

Freefall

A Duskland Tale by Andrew T.S. Bedgood

Day 1—Tuesday:

He was sitting just ten feet away from me; his eyes glared in their condescending way—the same way every shrink stares at a patient. This was my third visit, and each time his glare seemed to be more oppressive—like he knew, knew he was better than me. I had to take it, though; I hadn't had a good night's sleep in weeks and he promised to help me.

Those dreams... unlike anything I thought my mind could conjure were tormenting me and there wasn't a thing I could do about it. I saw a hypnotist once before I came to Dr. Taggart—once was all he'd see me after the incident in his office. I remember when he snapped me out of it; I awoke on the floor with an upturned desk and a shattered lamp at my feet. He said that there was nothing he could do for me, recommended I schedule an appointment with Dr. Taggart, and then charged me for damages on top of my session. Prick.

Each session started the same way—in silence. He just stared at me, his eyes dull and apathetic. It had been five minutes and the only sound in the room was the Naugahyde chair squeaking beneath me and the white noise machine. I broke the silence. "Is the glaring supposed to help the dreams go away, or are you just hoping to put as little effort into your 'hour' for my money?"

"I can understand your frustration, Tom, but these things take time," he said to me. His voice had that same, pseudo-comforting monotone I had come to know over the past two sessions. "You shouldn't rely on me to break the silence; you're coming to me to talk. So, talk."

"There's nothing new to tell!" my frustration was apparent in my tone. "It's the same dream leading to the same sleepless nights."

"The same dream? There's nothing ever different about it?"

"No, it's the same dream. I close my eyes for ten minutes, tops, and I find myself atop a large building. I don't know, maybe the sky is a bit different, maybe it's windier—small details; nothing I'd really ever notice. And then, I fall."

"The dream hasn't changed; it's the same one I told you in our first session, and it's the same one I'll tell you in our next session if I ever come back."

He stared at me in silence—maybe worried by the thought of my not returning. No patient, no money. Then, he spoke, "Okay, well, if you don't want to continue, there's nothing I can do to stop you. I would like you to keep coming back because I feel that additional sessions could yield some true progress, but I can understand why you wouldn't want to. You like immediate results; most people do."

"So, here's what I'm going to do for you: I'm going to write you a prescription. It's not medicine, don't worry; I don't much care for pawning people's problems off on drugs as the cure. It's a prescription for a CD; you should find it in the 'Easy Listening' section at the bookstore just down the street from here."

"Yeah? And how much is this going to cost me?"

"Just ask for the manager, Sherry, and show her this prescription," he yanked the paper from his pad and handed it to me. "She'll find it for you, and it will be charged to my account. So, it won't cost you anything."

"Charged to your account? What's the catch?"

"No catch," he said as he stood and extended his arm toward me with an open hand; I shook it. "Pleasant dreams, Tom."

I left Dr. Taggart's office and walked down to the bookstore. It was a little over a block away and it was nice outside; the sun was working its way down for the night and the mid afternoon traffic was abnormally absent. *The fresh air might do me good*, I thought.

I opened the door and was greeted by the inviting scent of coffee and chocolate. The bookstore was dimly lit and quiet; a few hushed chuckles rose above the shelves in the "Humor" and "Games" aisles, but it was just as calm, albeit artificial, in the bookstore as it was outside.

I walked to the man standing behind the cash register and told him that I was looking for Sherry. He picked up the phone beside him and paged the manager before letting me know that it may be a few minutes before she was available. I waited.

Just over five minutes later, I was still standing at the customer service desk as a larger woman approached me; she was wearing a nametag that read "Sherry: Mngr," and a big smile. "Hello, Mr. Larsson; Dr. Taggart had told me you were coming," she extended her hand toward me with that declaration. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, well, Dr. Taggart told me to give this to you," I handed her the prescription. "He said you have a CD that might help me sleep."

"Of course, Mr. Larsson; right this way."

She led me near the back of the store where all the digital entertainment goods were kept. It was sectioned off from the rest of the store's merchandise and divided into three main sections: "Audio," "Film," and "Games." About halfway down the "Easy Listening" subsection of the Audio section, Sherry kneeled down and picked up a rather unspectacular looking CD with a plain off-white cover that simply read "Lucidity."

"This is it," she stated assuming I hadn't already figured that out with her showing it to me.

"Thanks," I said as I reached for the disc, "Dr. Taggart said this was going to be charged to his account—he did let you know that, right?"

She nodded in response before continuing with a crooked smirk, "I'm still going to have to ring it up, though."

Night 1—Tuesday:

I went back to the office after my appointment with Dr. Taggart and my brief run to the bookstore. I worked as a tester for a local startup company that developed applications for smart phones—mostly practical office applications that were compatible with desktop programs as free alternatives to first-party software. We weren't exactly making money off those applications, so we recently decided to look into mobile game development. Our biggest money maker was an ad-supported, physics-based racing game; the revenue from that was the only reason our office remained open.

I stayed at the office a couple hours later to catch up on lost time, so I didn't get home until around 7PM. I lived alone and didn't really have much of a social life outside of work—never really got into the bar scene and most people my age tended to spend their nights out either partying or studying. I enjoyed the solitude; even if I couldn't sleep, I could still relax.

I spent the remaining hours of my evening reclined in my living room catching up on some of my favorite shows, and decided around 11PM that I'd see if my "prescription" worked. I inserted the disc in the CD player that sat beside my bed and pressed the "play" button after situating myself comfortably under my blankets.

The disc began with the hypnotic, lulling sounds of waves softly crashing against a beach. I closed my eyes and began to picture the scene: The sun was a vibrant orange as it just peaked above the horizon. The clouds in the sky looked like reflections of the white-capped waves before me. The golden sand beneath my feet was warm from a day's worth of heat from the still-setting sun. With each breath, I could smell the refreshing saltwater air. With each breath, it became harder to open my eyes.

With each breath, I began to drift deeper into my fantasy. With each breath, I began to sleep. With each breath...

I inhaled one last deep breath and the world around me began to shift and drip like wet paint on a canvas beneath the artful strokes of a master. The sandy beach stretched out beyond my line of sight and each grain melded with the next to form pavement beneath my feet. The waves out on the ocean began to stand up and harden as crude monoliths before their outer shells cracked open to reveal towering skyscrapers hidden underneath; the remnants that came crashing to the ground became cars and people that hurried about as if they had purposes.

I was asleep in a scene that was all too familiar to me—a scene that painted itself before me in a way I had never seen before. I was asleep and I *knew* I was dreaming; I felt comfort in that thought. I looked around at the world in which I found myself and observed it very carefully. I tried to pick up on the small details I never noticed before with the hope that maybe I would find something relevant.

I stood under the green awning of a hotel on the corner of Washington and 3rd. I scanned the area surrounding me to see if anything looked familiar beyond the confines of my recurring fantasy. I saw the building where my office was located about three blocks south—or what I assumed to be south due to the increasing street numbers—of where I was standing. I walked toward it.

As I made my way toward my office, I kept searching busily for the building—the one I fell from every night. Despite the broken logic of dreams, I knew there had to be a reason I found myself on that ledge every night. I knew there was a reason I fell.

I closed my eyes to escape from the distractions of the busy world around me and tried to remember. The building was tall—taller than any other around it. I was lost in a world of imagined skyscrapers and I was looking for a tall building. *Lovely*, I thought.

I took a deep breath and looked to the sky; it was grey. There was no sun and the wind started to blow heavily as rain began to fall. *This is new*, I mused. *I don't remember rain*. I looked back down at the buildings before me and continued to search for the one that kept me from dreaming.

