

Adi Gelbart

ENG LI KE



E G G L I K E

Adi Gelbart



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 by Adi Gelbart

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

First Printing, 2018

Defekt Books

ISBN 978-3-947766-00-0

www.gelbartcorp.com

The Bridge

Day one

At exactly 6:33 A.M., I spotted the purple truck. It was heading north, as I had been told it would, and it was purple. No sign of the yellow motorcycle.

Day two

The purple truck was going north again, but slightly slower than yesterday.

Day three

Interesting. The purple truck was driving as fast as on the first day, but it slowed down just as it was crossing the bridge that I'm standing on. Many vehicles passed today, but still no sign of the yellow motorcycle.

Day four

I spotted an orange motorcycle today, thought it was yellow for a moment, but then realized it only seemed so because all the cars around it were red—some sort of optical illusion. The purple truck passed at 6:40 A.M.—direction: north.

Day five

It's the fifth day in a row that I've brought with me a chicken sandwich, and I think it might be time to switch. No motorcycle, yes truck, 6:34 A.M., northbound.

Day six

The purple truck passed at 6:51 A.M., which is slightly later than usual; normal speed though. I decided to go with a ham and cheese croissant. It was fine, but it's no chicken sandwich.

Day seven

The purple truck arrived from the south going north. It made its pass under the bridge at 6:40 A.M. Perhaps the yellow motorcycle is never seen because it's inside the truck?

Day eight

The yellow motorcycle! It was there at the side of the purple truck, both vehicles heading north. It was unmistakably yellow, and it was obviously outside the truck—my theory had been wrong.

Day nine

Only purple truck today, northbound. No motorcycle.

Day ten

The truck passed under the bridge at 6:40 A.M., directly followed by the yellow motorcycle, going north. At 12:30 P.M., the yellow motorcycle crossed under my observation post going south, with the purple truck following right behind.

Day eleven

Same as yesterday. Both vehicles going north, with the purple truck leading, then returning with the yellow motorcycle in the lead. Times: 6:30 A.M. and 12:30 P.M. respectively.

Day twelve

The same routine. At some point during the day I noticed four green trucks riding in a convoy, which I found pretty strange. I'm sick of the chicken sandwiches again.

Day thirteen

Today I noticed that the yellow motorcycle had no driver. I'm not sure this was the case on the previous days. Either there was a driver before and I hadn't paid attention, or there was never a driver. Let's see what happens tomorrow.

Other than that, the usual pattern of the last three days: going north in the early morning, returning around noon.

Day fourteen

Definitely no driver on the yellow motorcycle. So how does it work? The only thing I can think of is that it's remote controlled by someone from inside the purple truck.

Day fifteen

Morning northbound, noon southbound, and no driver on the yellow motorcycle. I've been experimenting with mayonnaise-based sandwiches for the past few days. They keep me full till the end of the shift, but it's no long-term solution.

Day sixteen

There really can be no other option. The yellow motorcycle is driving with confidence. It can't be a preprogrammed thing; has to be remote controlled. There must be a person inside the purple truck (besides the driver) who is operating the remote control. Tomorrow I will try to see if there are two people sitting in the purple truck.

Worth noting: for some reason, around noon it's less hot on the bridge than in the mornings. It's supposed to be the other way around.

Day seventeen

No one is driving the purple truck either! There are seats and there is a steering wheel, but no one is operating it. This is already mildly disturbing. My current theory: one or two persons are seated in a command module inside the truck's cargo container, and, using cameras and remote controls, they navigate both the purple truck and the yellow motorcycle.

Day eighteen

Today the truck and motorcycle crossed normally at 6:35 A.M., with the purple truck leading and the yellow motorcycle following close behind. However, upon their return they performed a variation: The motorcycle was leading (as it always does in the noontime trip), but just as they crossed under my bridge, the motorcycle moved to the left lane and allowed the purple truck to pass it. It then returned to the right and proceeded to follow the truck.

