there’s no end to my hair.”

I touch my own face. I guess I’m older, too, but I feel the same.

“I feel the same.”

“Exactly! Your consciousness is the same. Everything is happening now. I’m simultaneously young and old. So are you. The only resolute is your awareness.”

Behind Shad, a dark shape forms. There’s no light here, nor is there a lack of light: but the shape is dark. It vibrates, and beats waves all throughout the thin lines that surround us. The whole system shakes.

“The fourth dimension must be time.”

“Bingo bango.”

I look again at the dark shape looming behind Shad. It bobs into definition, then back out, like a ship bobbing on a wave.

“Is that a giant fucking bat?”

“Bongo.” Shad grins again. “That’s our ride.”

⁴ Shit/fart his pants. Unsure if this is common vernacular

⁵ Testosterone

*
**

From our bat's eye view, Chumster's bald spot beckons like a pink helicopter pad. I'm clinging to the furry neckfolds of a giant fucking bat, rocked back and forth by its slow-beating wings.

Shad is right behind me, arms circled around my back like we're on a motorcycle.⁶ He says in my ear, "There's one thing we need to discuss before we go down," Shad says. "Observation of the system will change the system."

"You mean, Chumster's gonna know we're observing him."

"Yup. Just like how I became younger when you showed up inside the hypercube. Because you still carry that memory, of how I was when we first met."

"Well, what's he gonna do?"

"It's more like we're gonna become vulnerable to him. We'll become a part of his system, and we won't have any secrets from him."

"Jizzum. But he's a stranger. He didn't consent to sharing secrets."

"Right. How far we go is actually up to him. We'll approach him, and utilize our superstructure. Be polite, and all that. The outcome of the exchange is up to him."

"By superstructure, do you mean giant fucking bat?"

"Yup." Shad reaches around and gives the bat a good scrunch between its hairless ears. It screams and beats its wings faster and the silvery lines defining the fourth dimension slide around like beads on an abacus. "It likes scrunches," he says.

"You know so much more about this than I do," I admit.

"I did *so much* acid in my 20s."

⁶ Unhelpful, because I'm terrified of motorcycles.

“I see your point. But acid doesn’t actually germinate new ideas. More like, it rearranges them, brings repressed things forward, puts old worries away, like cooking on all four burners.”

“Up to a point. We had to meditate to get here, see? That’s analogous to the acid, being open. But the superstructure, that’s the joining of our two consciousnesses. Through this exchange, we actually will encounter ideas we never would have alone. Like seeing into that Ford, for example.”

“Our combined consciousness is a horrifying monster.”

Shad laughs. “Isn’t intimacy always horrifying?”

“You’re right, all right. Let’s get this over with.”

“Press your palm against the bat’s head.”

I do it. I press my palm into the bat’s head. It shivers once, then it circles and dives, straight into Chumster’s head.

*
**

PK and Shad sat in the shade of the elm. Shad sat on the bench. PK sat on the ground.

She blinked sleepily. Had she just fallen asleep? Her groin ached like she’d just ridden a horse, or something. Somehow, the sun was a fixed monolith, unmoving. Her mind felt sunstruck, unable to rouse itself.

Chumster was up and ambling towards them. His salmon-pink shirt was damp under the pits.

Shad elbowed her knowingly. “He’s about to tell us.”

“Oh?” She said. Tell us what?

Chumster stopped about ten feet in front of them. His eyes were small as buttons, overhung by slabby eyebrows, and his pink lips were thin and bitten. It was hard to imagine any loving from those lips; but even crocodiles have mates.

He seemed unsure of how to address the pair of them: the trans man, sitting properly on the bench; and the messy woman, blinking sleepily, sitting in the dust on the ground.

PK remembered she had a hat on and flipped it around, so that the brim shielded her eyes again. That helped.

“Whale, I seen ya’ll waiting here for quite a while, thought I should letcha know,” he said. “I’m not usual-lee one to get involved in folks’ business, but I was settin’ there and I seen ya’ll settin’ and it just seemed right that I letcha know.”