I decided to focus on the tallest building I could find. It was obscured by all the other city structures standing around me, so I couldn't clearly tell if it was the building I was searching for. Each step, though, moved the building more clearly into view. When I arrived at my office building, there was no doubt that the towering structure on which my eyes were fixed was the same damn building I fell from dozens of times before.

The sudden crack of thunder woke me from my dream's novel alteration. The clock beside me read "12:17." I had been asleep for more than an hour, which was an improvement, but I'm sure it could have been even better without *Lucidity*'s soothing sounds of thunder.

Day 2—Wednesday:

I lay in bed with my eyes closed for what felt like an eternity after that. I couldn't sleep. I even started the cursed CD over and I still couldn't sleep. My mind was at odds with my body and after—*Five minutes? It's only been five minutes?* I decided it was time to occupy myself with something other than darkness and *Lucidity*.

I walked out to my living room and collapsed on the couch. The television remote was still on the armrest, *Convenient*. There was little more than nothing on television, however, and I quickly found myself switching between "Paid Programming" and dead air. The thought of getting up and popping in a movie more than once made its way to my mind, but I was tired and that sounded like too much work.

I decided to finally settle for the hypnotic sounds of static—at least until they motivated me to put in something actually worth watching. The room was illuminated as the television flickered with dancing digital “snow”; I couldn’t take my eyes off of it.

With my eyes locked on the television, I could feel my breathing slow. I could hear the sound of static growing softer. I could see the light of the television growing dimmer. The room around me was swallowed in darkness and, for a moment, the world stopped—but only for a moment.

I inhaled deeply and let out a sigh as I opened my eyes again to be greeted by the flashing lights of indecisive pixels. The sound of static still accompanied the luminous visual noise on screen.

I sat up and rested my head in my hands for a few seconds while the television carried on about its business in the background. I was running on empty and there wasn’t a thing I could do to get back to sleep.

I sighed heavily and reaffixed my gaze to the television. A woman looked back at me; her stare was intense but comforting.

I stood and walked toward the television as she extended her arm beyond the screen. I knelt down in front of her, completely oblivious that I was no longer in my living room; she bent down and whispered in my ear, “You are dreaming. You can fly.”

Night 1—Tuesday:

The woman from the television was kneeling in front of me with her mouth just inches away from my ear; she kept repeating, “You are dreaming. You can fly.” Her words were hypnotizing and I could feel myself drifting into a fantasy. I felt a strong gust of wind and my stomach drop in the same way it does when a plane takes off—I felt as though I was truly flying. The world around me began to sink out of sight, yet I remained on solid ground. I looked around and could see nothing other than the blue sky which seemed to be swallowing me.

The ground beneath me came to a sudden end just fifteen feet away from where I was kneeling. I knew where I was—atop the building. She had brought me back to the vision in which I had found myself earlier—the dream which had become so familiar to me. I knew what this was—I knew what her words meant.

I stood, and, as I stood, her words kept repeating in my mind, “You are dreaming. You can fly.” Over and over, she spoke; her words seemed to grow louder with each repetition. I walked forward; with each step, her voice grew louder. I peered over the edge of the building to see that the world below appeared so seemingly insignificant from that incredible height; her words still grew louder. As I stood staring at the familiar world around me, she was no longer just speaking to me. No, she was shouting.

A thousand feet below me was the abrupt awakening that ruined fifty nights’ rests. I had always been terrified of heights and my recurring nightmare did nothing to help that phobia. I stood at the edge of that building dozens of times before paralyzed in my fear, but this time was different. Though the voice of the woman was unpleasantly loud, it was comforting. I knew where I was. I knew that this world was one of my own making. I was in control.

Slowly, her words became my words—her voice, my voice. The world quieted and soon all I could hear was my inner voice telling me, *I am dreaming. I can fly. I can fly.*

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I could feel a confidence that was absent when I had found myself in this very position. *Tonight, I thought, I will not fall. Tonight, I will fly.* I extended my leg over the edge and

Day 2—Wednesday:

My alarm sounded with a jarring intensity. I looked over at the clock which had an illuminated “7:15” on its face. I sighed softly at the thought of not overcoming my nightmare, but this was the first good sleep I had in weeks. I kicked off my blankets and rolled out of bed to prepare for work.

Despite actually getting a decent night’s rest, I felt groggier than usual in as I stood from my bed. Sleep had become a foreign concept to my body and the hours of inactivity I had subjected it to were taking their toll on me. I didn’t mind, though—I would surely feel better as the day progressed, not lost in a lethargic state of existence as I had been for more than a month.

I shuffled lazily to the bathroom and stared into the soulless eyes of my reflection—they looked as tired as I felt. *Oh, if only it were Saturday*, I mused. I managed to pull my toothbrush from the cup inside my medicine cabinet; I brushed my teeth as I disrobed and stepped into the shower.

I arrived at the office at 8:53—seven minutes early, technically, but late by everyone else’s standards.

I walked to the kitchen, which was to the right of the entrance, for a cup of coffee. Alice, one of the programmers who recently took up the mantle of sound designer when we started working on mobile games, was standing next to the coffee maker. “Spend the night in Hell?” she asked.

“Just didn’t have time to put on my makeup,” I joked as I reached for the coffee pot. “What does Matt have you working on today?”

Matt Butler owned the company. “Ambitious, but reckless and ignorant” is how he is best described. He came into some money and started the business without any real plan to speak of; it was only through his failures and the advice of his employees that he was able to recoup some of the losses incurred.

“Squashing bugs,” she replied. “You?”

“I’ve been keeping busy building a prototype for another game—it’s about time we moved onto something new. I may have some sound work for you if you get too bored with debugging.”

“Could be a nice distraction; let me know what you want.”

“Will do.”

I nodded at her as I walked toward my workstation at the back of the office. Matt was sitting in my chair with his eyes fixed on my monitor. I set my coffee on the desk in front of him, but his eyes remained fixed.

“What’s this?” he asked with his hand outstretched while moving his arm in a circular motion to encompass the entire screen?

I peered over his shoulder and snidely quipped, “Looks like code.”

He cocked his head and finally broke his gaze with my jesting remark. “Thank you,” he stated in an equally sarcastic tone. “What’s the code for?”

“I’m working on a prototype for a new game—I sent you an email.”

“When?” Before I could respond, he interjected, “I haven’t checked my email. Why aren’t you working on updates for that racing game—expansions and whatever the hell it is people put in updates for mobile games?”

“Well, *Mudd-Runn* has pretty much run its course—it’s been buried by new software on the marketplace and downloads are down to a fraction of what we launched at. Focusing resources on additional content wouldn’t be ‘fiscally responsible’ at this time. We need to introduce a new product to see if we can get some more money flowing through here—I explained this in my email.”

He stared at me for a few moments—an obvious displeasure with my condescending tone was written on his face. “Well, I wish you would have told me—when will you have something to show us?”

“This afternoon,” I lied, but I knew he wouldn’t organize a meeting until Friday at the earliest—the lie promoted an image of efficiency.

He pulled out his phone and scrolled through his calendar before responding. “I’m going to be out of the office most of the day tomorrow,” he paused. “I’ll set up a meeting for Friday before noon.”

“Sounds good.” I pointed at my chair, “Mind if I...?”

He stood up at the gesture and gave me a nod as he walked away. I sighed and sat down.

I stared at the code on my display for several minutes while I sipped on my coffee. Black—was never fond of sweetener in my coffee. Hot and bitter. It helped me think. The code, to someone unfamiliar, would seem like a broken string of random, imaginary words—to me, they were building blocks. I was creating something; my fingers on the keyboard breathed life into the dust of my imagination with the help of those strings of random, imaginary words.

I set down my cup and placed my hands on the keyboard—this was my domain, a world of my own making. I was in control.

My fingers clacked against the keys as I translated my idea to code—a long, tedious process, but one that always felt rewarding in the end. I paused infrequently only to build the program to see if all the components were working together nicely—they weren’t.