Day nineteen

More curious variations. In the morning northbound trip, the truck and the motorcycle were driving side by side, and on their return trip I had to rub my eyes to be sure: the yellow motorcycle was standing on the roof of the purple truck! I have a working theory now, but it would be wise to sleep on it before I put it to paper. Besides, my fingers are all greasy from mayonnaise.

Day twenty

More variations. I decided not to record the specifics, as they seem to be of a purely random nature. I still don't feel ready to write down my theory, but so far the continuing variations

support it. On an unrelated note, at approximately 11:40 A.M., I noticed a roofless double-decker bus. The entire upper deck appeared to be occupied by professional photographers, and almost all of them were taking pictures of the sky as they passed under me.

Day twenty-one

Okay. This is what I assume is going on:

Inside the truck is a group of up to eight people, but definitely more than three, and probably more than five. At any given moment, two of them are controlling the vehicles using remote controls. One controls the purple truck and one controls the yellow motorcycle. They work in shifts, that is, every so and so minutes, someone hands the remote control to someone else in the group—this is how they prevent fatigue. Now, a few days ago I assumed there were only two people inside the truck, but seeing all the different variations in the ways the truck and motorcycle drove in relation to each other convinced me otherwise. Why would they perform so many variations? Why was the motorcycle on the roof of the truck on not one, but two separate occasions? Only one answer seems plausible: there are more than two people inside the truck, and not only does every person possess a distinct style of controlling the vehicles with the remote, but I'm also guessing that they've become bored going through the same routines every day and therefore started playing around in an attempt to make each other laugh—today at noon the yellow motorcycle was driving in reverse!

Day twenty-two

A double-decker bus with photographers passed again today. They were taking pictures of the sky just as last time, and I

noticed that among them was also a film crew, including a boom operator, who held his fur-covered microphone so high that it almost grazed the bridge. I wonder if they're getting any usable footage with the sky being as bright as it is these days.

The truck and motorcycle passed at the usual times and gave no fancy performances. I now assume that the persons inside the truck's cargo hold are of several nationalities or at least come from different cultural backgrounds. Some of them have a tendency for playfulness, while I imagine that some grew up in stricter households and were harshly disciplined as children.

Day twenty-three

All my theories can be scrapped for the moment. I woke up slightly late today on account of a weird dream about a highway with an endless convoy of green trucks that had triangles painted on them in blinding orange, and anyhow, I didn't have time to prepare a proper sandwich, so on the way to the bridge I bought a factory-wrapped egg and ham sandwich, the kind that comes in a triangular plastic container. I opened it only when I was already at my spot on the bridge and it tasted funny. I then realized I forgot to check the expiration date when I bought it (these things have the life expectancy of a corpse), so I tried to read the inscription on the plastic wrap. The writing was so small that I had to hold it at some distance from my face and squint in order to force the letters into focus. Even then, it proved a challenge to make sense of the smeared purple digits, but this led me to a completely unexpected discovery. As I was standing there looking up, with the sandwich in front of my head, I realized how ignorant I had been in my observations: There is a third vehicle in the mix. A helicopter. Floating above the bridge—my bridge. A silver helicopter. And it has probably

been there every day, its noise masked by the heavy traffic, its image drowned by the summer sun.

I waved my hands in its direction, but there was no response. Tomorrow I shall bring a big flashlight.

Day twenty-four

The silver helicopter was there when I arrived in the morning—so the events of yesterday morning did actually happen (last night I wasn't sure anymore if I had really seen it or was hallucinating because of the egg and ham sandwich—it was three days past its expiration date). I didn't have any flashlights at home, so I took down the bathroom mirror and carried it with me to the bridge. I used it to reflect the sun onto the cockpit of the silver helicopter, but the sun only gave it a half-assed effort and the helicopter was not impressed.

I repeated this routine a number of times to similar indifference. With frustration building up and the useless mirror insisting on showing me a spot I had missed while shaving, I decided to go for it and just sling the mirror at the helicopter, which I did, only to have it miss the target and land on the roof of the hearse in a passing funeral procession. Luckily, no one saw me, but I couldn't help but feel guilty for supplying the already grieving people with a fresh grievance. However, I told myself that under the circumstances they would be grateful that at least no one new had met their death, and in any case, this minor drama had a fortunate effect in that it finally attracted the attention of the helicopter pilot.