Chumster was missing one of his top canines.

“The thing is, I’m in the same boat as ya’ll.”

He wasn’t stealing at all. He just locked his keys inside his truck. PK remembered suddenly.

“I locked my keys inside my truck.” He said sheepishly.

“Oh, what a bummer,” said Shad sympathetically. “A nice gas-powered vehicle like that.”

Chumster took the bait. He was warming up to them. “Yessir,” said Chumster, and Shad beamed, “it’s a 2005 good ol’ fashioned American Ford and it Still Runs On Gasoline, yessir it does, I started hoarding gasoline way before anybody. Can’t break a window and get my keys, cause I won’t be able to fix it.”

“How’d you lock it without keys?” PK broke in.

“Oh, whale.” Chumster looks up at the sun, straight on without blinking, like his words are beamed into his head from on high.

“I stopped here to have a smoke, smoke a’ dope, doncha know, I still gotta friend who grows it in a bathtub, makes a man grateful to be livin in community, gots friends like that. Anyway, I’m smokin and I get to thinkin, man, oh boy, it’d be nice to have a Pepsi right about now, I’ll drink it warm I don’t care. So I’m digging around in my trunk and I get so loopy I set my keys down inside and I slam it shut. Soree, I’m talkin yer ear off. I came over to letcha know, the bus ain’t coming.”

“Oshit,” said PK, and she sat up straight. “No bus?”

“Yep. ‘Fraid so. It’s Sunday and they cut those services forever ago. If you needa get somewheres, yer gonna have to take another route. But I came over to offer ya’ll a deal.”

“Oh?” Said Shad. Somehow, he sounded sarcastic, like he already knew what was going to happen.

“Yep. I used to be a dope dealer myself. I like making deals with people. Haven’t gone to the trouble in a long time, but something just came over me.”

“Well, if it’s a ride, we’ll take it. We gotta get to a conference.” Said PK.

“Conference?” said Chumster, and he suddenly sounded suspicious.

“Yeah, we co-authored a paper, and we’re giving a talk about it in the city. A bunch of other scientists are gonna be there, from all across the country. In fact, we’re probably very late,” said Shad.

“Is that so.”

“The paper’s called *Things Aren’t So Easy With Noodles for Brains*,” PK added. “In it, we compare organizing spaghetti-bowl-style, where every discrete subject has a lot of randomized interaction with every other subject, vs organizing hub-and-node style, where each subject interacts only with its neighbors, and with a central hub. Basically, we found that hub-and-node tends to be a lot more efficient.”

“What it means in layman’s terms is that people will trust pretty much anything their friends trust, do anything their friends do.”

“Well, I coulda toldja that,” said Chumster irritably. “I started in on dope cuz my friend Tuna grew it, right in his bathtub, like I toldja. This is why no’one cares much for *scientists*. None offense, of course. I’ll still give ya a ride, on one condition.”

“Sure,” said PK.

“Course,” said Shad.

“You don’t even know what I want yet,” said Chumster, looking uncomfortable, but committed, like he had a fishing hook tugging his heart.

“We only got one thing to give,” said Shad, “and that’s our talk. Who knows, you might get something out of it.”

“Fine, you can tell me about it on the way.” Said Chumster. “Can ya hear the Yamara from here?”

They couldn’t.

“Whale,” said Chumster, “That’s scientists for ya, can’t hear what’s right in front of ya. But I gotta fishing boat hidden down on the bank, just a short walk from here. We can take it downstream, all the way to the city. I’m goin that way too, or I wouldn’t offer. Sound good?”

It sounded great. They followed him, past the small brown sign, down to the bank, where the brown Yamara slugged, and sure enough, among the trash and algae was a wooden rowboat.

They climbed in.

Shad whispered in PK’s ear, “would you wanna try playing in the fourth dimension with *three* people? I have no idea what form the superstructure would take.”

PK said to Chumster, “How long will it take to get to the city?”

“At least an hour,” he said.

“Oh, we’ve got plenty of time,” she said. “I’ve got an idea. Let’s play a game.”