The visual assets I was using were leftovers from *Mudd-Runn*, the poorly named physics-based racer to which I owed my current employment. Alice was the one who suggested we switch to mobile game development, which turned out to be a smart move. Despite breathing new life into the company and saving it from collapse, her idea didn’t benefit her in any way—more work at the same pay. She loved her job, though, so she didn’t mind.

I ran the code again. A crude collage of images not intended for my prototype filled the display of my phone. After a few minutes on the controls, it seemed that character navigation was finally working properly—one of many things I needed to get down for Friday’s presentation.

As I distracted myself with the early prototype running on my phone, I heard a voice pull me back down to reality. “Hey, Tom, busy?”

I looked up to see Alice standing at the corner of my desk. “No, not really. Why?”

“Have any plans for lunch?”

I looked up at the clock on my monitor and was surprised to see it was already 12:17. “No—was just going to go grab some fast food or something. Why?”

“Want to grab some Chinese?”

I was always in the mood for Chinese; I nodded as I logged off of my workstation.

Alice sat across from me with a dish of lo mein in front of her. She twirled her fork in the noodles without looking as she started a conversation, “How are things with the therapist going?”

An odd conversation starter, I thought.

“Didn’t really seem to be going anywhere at first, but I think I’m actually making progress now,” I replied.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I mean, I still think the sessions are a waste of time... and money, but he introduced me to a CD that actually helped.”

“What, like a hypnosis CD?”

“No, just nature sounds and other crap—you know, the kind of CD you can pull from any easy listening or New Age aisle. Except this one actually worked.”

"My mom sent me some old cassettes of classical music and other nonsense that she used to play for me when I was a kid. They didn't help," I stopped. Her light brown eyes stared intently at my boring life's story—she seemed interested for some strange reason.

"I'm sorry; I must be boring you," I said politely, trying to see if her interest was merely a façade.

"No," she chuckled, "I don't really get good conversation these days—what with work and all."

"I can imagine. You must be busy with your double duty."

"I love it, but it's hell—let's just leave it at that."

"Fine by me."

We sat in silence for several minutes focusing more on our food than our company. I had spent the past fifty days unable to sleep—unable to focus. It's been hard to do anything, so any conversation I could start would mostly relate to work, something I'm sure she'd rather not discuss over lunch break. For several minutes I sat there hoping that she would just say something; instead, the only sounds I heard were the clanking of our silverware against the ceramic plates and the faint, melodic sounds of traditional music that fell from the overhead speakers.

Finally, she broke the silence, "You don't talk much, do you?"

I replied through a half-sincere smile, "I don't really have much to talk about."

"And you seemed to be doing so well before," she said sarcastically.

"Hey, now, I'm not the only one not talking here," I quipped back.

"Good point."

"Yeah, so, what about you? Other than dedicate your every waking breath to work, what do you do for fun?"

"Fun? I don't understand," she smiled a toothy grin before asking if I had the time.

My phone was resting on the table; I picked it up and illuminated the display. A crude collage of images filled the screen—leftover assets from *Mudd-Runn* I had repurposed for my prototype. I stared blankly at the screen for several moments trying to figure out why my prototype was running.

I terminated the program and was brought to my phone's home screen—the clock read "12:17." *That can't be right*, I thought as I shook the phone—hoping, for some reason, that would adjust the time on display to present. It didn't. I set the phone back down on my desk and pushed my chair over toward my monitor—my computer's clock agreed with my phone.

I looked up and saw Matt walking toward the office's exit as he pointed toward me and shouted, "I sent you an email—meeting at 10:30 Friday."

I waved in acknowledgment of his statement and opened up Outlook. His appointment invite was at the top of my inbox; I accepted the invitation, synced the date with my phone, and set a reminder.

I scrolled through my calendar to see if there were any other appointments I had scheduled in that I may have forgotten about. I discovered that I had an appointment with Dr. Taggart on Thursday that I forgot to cancel. *Maybe I should keep it*, I considered, *maybe something could actually come of the session now that I've had some sleep*.

When I finished checking my appointments, I logged out of my workstation; it was after noon and I was getting hungry. I unplugged the USB cable from my phone and pushed in my chair. I looked around the office as I walked toward the exit—it was empty. I concluded that they must all be out to lunch.

It was rare that the entire office would take their lunch at the same time, but it has happened in the past. Generally one or two people will take a later lunch so they can man the phones, but we never really received many calls and we all had voicemail in the event that a call was missed. I didn't feel bad about leaving the office empty; my stomach was beginning to growl and I had an overwhelming desire for Chinese.

As I exited the office, I couldn't shake the strange feeling that something wasn't right—like I had missed something. I walked to my car in a daze as Alice pulled into the office parking lot. She had a smile stretched across her face. I waved at her as she pulled up beside me and rolled down her window.

"Hey, Tom! Didn't get to catch you after work; I just wanted to let you know I had a good time at lunch yesterday. Thank you."

"Yeah, sorry," I replied. I was at a loss and she could clearly see the confusion on my face.

"Is something wrong, Tom?"

Stuttering, I tried to hide my confusion, "I think I forgot to send a file to Matt." I pulled out my phone and unlocked the screen. The time was still 12:17, but the clock let me know that it was now Thursday. I nearly dropped my phone.

Day 3—Thursday:

"Tom? Tom? Are you okay?" I could hear the concern in her voice

Still stuttering, I responded with another lie, "Yeah, I'm fine. Just got some strange news from back home, but everything's okay. How was lunch?"

"Good," she said with another smile, but I could tell it was forced—something in her eyes told me she knew I was lying. "Not as good as Chinese," she snickered, "but good."

"Yeah," I paused as I looked into her brown eyes staring back at me with an unexpected concern. It felt good. "We should get together again sometime. You, me, some dinner... maybe a movie."

"I'd like that. How about tonight?"

I paused to think. *This doesn't feel right. I'm missing a day—everything from lunch on... gone. I need to figure this out—figure out what happened.* I paused to make an excuse. "Well, I've got an appointment with my therapist tonight—I figure it would be good to check in with him now that I've gotten some sleep. Tomorrow should be good for me, though, if you're free, that is."

"Yeah, tomorrow works."

"Okay, cool. I'm off to lunch right now, but I'll catch you after work today so we can figure something out."

She nodded as she rolled up her window and pulled into a parking spot.

Night 3—Thursday:

My appointment was scheduled for half-past six, and I was running late. Again, I had lost myself in my work—if Alice hadn't snapped me out of my trance to remind me of our date tomorrow, I may have worked through my appointment altogether.

I was six minutes late when I pulled into the parking lot and it took me another three minutes or so to work my way to Dr. Taggart's office. His secretary informed me that I was late, a fact I was well aware of, and that the good doctor doesn't like tardy patients. I made up some excuse about traffic and an important business call—it wasn't really her business, so I didn't feel obligated to tell her the truth. I opened the door to find Dr. Taggart sitting at a desk shuffling through some papers and occasionally writing something down. Apparently he hadn't noticed I entered the room as he kept about his work until I seated myself across the desk from him and made myself known. "Hey, Doc, sorry I'm late. Been busy at work—I've got a prototype due tomorrow, so I've been really crunching to get it done."

He looked up at me, holding a sheet of paper lifelessly in his left hand. I could see smirk forming in the corner of his mouth. "No bother, I had some stuff I needed to get done myself. I'm glad you came, Tom."

"Yeah, I figured I should after that CD you suggested."

"*Lucidity*? How did it work?"

"Great! First solid night's rest I've had in ages. It almost feels weird to get some sleep now, and I can hardly believe that all I needed was an easy listening CD," I chuckled.