The silver helicopter rotated in place, then made subtle adjustments until it aligned itself with the bridge and began its descent. It made a slow landing on the far side of the bridge, hurling turbulent gusts of wind in the process that showed no mercy on the chicken sandwich I had left unattended on the

railing (marinated poultry rained down on the grief-stricken faces of the funeral procession people, who were in the midst of exchanging insurance details). The engines then shut down, and after a minute or so, a figure in a gray jumpsuit stepped out, helmet in hand, and waved in my direction.

I waved back. The figure waved again then motioned me to come over, but I remained in my spot. Another minute passed before he waved at me again. I did not want to be the one giving in and approaching, and apparently, neither did he. We waited some more. He motioned me again to approach. I motioned him in return. No one moved.

Then finally, he went back to the helicopter, climbed inside for a short minute, and came back out carrying a megaphone.

“I am the pilot,” he said, “the pilot of the helicopter.”

Day twenty-five

It was shortly after six in the morning when the taxi dropped me off at the address the pilot gave me yesterday. A big wooden cabin in the middle of nowhere in the middle of a forest just outside the city. I knocked on the door. He opened, still in his bathrobe, and told me to wait in the living room while he dressed up.

The entirety of the wall around the fireplace was covered with about twenty deer heads, one of them albino (I made a point to remember that). The room had a nice old-fashioned coziness to it, the general mood dictated by the smell of the red and somewhat damp wall-to-wall carpeting. At each corner of the room stood an aquarium with taxidermied hamsters carrying toy model rifles. I went to get a closer look at one of the aquariums. That specific one probably depicted a scene from World War I, as the hamsters were all dressed in highly detailed German uniforms, complete with helmets and

gas masks, and some were riding model horses. I started walking in the direction of another one that from afar appeared to portray a scene from the Vietnam War, but I heard the pilot approaching from the other room and decided it would be a bad move to be seen nosing around. We then had a conversation that was recorded on the tape recorder I hid in my jacket beforehand. It began with a simple exchange of pleasantries, but I feel it's important to cover that part as well, therefore I'm transcribing here the entire thing:

Pilot: Tea, coffee?

Me: Some tea would be great.

Pilot: Milk?

Me: No.

Pilot: Be right back.

Pilot (from kitchen): I forgot to <indistinguishable>

Me: I can't understand you from here.

Pilot (from kitchen): Sorry. Coming right back.

Pilot (back in room): So you wanted tea, right?

Me: Yes, no milk.

Pilot: Yes, I will make it now. I was just feeding the cat in the kitchen. He's very grumpy if I don't do it first thing in the morning.

Me: Oh. What kind of cat is it?

Pilot: Actually, I don't know the first thing about cats. It's gray . . . it has green eyes. It's not mine. I'm just taking care of it for the neighbor while she's on vacation.

Me: That's nice of you.

Pilot: I owe her. She takes care of this place when I'm away, and I'm away a lot. I think the water is ready. Coming right back.

Pilot (returning from kitchen): There you go. Be careful, it's very hot.

Me: Thank you.

Pilot: Did you have trouble finding the house?

Me: No, not at all.

Pilot: I've been living here for the past five years. I used to really like it, then we broke up—me and my wife that is—left me for a commercial airline pilot. It broke my spirit at the time, but in the end I think it was probably for the best. And you know, she decorated this place—all the deer heads, the hamster war dioramas, and the stuffed dog astronaut in the bedroom—you can have a look at that one later—it's all her. Me, I don't know the first thing about taxidermy. When she left, I thought I'd get rid of all that stuff—too many memories—but then as time passed, it didn't feel strange anymore, it became my own place, my own deer heads, my own hamster soldiers.

Me: How long ago was it that you split up?

Pilot: The separation was almost two years ago, the divorce was finalized a few months later. I got the cabin, she got our house in the city. I could have fought harder, but what's the use? In the end, serenity of the mind is more important than any asset—better a bird on a highway than a limousine on top of a tree.

Me: I guess that's true. Still, I don't know many people who would have taken this experience quite so positively.

Pilot: Well sure, I've had some rough patches, been to low places—even the proudest peacock will sometimes feed on worms—but then I looked at myself from the outside, and it all just seemed like a theater play, this misery business, and I had to pull down the curtain and get on with it.

Me: You have a real flair for the metaphors.

Pilot: Thank you. In a way, I've always been better with that sort of stuff. I don't know the first thing about physics, for example.

Me: But you're a helicopter pilot. I would assume it requires some knowledge of physics?

Pilot: Well, I know how to make it fly up and down, but believe me, I don't know the first thing about the mechanics, the stuff that—

[At this point in the conversation, the cat walked into the room. I noticed it had a peculiar walk, but I only allowed myself a short glance, wanting to be polite to my host who was midsentence.]

Pilot: —that makes it work.

[The cat meowed.]

[In the following fifteen minutes, nothing of real interest was said. I sensed he wanted to go back and talk about his ex-wife, and, wishing to keep the conversation flowing, I asked him follow-up questions (something I often do and often regret). He went on and on about his ex-wife's shortcomings and how it was she who had brought on the eventual deterioration of their relationship and so on. I found his account very one-sided and self-indulgent and his reliance on metaphors tiring, but I didn't say anything. I also kept silent about the tea, which in itself tasted like sufficient grounds for divorce.]

Pilot: But I've been going on and on about myself. So you work on the bridge as a traffic surveyor? I assumed this sort of stuff was already taken over by special cameras these days.

Me: You are correct, it is done by special cameras, yes. But first, one has to know where to put those special cameras and which types of special cameras to use and so on. This is where I come in. I collect data, which then serves as a basis for those technical decisions.

Pilot: Sounds interesting, though it's all too technical for me. As I said, I don't know the first thing about machine technology.

Me: The job is quite monotonous in nature. But at least I don't have an office to show up to day in and day out—I would never be able to lead that sort of life. That's modern slavery if you ask me.

[At that point, the cat meowed again. Acting on a hunch, I yanked the cat's tail. It let out a meow. I yanked it again. Another meow—identical—just as I expected. The cat jumped away to the corner of the room and hissed. It was time to put an end to this whole charade.]

Me: My dear pilot, what you have so clumsily erected here is more than a mere smoke screen, it's a veritable fog on an early-dawn highway, and your bus has just lost its grip on the road, if you won't mind *me* having a go at the metaphors for a change. Since I first sat myself in this chair, you have gone out of your way to foster the illusion that you are ignorant on the subject of cats and know nothing about taxidermy, physics, machine technology, and so on. In fact, the exact opposite is the truth. This cat, which you allege was left here by an imaginary neighbor, is in reality of your own creation. A machine, a robot, and quite a sophisticated one at that. Building it would take someone who's an expert in the combined fields of zoology, taxidermy, mechanics, and artificial intelligence—the exact fields you tried to mislead me into believing you know nothing about. You even borrowed a technique from the pages of hypnotic suggestion—your very intentional repetition of the phrase “I don't know the first thing about.” Of course, this is a beginner's technique and it left me unimpressed; in fact, this repetition was the first hint that gave you away. It was meant to suggest to my mind that you literally do not know a thing about those fields. Well, let me say here and now that you don't know the first thing about *acting*. Taking everything into account, I am assuming that this entire meeting was set up as a test—one

of important consequences. I would venture to say that in one of those deer heads is hidden a camera and microphone pair, recording my every move. And it wouldn't be inside the albino deer, either. I bet if I opened it up, I would find a camera, only it would be a decoy, not the real thing but something to make the one who found it think they had disabled the surveillance, when in fact the spying deer is one of the others, the least remarkable one. A boring deer makes the perfect spy. Of course, this is all elementary, which is why you would not have bothered to put a camera in any of the deer. I also do not suspect the hamsters. I believe they genuinely represent a meeting of your two biggest fascinations—war and rodents. No, you have no need for cameras at all, for the test subject is not me. No. You see me every day from your silver helicopter. You already know what you need, and you know I am no fool. Which leads me to conclude that I was actually meant to serve not as the test subject but rather as the *tester* in this bizarre setup.