Dr. Taggart set down the paper he was holding and pulled out a notepad. He flipped through a few pages and pulled the cap off of his pen. "Tell me, Tom, when you slept, was it the same dream you've been having, or was it a new one?"

I remembered everything from my dream. The way the world shifted around me: the beach transforming into a cityscape, the rain, and the woman—the woman who stepped from the television to tell me I could fly. It was the same idea, the same city, the same building I found myself atop every night, but the way I got there, the weather... it was all different.

"It was raining in my dream. I remember it vividly. It never rained before. But the way I got there, in the city, it was like the city came to me; it formed itself around me. It was bizarre and I was totally aware that it was happening."

"You were aware that you were dreaming?"

"I don't know if I was thinking, 'Hey, this must be a dream,' because I didn't really question the world changing around me... but I knew where I was—in a dream."

"Tell me about the rain."

"I don't know what really to tell about it. Is the rain significant?"

"Well, you remember the rain; that must mean something."

"Okay, well, when I first closed my eyes, I was standing on a beach... and then the city came and it started to rain. I woke up when I heard a clap of thunder and *Lucidity* was still playing... and it was on a track that was storm sounds. You know, rain and thunder."

"Well, after that, I went downstairs to watch a movie, but the static of the television was alluring and before I knew it, a woman was approaching me from within the television. Then I was atop the same building I had been on every night before. The woman whispered in my ear, 'You are dreaming. You can fly.'"

"And did you?" Dr. Taggart asked as he scribbled down notes on my story.

"No, I fought with myself to gain the courage to make it to the edge, and when I finally convinced myself to make the leap, my alarm went off."

"Nevertheless, it sounds like you're making some serious progress."

"Do you think I should?"

"Should what?"

"Take the jump? Fly?"

"Well, in past sessions, you've told me you don't know how you end up on top of the building, and you've always said it ends the same way: you fall. I don't know if the mystery of how you get on that building has been solved yet, but that fear of falling—being helpless of the outcome—I think that's something you can take control of now. When you get up there at the peak and you're telling yourself that you can do it—that you *can* fly... when you take that leap, I think that's when you might be able to move on from this nightmare."

"If it doesn't work?"

"Well, your problem might be rooted elsewhere, and we'll cross that bridge when we get there. Until then, become the master of your dream. Don't fall when you can fly."

“I hope you’re right.” I paused briefly as I thought about the time I had lost—the day that went missing. *Maybe it has to do with my condition—my lack of sleep. Maybe I should mention it to the doc.* I mused about it briefly as he stared at me intently, examining the worried expression on my face.

“Is there something else that’s bothering you, Tom?”

“Yeah, something weird happened the other day,” I paused for a moment as my head began to pound. I must have grimaced.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah... just an unexpected headache.” I closed my eyes and slowly massaged my head. The pain was profound. Tighter—tighter I closed my eyes hoping that the darkness would ease away the pounding.

I opened my eyes. A crude collage of images filled the screen of my phone—leftover assets from *Mudd-Runn* I had repurposed for my prototype. I stared blankly at the screen for several moments trying to figure out why my prototype was running.

“Did you get lost, Tom?” Alice asked.

I looked up... lost and confused. *This isn’t right*, I thought.

Alice smiled at me before asking once more, “The time, Tom?”

I looked down at my phone and closed the prototype. I was brought to the home screen. The illuminated display informed me that it was nearly one in the afternoon. On Wednesday.

Day 2—Wednesday:

“It’s almost one,” I said as I set my phone down beside my nearly empty plate of chicken lo mein.

“We should probably head back to the office,” Alice said as she raised her hand for the check.

“I’ll get it,” I said, motioning her to put her hand down. Our server approached the table holding the bill and two fortune cookies; Alice grabbed hers and cracked it open almost immediately. I handed the woman my credit card.

She unfolded her fortune as she popped half of the cookie into her mouth. “Take a break—enjoy the company of friends.’ That’s hardly a fortune,” she said as she finished the other half of her cookie.

“Fortune? No. But, good advice,” I shot her a smile. She knew she worked too hard, but she was passionate about what she did. She didn’t love the company, but she loved her job; more than anything, though, she just wanted to succeed. I didn’t know much about her past or her family, but everything I’ve learned from her indicated that she distanced herself from them to prove that she could make it on her own.

“What does yours say?”

I picked my fortune cookie up from the table and opened it. “Strange opportunities are coming your way. Take the leap!”

“See, that’s a fortune!”

“Can’t deny that. I wonder what kind of strange opportunities I have waiting for me.”

“Only time will tell.”

Our waitress returned with my card and receipt; I smiled at her as she handed them to me. As she walked away, I pushed away from the table, reached for Alice’s hand as I motioned toward the door with the other, and said, “Shall we?”

When we got to the office, I sat down at my desk and connected my phone to my workstation. The screen lit up and signaled to me that it was connected. I launched my prototype. I looked over at the large display to make sure that it was up for everybody to see. Everything seemed to be running like it was supposed to. I turned around and saw that everybody was there for the meeting.

Day 4—Friday:

All eyes were on me as everybody waited eagerly to see what I had dreamed up for our successor to *Mudd-Runn*. There were only four of us in the company: Matt, the owner; Alice, the programmer who did sound design work on the side; Terrance, our graphic designer; and me, the other programmer. We had a bit of success with *Mudd-Runn* when it was suggested that our company develop mobile games, but customers had grown tired of our first title and we desperately needed something new to keep us afloat and maybe even allow us to turn a profit.

“So, what do you have to show us?” Matt asked with a bored expression on his face and his phone in hand.

“Well,” I explained, “I’m sure you’re all aware that downloads for our first game are down drastically from where they used to be when we first launched. There’s nothing we can really do about that because we’re in a crowded market that gets more and more crowded every day. We’ve tried to keep *Mudd-Runn* alive for a few months now and while we’ve seen some spikes in downloads here and there, it’s pretty apparent that the game is, for all intents and purposes, dead.

“Instead of trying to breathe life into the corpse of our last project, I think it’s time we move on to something new—something more exciting and innovative.”

The game was running a demo on the screen behind me as I spoke. I touched the screen of my phone and was brought to the game’s menu. I started up a new game and moved my character around on the screen. There wasn’t much in the way of animation, but the new, albeit crude, sprites and environments that Terrance had sent me looked much better than the assets I was reusing from *Mudd-Runn*.

“What’s the point of the game?” Matt asked.

“To get to the end of the level,” I quipped. He didn’t appear amused.

“We still have the physics engine from our last game,” I continued, “and it doesn’t make much sense to let that go to waste. So, I’ve tweaked it a little so it can be used in this prototype. It’s a physics-based puzzle platformer. Each level will present players with a unique challenge centering on environmental attributes. Gravity, destructible environments, water, ice, and so forth. We’ll slowly ease players into these unique challenges and gradually combine environments in different ways to make the game fresh and interesting all the way through.”

With his eyes on his phone and completely oblivious to my presentation, Matt asked, “What are you thinking for longevity?”

“Well, there’s a lot we can do with the initial release... and this is something that can be easily expanded in the future. We can introduce new environments with different gravities and surfaces with different frictions and so forth. Since we’re going to be combining the challenges, we don’t need to have all the possibilities available right at launch.”

“Sounds good to me,” Matt concluded in a disinterested monotone.

“I like it,” Alice chimed excitedly. Terrance nodded in agreement.

“Okay, then. I want you all to focus exclusively on this new game,” Matt said decisively. “Everything we have planned for *Mudd-Runn* is to be put on indefinite hold.”

It felt good to have such a positive reaction toward my idea. I still felt like it was nowhere near ready to present for that meeting, but with everybody working on it, production on the game would go much smoother.

Everybody rose from their seats and made their way out of the conference room. I nodded at them gratefully.