[He gave a short smile, then stood up, went into the kitchen, and came back with two glasses and an unlabeled bottle of what turned out to be very fine single-malt scotch.]

Pilot: As you no doubt understand, I had no choice but to produce all of those lies and metaphors. It was important that you experience the cat without any prior knowledge of its artificiality.

Me: You are not a simple pilot. You are a pilot/engineer.

Pilot: And you are no traffic surveyor.

Me: Nor did I enjoy the tea. But let us proceed.

Pilot: Yes, let's please. I am anxious to know what you thought of the cat. And please, hold nothing back.

[I didn't quite know in what way, but I had a feeling it would prove beneficial to have this person on my side. I decided to help him.]

Me: Let me start by saying that the facial features are nothing short of remarkable. Obviously the real cat, whose skin and fur you used in the creation of this robot, had quite a distinct personality, and it still shines through. I would certainly say that, when seen from afar, the robot passes for a genuine cat. Even though the movement of the legs is slightly off, more clumsy than it is catty, it's not enough to betray the cat's synthetic nature. However, my suspicions first arose when I glimpsed it up close. That's when I noticed that the knees are not moving—the joints are molded at a preset angle, which lends the cat a very unnatural shape. But the biggest giveaway was the meow sound. I heard it three or four times, and each time it sounded exactly the same.

Pilot: Actually, there are four tapes inside the cat's belly. A meow, a purr, a growl, and a hiss—all recorded from a real live cat in the highest fidelity possible. A dedicated electrical circuit selects the appropriate sound depending on the situation.

Me: The sound quality was indeed very clear, a testament to your skills as an engineer, and I can only assume how difficult it must have been to fit a speaker inside the head section. Still, technique will only go so far if not accompanied by true inspiration. And so, you should probably be picking up the phone to arrange for a new recording session with the cat whose voice is on those recorded tapes. Only, this time have him meow multiple times, so that you have about four distinct versions of meows, four versions of purrs, and so on. If you want to imitate life, you need to imitate its versatility. But do not simply put him in front of a microphone and order him to make sounds. No, that will not do. Have him play around, show him love, make him experience calm, leisure. Then bring in fear, uncertainty, bark at him, make him hide, let him doubt his every move. Let a bird fly into the recording room,

have him chase it, let him hide, anticipate, attack. Re-create life for him, and he will create sounds full of life in return. Edit the tapes and have the circuits replay these sounds from the belly of the robot. Only then will you have imitated life.

[The cat hissed in my direction, then walked to the fireplace and crouched awkwardly on its fur-covered, unbendable metallic legs.]

Day twenty-six

Stayed home. I planned to catch up on some sleep, but the neighbor from the apartment below, which until recently lay vacant, was practicing the bassoon all day. This was not the first time either, and it's slowly turning into a real nuisance.

Day twenty-seven

I took my spot on the bridge at about 6:00 A.M. When I arrived, the pilot was already floating above it in the helicopter. I waved at him. He moved the helicopter's nose down and then up—a nod?

There were no fancy patterns today: the truck was leading in the morning, and on the trip back around noon, the yellow motorcycle rode in front.

Day twenty-eight

I had a very vivid dream that woke me up in the middle of the night. All I can remember now is that it had some pyramids in it, and I think it wasn't the first time I've dreamed about pyramids lately. I should probably keep a dream journal—pyramids should never be taken lightly.

As for the vehicles: same patterns as yesterday, except that the motorcycle was driving in reverse. Now that I know the

pilot is an observer like me, I am back to the eight-multinationals-in-the-belly-of-the-truck theory.

Day twenty-nine

They passed in the morning, drove back in the afternoon.

Day thirty

The same.

Day thirty-one

The same again.

Day thirty-two

Same.