Alice was the last to leave; she stopped in front of me. "We still on for tonight?" She asked.

"Absolutely," I responded.

"Good. I'm looking forward to it," she said as she exited the room.

I turned toward the screen and pressed the power button. The screen went dark. Blackness. My eyes tightly clenched shut, the headache began to subside. I opened my eyes.

Dr. Taggart sat across from me; a genuine concern was painted on his face. "Are you sure you're okay, Tom?"

Night 3—Thursday:

"Must not have had enough caffeine this morning, I guess," I said shaking my head.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Dr. Taggart asked me.

"Yes, please... black."

He paged his secretary and asked her to bring in a cup of coffee. She set it down on the doctor's desk in front of me and exited the room. When she closed the door behind her, the doctor continued, "You were going to tell me something, Tom?"

"Oh, uh... yeah. I've been having trouble making sense of things lately. Like everything is jumbled together, you know?"

"I guess not. How do you mean?"

"It's like all my thoughts are just running together and I don't know where one starts and the other ends. Like I'm trying to make sense of things and everything is out of order."

"I see. Is this something that's been going on for a while?"

"No. I mean, I've been getting sleep since I got the CD, but it's like sleeping has thrown everything out of whack. It's like my mind is jumping all over the place and I don't know how to stop it."

"I see," he said looking down at his notepad. He quickly wrote something down and peered up at me. "Your brain is still adjusting to finally getting some sleep. You've had a routine that consisted of as little rest as possible and now you're getting a full eight hours of sleep. As much as you need the sleep, your mind is still adjusting to this new routine, so it may take a while to sort things out."

"So, it's a temporary thing?"

"Yes. Once you get into a normal sleep routine, I'm sure all of this will clear up. But that comes back to finding the root of the nightmare. When you find out what brings you to the top of the building, take hold of your dream, take the leap, and fly, I'm sure you'll find it a lot easier to get some rest. And you won't need some easy listening CD to get some shuteye."

We talked a little longer about the significance of my dream. What I thought the building might be, why and how I got up on top of it, and why I always fell. I don't know if anything came of it, but it was an interesting discussion.

The doctor theorized that the building might be a challenge that I'm facing. Climbing to the top of this tall structure seems like a sort of accomplishment, but I have this fear of failing—that's why I fall. Despite making it to the top, I've got the pressure of actually making it and the fear of what I'm going to do after I reach the top. I keep trying to climb, but there's nowhere else to go, so I fall. That's what the doctor thought, anyway.

My session ended and he suggested I keep in touch and continue coming back to talk—to see what kind of progress I've made. I left the room and set up another appointment with his secretary. Monday, next week. I walked downstairs and exited the building. Opening the door, I was welcomed into a familiar location that didn't at all resemble the outside of Dr. Taggart's office.

I looked up and saw I was standing under a green awning. The street signs beside me indicated that I was on the corner of 3rd and Washington.

Day #—@\$73R1\$Kday:

I knew exactly where I was. This familiar scene I've walked dozens of times before; the one I had watched form itself right before my eyes. I looked south, scanned the skyline, and finally saw the towering building—the monument to all my restless nights. I stared at it and felt it beckoning me to stand on its peak. I would not be defeated this night. No, this night, I would fly.

It was bright and warm this time. No rain. No storm. The sun was on its way down and the streets were packed. Pedestrians absent-mindedly walked onward to their destinations and the traffic hummed, buzzed, and honked beside me. *Rush hour*, I concluded.

The tower, my destination, stood about five blocks south from the hotel with the green awning. I walked with a determined pace. Each step shouted my resolve. I kept my eyes fixed on that damned building—I wouldn't let it leave my sight for fear it might move to keep me from conquering it. Tonight, I would climb to the top. Tonight, I would know why I stood atop the tall building. I would stand there with purpose. I would climb to the top so that I could fly.

The people on the sidewalks served as obstacles impeding my progress. They all marched along, side by side with seemingly little more purpose than to make my forward motion difficult. They talked to each other about nonsensical things; random strings of thought that these figments of my fractured mind deemed interesting. The ones not in groups marched with their heads down either buried in a magazine or their phones. Reading manufactured articles or sending imaginary emails to convince me that this world in which I found myself was real.

I knew it wasn't, but I dared not convince myself that I was dreaming—I was afraid I would awaken. If I awoke, how could I conquer that building? My great challenge—the thing that's been keeping me awake for all these nights. No, I fought against the determined hordes and progressed toward my destination.

After what must have been twenty minutes of walking around those mindless pedestrians and stopping for traffic, I arrived at the door to the building. I felt a small sense of victory in finally arriving, but I knew I still had the climb to the top. I reached out for the door and opened it.

I stepped into the office and the door closed behind me. Terrance was walking into the kitchen, I decided to follow him.

He walked straight for the coffee pot and picked it up. There was maybe enough coffee left for a full cup. He set the pot down and looked back at me. "Looks like there's only enough for one of us. Pretty sure the cupboards are empty, too. Want it?"

"Yeah, but I don't need it," I chuckled. "Go ahead, I'll get some coffee with my lunch or something."

Day 3—Thursday:

He shrugged in a way that said, “Don’t mind if I do,” and poured himself the last of the coffee. He opened three packets of sugar and dumped them in; to finish, he added a healthy dose of creamer and stirred. I watched as the last of the caffeine in the office was diluted and consumed in front of me. I could have stopped it, too.

Shame, I thought as I turned and walked toward my workstation.

As I began to walk away, he turned back toward me and said, “Hey, Tom!”

I stopped and turned to face him. “Yeah?”

“I sent you some new assets last night, like you asked. They’re nothing special, but it beats reusing assets, I’m sure.”

“Good, I’ll go check them out now.”

He nodded at me as I turned away and walked to my desk. I sat down, woke up my computer, and opened Outlook. Terrance’s message was at the top of my inbox:

From: Terrance Freis
Subject: Re: Assets
To: Tom Larsson
CC: Matt Butler

Hey, Tom, here’s the stuff you asked for. You didn’t really give me much time, so they’re pretty crude—and, no, I didn’t make animation cycles. It’s just for a prototype, though, so I’m sure they’ll be fine. If you need anything else, let me know.

Terrance Freis

I downloaded the attachments. *He didn’t lie; they’re pretty basic. They’ll work, though.* I moved the sprites and backgrounds to my project folder and opened up the code for my prototype. I stared blankly at it for a few minutes—maybe wishing I had a cup of coffee to kick start my brain and help me think.

After letting out a heavy sigh, I began working on my project. Fine tuning character navigation, tweaking the physics, replacing assets—it was all very tedious work, but seeing it come together was gratifying. Each error became a new puzzle to solve—some incredibly easy to fix, but frustratingly difficult to find. Despite the frustrations, each success gave me the motivation I needed to continue working; something I desperately needed since caffeine wasn’t readily available.

I hadn’t replaced all the old *Mudd-Runn* assets in my prototype, but I had reached a point where I wanted to see how it ran. I plugged in my phone and deployed the program. The game came to life and a crude collage of images filled the screen—leftover assets from *Mudd-Runn* I had repurposed for my prototype. While those reused assets worked for me as I plugged away at my prototype, they certainly wouldn’t be acceptable to show off my idea for the meeting on Friday. I opened Outlook and typed up a message for Terrance.

Day 2—Wednesday:

From: Tom Larsson
Subject: Assets
To: Terrance Freis

Terrance, I'm working on a prototype for a new game and Matt's setting up a meeting for Friday. Right now I'm reusing assets from mudd runn, but I'd really like something a little more appropriate for what I'm working on. It's just a basic demo, so it doesn't need to be anything too fancy, just a character sprite, some props, a background, foreground stuff with maybe three different environments (lava, water, ice, maybe?), platforms, etc. This should keep you busy for a while. Maybe stop by my cube sometime today so we can talk more about it?

Thanks,
Tom Larsson

I sent the email and went back to work on my game. It was running on my phone and I took to the controls to see what needed tweaking. It was a mess. I spent some time earlier that day working on getting the character navigation working, but that was hardly a monumental achievement. I could move my stand-in sprite back and forth, make it jump, and the physics engine was also working properly—slowing down movement in areas, causing it to slide on certain surfaces, changes in gravity affected the height and duration of jumps and so forth—but there was still a lot of work to do. Triggers weren't working, so progression toward the end of the level was rendered impossible. That was something that needed fixing.

I sighed as I sat back in my chair and stared up at the ceiling—hoping, maybe, that an epiphany would be up there. Nothing but ceiling tiles, unfortunately. I closed my eyes for a moment to think.

She had a hand on my chest and a glass of wine in the other. I opened my eyes and looked at her; she looked up at me with those beautiful light brown eyes.

Night 4—Friday:

A movie was playing in the background on the television and two empty plates stacked on top of each other were resting on my coffee table. Alice sat beside me—her legs propped up on the couch, head on my shoulder, right arm wrapped around my left and holding a glass of wine. She was warm. I could feel her heart beating on my arm as she lay there at my side. It was comforting. She looked back at the television; I watched her for a few moments longer.

In my own right hand, I held a glass of wine—merlot. It was one of my favorite reds and my preferred wine for a steak dinner. I took a sip.

Alice's wine exchanged hands as she sat up to take a sip of her own. When she lowered the glass from her lips, she placed the wine back in her right hand, shifted her body even closer to mine, and rested her head on my shoulder. It couldn't have been comfortable, my bony shoulder against her cheek like that, but she didn't seem to care; she was content—happy even, judging by the expression on her face. She placed her left hand on my chest again. Each time my chest elevated as I inhaled, she closed her eyes.

Still resting on my arm, I could feel her heart beating. Each breath kept her eyes closed a second longer—each breath had her heart beating faster. She rubbed her cheek into my shoulder; I could hear her breathing heavier. I relaxed my neck from holding my head in its upright position and pressed my cheek against hers. Her rhythmically sensual heavy breathing continued. I turned toward her and set my wine down on the table. I reached for hers as I wrapped my other arm around her. When I set her

glass down on the table, we held each other locked in a passionate, hormone-driven embrace and stared at each other for what seemed like hours before we kissed.

She was soft, warm. Her lips were as comforting as they were arousing. It had been years since I had been with a woman, but kissing Alice may as well have been my first. I was flooded with a thousand sensations of physical and emotional desires. She was beautiful, and she was with me. She was smart, and she was with me. She was funny, and she was with me. All of the morning coffee conversations we've had at work and the playful office banters... she exemplified everything I could possibly want in a woman. She was the model of perfection and she actually wanted to be there with me. *This is a woman I could love*, I thought.

I pulled back. She sat there frozen in my arms. Her eyes were closed and her lips were slightly parted—beckoning me to return. But something felt wrong. I didn't know how I got there on the couch with her. It was a wonderful experience, but something was missing. She opened her eyes and stared at me.

There was a long pause as I stumbled over thoughts trying to find words to say. I lacked eloquence, so what came out was rather blunt and direct, "I like you, Alice. A lot."

She smiled at my crude sentiment, "I like you too, Tom."

She must have seen something written on my face because after sitting there holding each other in silence for several minutes longer, she just closed the embrace, rested her head on my shoulder, and stated, "A lot."

She held me tightly, rubbing my back as I rested my cheek atop her head. "I'm glad you came over."

"I'm glad you fed me," she joked.

We turned back to the television; the movie was still playing in the background and neither of us knew what was really going on with the plot. I grabbed our glasses of wine from the table and handed Alice hers. I sat back on the couch; Alice grabbed my arm and slung it around her shoulders. I looked over at her, but she kept her gaze straight forward—I could see a smirk forming in the corner of her mouth.

When the movie finished, we sat there in silence as the credits rolled. I didn't want her to go, and she didn't want to leave. Not a word was spoken as the credits scrolled up the screen. When the film had reached its ultimate end, she sighed as she sat up, pushing herself off me, and set her glass on the table.

"I should really get going," she said as she looked back at me.

I looked up at the clock, it read "12:17."

"It is pretty late," I said. "Let me walk you to your car."

We stood up and walked to the door. As I opened the door of my house for her, she reached for my hand. I motioned with my head toward the exit, "After you."

She led me to her car, which was parked on the street in front of my house. I opened her car door and turned to her. "I had a great time tonight," I said as I held her door open. "We should make a habit of this whole getting together thing."

"We should." She paused, "You know... I have some plans this Sunday that I'd love to get out of. You should come over! I'll return the favor and cook for you."

"I'd like that."

"So it's a date, then?"

"Absolutely."

We hugged one last time and kissed each other goodbye. She sat down in the driver's seat and I closed the door for her. As she started the car, she shot me another smile. The car roared to life and she drove off.

When she was out of sight, I approached my door and opened it. Matt was standing on the other side and he looked pale and shocked to see me. I gave him a nod and made my way to the kitchen—I desperately needed my morning coffee.

Day 7—Monday:

Matt followed slowly behind me. Terrance was standing at the coffee pot. He could see me coming into the kitchen out of the corner of his eye and he froze. He stopped pouring his coffee and set the pot down. He turned toward me—his eyebrows raised and a concerned look was painted across his face.

I was confused. Had something happened to me? Was I bleeding? I looked down at my outfit; it was slightly wrinkled and unimpressive, but there was no blood—no reason for concern. I reached up and touched my face; I could feel some stubble on my cheeks and oils on my forehead. But no blood. No swelling. No pain. I was confused.

“Tom,” Matt said behind me. I turned to face him.

“Tom,” Dr. Taggart began, “I’m glad to see you.” He stood to shake my hand. A gesture uncharacteristic of the doctor. “I didn’t think you’d show up today. Do you want to talk about what happened?”

Night 7—Monday:

I sat in the chair opposite the Dr.’s side of his desk. I was at a loss. I had no idea what he was talking about. I made something up. “I don’t really feel comfortable talking about it right now.” I paused and looked to the floor to sell my distress.

There was a long moment of silence as I stared at the floor thinking of what I could say next. Dr. Taggart interrupted my thoughts, “I understand.”

I looked back up at the doctor and nodded in acceptance of his understanding. There was a long pause as he stared at me in silence.

“Is the CD still working for you? Are you still sleeping well?”

“At least seven hours a night.”

“Good! And the dream?”

“Still the same dream.”

“Have you tried to fly?”

“I haven’t been able to. Last couple times I dreamed, I woke up before I could get to the top of the building.”

“Huh,” the doctor said as he scribbled something down before looking back up at me. “That’s quite peculiar. Have you figured out why you’re going to the top of the building yet?”

“Last time I dreamed, I was climbing to the top of the building so I could fly. That was all I could think about. Each step, I kept repeating to myself that I was going to do it—that I was going to fly.”

“But you didn’t make it to the top?”

“No.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re climbing the building for the wrong reasons,” he said almost questioning his own analysis.

“What about what you were talking about in our last session—how your thoughts are all jumbled.”

“What about it?”

“Are you still experiencing that?”

“A little in the morning when I wake up, but everything is pretty cleared up now,” I lied.

“I’m glad to hear that, Tom,” he said with a subtle insincerity—like he didn’t believe me. He wrote something else down in his notepad and looked back up at me with a look that suggested he was waiting for me to say something. I had nothing else to say.

I let out a deep sigh in that uncomfortable silence as I fidgeted in my seat. He just kept staring at me. That damned condescending stare. I couldn’t take it anymore, his looking down at me. I turned away from the doctor to get his face and that glare out of my mind.

“Are you sure you should be here today, Tom?” Matt asked.

I was confused. I felt fine and yet everybody was treating me so strangely. “I’m sure. I’d much rather be here than sitting around at home all day,” I stated before turning back toward the coffee pot and pouring myself a cup.

Day 7—Monday:

I walked back to my desk with my coffee in hand. I could feel the stares behind me. Matt and Terrance stood in the kitchen entryway and just watched as I situated myself at my desk. I tried my best to ignore them—keeping my head down and just going about my daily tasks.

I booted up my computer, logged in, and opened my prototype project that had recently been green-lit. From over my monitor, I could see Alice approaching my desk.

“Hey, Tom,” she said.

“G’morning, Alice.”

“I got some more of that sound stuff you wanted done and sent it your way. Don’t know if how much time you’ll have to really get it working before the meeting, but just thought you’d like to know.”

“Great!” I said as I opened up my email to download the attachments she sent me. I looked down at the clock in the corner of my screen; it was a little after nine and the meeting was set up for 10:30 that day.

Day 4—Friday:

I opened the email Alice sent me; it had seven attachments and a brief message that read, “Hope these work for you, Tom. Looking forward to tonight ☺.” I read the message a few times over—it was a short letter that never said anything new, but each subsequent reading made my smile grow a little. I downloaded the attachments and loaded them into my program’s library.

I spent the little time I had before the meeting getting the sound effects working with the game’s actions. I wasn’t going for perfection, just something that was presentable. I was getting close to that point when Matt appeared above my monitor.

“We’re ready for you, Tom.”

I looked up at him, he was holding his phone’s display toward me. It had a clock face on it that was telling me it was time to get to the conference room to show off what I had been working on. I nodded in acknowledgement; Matt turned toward the conference room as I saved my progress and unplugged my phone. I followed behind into the conference room.

When I walked through the door, the sun shone brightly in my eyes. It was brighter than I expected, and I had to squint to see anything... but something caught my attention—out of the corner of my eye, I saw a green awning.

.....

Day &—7H314\$7day:

When I saw it, I opened my eyes and focused on them. It hung over the entrance of a tall hotel building—it was the same green awning I saw every night in my dreams. I knew I had to be dreaming. It was odd, then, that I was standing outside my office instead of under that green awning.

Maybe, I thought, this dream is different.

I had no idea where I was—how I got there. Everything in my life had been an unintelligible string of events playing out of sequence. So, not only did I not know where I was, but I was clueless as to when I was. It's entirely possible that I had already taken the leap—flown—I just hadn't experienced it yet.

If I had flown but am still in the same dream, maybe I need to find out why exactly I'm climbing to the top of the building. Maybe when I climb the building so I can fly, I'm climbing it for the wrong reason.

I needed to know why I stood on top of that damned building. Every other night, my dream began with me standing beneath the green awning of the hotel just three blocks north of my office. Based on that, I felt that the hotel would be the best place to begin my search.

I made my way to the hotel building and shortly found myself standing beneath that green awning. I took a deep breath as I reached for the handle of the door and opened it.

Alice stood on the other side. She was wearing a black and red dress—it looked fancy and far more formal than anything I owned. I felt underdressed in my khakis and three-button polo.

.....

Night 4—Friday:

"You're awfully dressed up," I said. She seemed surprised at my comment.

"Some guys might say, 'You look nice,' or, you know... a compliment of some kind."

"Oh, well, you do—you look great! I just wasn't expecting you to be dressed so... nicely."

"Well, I wasn't expecting you to dress nicely either," she gave me the once-over, "which I'm glad I had low expectations... otherwise, I'd have been disappointed." She smiled as she made her way past me and into the house. "I brought a movie to go with dinner," she handed it to me and began peeking around—acclimating herself to my home.

"Would you like the tour?"

"Maybe later. I'm getting hungry, what's on the menu?"

"I was planning on some steak, if that's alright with you."

"Sounds great. I'll have mine medium-well."

"Oh, uh... okay. What do you want for a side? I have potatoes, some mixed veggies, or rice."

"Potatoes would be fantastic."

"Okay. Just make yourself at home," I pointed toward my couch in the living room. "I've got cable—remote should be on the coffee table. Dinner shouldn't take too long, the potatoes are instant."

"Fancy," she said, shooting me a smile as she sat down and reached for the remote.

“Nothing but the best,” I replied as I made my back into the kitchen. I kept my potatoes in the pantry beside my stove. I opened it. There was nothing in there. Nothing I felt like I could wear, anyway—cheap white button shirts and a vast array of unspectacular three-button tees.

Day 5—Saturday:

She was so beautiful when she came over Friday and I felt like I had to dress a little better when I went over to her place on Sunday. I had to buy a new shirt and maybe some black slacks.

I never really had a sense for fashion—I had always been just a t-shirt and blue jeans kind of guy—so I didn’t really know what would look nice when I was out shopping. I didn’t feel like making a whole day out of finding a shirt and some pants, either, so I just asked for help at the first store I went to. I approached the woman who was stocking the rack with new pants.

“Hi,” I said as awkwardly blunt as humanly possible.

She looked up from the stack of clothes in front of her and, with a store policy grin on her lips, returned my greeting, “Hello, how can I help you today?”

“Well, I’m not terribly well-versed in fashion, but I’ve got a date tomorrow and I wouldn’t mind having something nice to wear. So, if you could just help me get something along those lines, I’d really appreciate it.”

“How nice are we talking?”

“Not like suit and tie or anything, but button down shirt and some nice slacks. Something along those lines, I think.”

I guess I never realized how difficult clothes shopping could be. It took seven different fittings and probably three dozen shirts over the course of nearly an hour before I settled on something that I didn’t find obnoxiously over-colored or tacky in some way. I couldn’t help feeling that the clerk’s fashion sense was as bad as mine after the third time I undressed in the fitting room. I began to question how she ever got employed at a clothing store. In the end, it didn’t really matter—I got my outfit and I could tell by the expression on her face when I checked out that she was as sick of me as I was of her and her awful clothing suggestions.

I wasn’t entirely satisfied with the clothes, but they were inarguably nicer than anything I owned, so that was a plus. I left the store and walked back to my car. I sat in the driver’s seat and checked my watch. It was about half-past six and I told Alice I would be at her house at seven. That would give me plenty of time to pick up a movie and some flowers before I arrived.

Night 6—Sunday:

I stopped in at the brick and mortar video place a mile from my house first. Alice and I never really talked about movies, so I wasn’t entirely sure what she liked or didn’t like, but I figured comedy was always a good choice. I grabbed two older releases; they were two for a dollar for a night and I figured it’d be nice to have an option in case she didn’t like one of the films.

After I got the movies, I walked to the grocery store near the video place for the flowers. It wasn’t an elaborate bouquet, but I knew she would appreciate the gesture. With flowers in hand, I had everything I needed, so I took off for Alice’s.

I parked on the street in front of her house. I could see her kitchen and living room lights were on. I figured she was in the kitchen working on the meal. I grabbed the flowers and movies from the passenger seat, walked to her door, and rang the bell.

I stood outside her door for a few moments. There was no answer. I tried peering through the window on her door, but it was more for decoration than function. All I could really tell was she had her living room and kitchen lights on. I assumed she was busy in the kitchen, so I checked the knob—it was unlocked. I opened the door and let myself in.

“Alice? I hope you don’t mind I let myself in.”

I walked into the living room. She was peering up at me as she lay comfortably on the couch with the television remote in her hand. She sat up and patted the seat beside her.

“I kept it warm for you.”

I set down her plate on the coffee table in front of her.

“Wine?” I asked as I set my dinner in front of the seat she warmed for me.

“Yes, please.”

Night 4—Friday:

I had purchased a fresh bottle of merlot earlier that day and it was resting, unopened, on my counter. I pulled my corkscrew from the silverware drawer and two glasses from the cupboard. I opened the bottle and poured two generous glasses of the red. I felt certain that the bottle would be gone by the end of the night and a taller glass meant more time before a refill trip.

I walked back to the living room; Alice was already working on her steak. “It’s very good,” she said covering her mouth with her hand so I couldn’t see the small bite she had been chewing. “Cooked just right.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said handing her the glass of wine. “I hope you approve of the wine selection.”

“I’ll trust your judgment.”

She pointed to the seat beside her again. “Make yourself comfortable. I already put the movie in.”

I picked up the remote and pressed play. The screen was filled with static for a moment before I could see the image of a woman looking back at me. Her stare was intense, but comforting. She reached out a hand to me—beyond the screen in which she stood, her hand came out to me as an offer to guide me. I rose from my seat and took her hand.

Day @: I>R34|V1day:

As I grabbed her hand, she pulled herself in close to me, placed her mouth next to my ear, and whispered to me, “You are dreaming. You can fly.”

I believed her—everything she said. I was in that place again. In my dream. Atop that damned building. Tonight was the night I would fly.

I looked beyond the woman to the edge of the building—the platform of my triumphant flight. She began to dissolve as I stared past her and I thought to myself, *I am dreaming. I can fly.* I stepped forward and, with each step, I kept repeating, “I am dreaming. I can fly.” I reached the end of the roof and stared forward—not down to the ground below, but forward to the open world that lay before me. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Stretching out my arms, I repeated to myself one last time, *I am dreaming. I can fly.*

I opened my eyes and my alarm clock stared back at me. The time on its face was 7:15am. The sound emanating from it was louder than usual—it made my head pound. I quickly turned it off and rolled to my other side.

Day 7—Monday:

My head ached, my mouth was dry, and my stomach was in knots. There was no doubt in my mind that I had a hangover. I concluded that I didn't get much sleep, either, as I was incredibly tired. I didn't remember drinking, though—or anything about Sunday night. I had a date with Alice, but I wouldn't think we would get plowed. Maybe a glass of wine with dinner and the movies, but I could taste the remnants of cheap brandy on my breath.

Maybe the date went poorly, I thought. I didn't want to think that I screwed it up, but I've never been above finding comfort in a bottle when the occasion called for it. I considered calling her, but ultimately decided it would be best to talk to her in person. I would see her at work and we'd sort things out there... *hopefully*.

I rose from my bed, took a muchneeded long, hot shower, scrubbed my teeth for a solid 5 minutes to get the stale taste of bottom shelf brandy out of my mouth, rinsed twice with Listerine, and dressed. I still felt like hell, but at least I didn't look like it—I thought, anyway, as I looked into the mirror. The bags in my eyes were hanging pretty low, but my teeth were clean, my hair parted, and my body clothed. *Better than nothing*.

I didn't doubt that the day ahead would be nothing short of challenging, but I wasn't bad off enough to call in sick. I opened the door and stepped into the lobby. I could see the concierge standing behind his desk looking over at me with a look that said, "How can I help you?" before he even had a chance to utter the same line.

Day ^: 7-41|day

"Sir, are you alright?" he asked me—a genuine concern in his voice.

I could feel my breathing labored and my eyes itched. "Yes, I'm fine," I said as I approached the desk. Each step brought me closer to the man, and with each step I could see the expression on his face changing from that of concern to shock or empathy. Maybe both.

"I saw you on the news last night."

"Excuse me?" I honestly had no idea what he was talking about.

"It was all over the news, what happened last night... I'm sorry, you probably don't want to talk about this."

"You're right, I don't." Mostly because I was entirely incapable of talking about it. I was oblivious about what happened and had no way of continuing the conversation.

"I apologize. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

"Well, what did you come here for?"

"I—" I stopped for a moment confused as to why I did go into the hotel. It was a striking image—one I had seen dozens of times in my dreams. I stood beneath the green awning of this building every night before I fell. I was hoping to find answers inside, but I was only met with confusion. "I'm not sure," I said before turning around toward the exit.

"Well, thank you for stopping in, and have a pleasant day." I could hear in the tone of his voice he was thinking something along the lines of, "Strange fellow."

I opened the door and stepped inside. Alice was lying on the couch; her light brown eyes wide open and staring up at me.

.....

Night 6: Sunday

Unblinking, they stared up at me. Pale, lifeless, and framed by dried blood and tears. Her mouth was open and contorted—frozen with an expression crying out in pain. I could hear her screams in the silence echoing against the walls. Her clothes were cut and bloodied and the knife that opened the holes in her chest was still plunged deeply in a wound. She was gone.

Everything I held in my arms fell to the floor as I collapsed in a heap of tears and agony. "She's gone!" I cried out with an unrestrained intensity.

Dr. Taggart sat across from me in silence. I could feel my body quivering as I fought to control the emotion—I couldn't. I began to cry violently as I shouted, "She's gone! She's gone!"

.....

Night 7: Monday

He just sat there with a blank expression on his face as I sobbed uncontrollably in my seat. The eruption of emotions came from nowhere and he seemed to be as surprised by it as I was.

"It doesn't make sense!" I cried out.

"What doesn't make sense?"

"All of it! Nothing makes sense anymore. Everything is happening out of order—I'm trapped in this twisted bastardization of reality."

"Tell me what you mean, Tom." His voice was steady and calm—the damned doctor just kept calm despite my intense emotional outburst and it was pissing me off.

"I mean, I don't even know why I'm here—how I got here—I'm just here! I find myself jumping around from locations and..." I paused. Something clicked. The strange happenings, everything out of order with no reason as to why, my being here in the doctor's office. I was dreaming. It all made sense when I thought of it like that. Dreams are rarely ever linear and full of nonsensical translations between places. This was all a dream.

"I am dreaming," I stated my conclusion aloud.

The doctor was taken aback for a moment at my revelation. He was wordless.

"I am dreaming and none of this is actually happening—none of this has actually happened. I just need to wake up."

"Tom," he said, his voice bored and monotonous, "I know you've been through a lot, but this kind of reaction isn't going to help you."

"What kind of reaction? Claiming that I'm dreaming? That's the only logical explanation to all this nonsense. The real world follows rules, logic, and a linear sequence of events—what I've experienced is anything but. I am dreaming, I just need to wake up."

"Tom, look at me!" he raised his voice. I was surprised. "You are awake—this is all real."

"No! No it's not! I'm trapped in this hellish nightmare. I need to wake up!"

I stopped for a moment to think. Think of a way to wake myself. Then it came to me, *I need to fly.*

I stood from my chair and walked toward the door. Dr. Taggart rose from his as I marched closer to the exit, “Where are you going, Tom?”

“To fly,” I stated as I whipped open the door.

The evening sun was bright as it peeked above the horizon—I could see it just beyond the end of the building. The towering monument to all my restless nights.

Day ~: D|7\09day

I stood still for a moment to pause and admire the view. It was beautiful despite all the pain it had caused me.

I took a step forward—I told myself, *This is it*. I took another step, *This is the night I fly*. Another, *If I do this, I can wake up*. With an unwavering determination, I pushed myself closer and closer to the edge; telling myself with each inch of ground that if I could take the leap and fly, I could have my life back. I just wanted some normalcy to return to my chaotic joke of an existence—to escape from this wretched dream in which I found myself trapped.

I stood on the edge of the building and looked forward—forward to where I would fly. Somewhere beyond this place—this vividly imagined hell. I stretched out my arms and stated aloud, “I am dreaming. I can fly.”