Day thirty-three

Frustration.

The patterns seem purely random, and I've decided that from here on I will no longer document them. This surveying from the bridge has got me as far as it could. If I want to learn more, I have to go to either the source or the destination of the vehicles' route.

The only positive I can find is that this seeming randomness actually supports my working theory: that whoever happens to be holding the remote at the moment of passage is responsible for the style of driving of the two vehicles. However, there could still be order on a deeper level. The persons inside the purple truck may be following a weekly schedule that determines who is remote controlling the motorcycle and when, or it could be prearranged according to country of origin, or still

there could be complete anarchy wherein whoever snatches the remote first thing in the morning gets to handle it.

More questions: Do they meet up for an early coffee before they get into the truck? Or does someone start off with the truck in the morning and proceed to pick up the other team members from their homes? Does that person ring their doorbells, or are they already waiting in the street? Is it the same person every day, or is this aspect scheduled as well? Do they have a dress code? Customized briefcases? Secret handshakes?

The more I think about it, the more I am nearing a new theory: These people have no houses and they have no morning meetings. In fact, I believe they have no social footprint in the outside world—it would serve no purpose. They spend their entire time inside this purple truck, driving it and the yellow motorcycle without ever stopping. They are not everyday, regular people; they are passengers. They have become part of the process, another piece of machinery, as indispensable, and at the same time unremarkable, as the fuel tank or the transmission box. They are not the thing I am looking for.

I wonder if I, too, have become too attached to this daily routine.

Day thirty-four

Stayed inside today. The bassoon player from the apartment below practiced all day long. It began with a few hours of scales, repeated and recycled to exhaustion, then all sorts of sound gymnastics—short notes, long notes, notes bent up, notes bent down, notes hell-bent on triggering migraines; then scales again, fast, faster, then slower and slower still until each note lingered for a small eternity. Already under normal circumstances the bassoon has an irritating quality—sort of like the humming of a prepubescent bee—but this was much

worse, as if the bassoonist was going out of his way to pack each note with the full annoyance potential the instrument allowed for.

Around eleven at night, the day's practice session culminated in a recurring pattern of seven notes—the same notes repeated in a fast pace over and over and over again. I was getting so annoyed that I considered dropping in on him with the angry-neighbor act. Eventually, however, I decided against it—he'd either be a complete jerk, or worse, he would apologize and I'd find myself having to withstand a conversation.

I must remember to buy earplugs.

DREAM JOURNAL ENTRY NO. 1

The three pyramids are here again. Hollow and holographic and humming. And glowing. As before. The red one on the left, the green on the right, and the yellow in the middle. All of them touching each other just slightly, glowing more intensely where they intersect. They are gigantic structures of light. And everything else is black. As it was before. I listen more closely: each pyramid is humming a different tone, I think. Suddenly, a sensation appears—an overwhelming sensation that something is about to happen. And while nothing is happening in actuality, this sensation is so clear and real that it is already an event in and of itself. This is what it feels like: I am on the verge of some great transformation—actually not specifically me—*everything* is about to transform itself; nothing is changing as of yet, but everything is about to. This feeling lingers for a substantial amount of time. Or maybe it only lasts for a single second and it's time itself that has slowed to a standstill. This is the last thing I remember. I can't quite say whether the pyramids had a triangular or rectangular base.

Day thirty-five

It was time to speak to the pilot. Once again, gaining his attention proved difficult. Using what small stones I could gather and some excess mayonnaise from the sandwich, I drew a helicopter and a large downward arrow on the floor of the bridge, but he didn't seem to notice. He also didn't respond to my hand waving, nor did I get anywhere with an energetic set of jumping jacks. So later in the day (this time, after politely waiting for the road to clear), I launched my still half-full tea thermos in the direction of the helicopter. It was quality tea, but sometimes sacrifices have to be made.

After the pilot landed on the bridge, he stepped out with his megaphone and told me that from now on if I wanted to talk, I should call him up on his satellite phone from the phone booth that's located under the stairs to the bridge. He then put down the megaphone and used his fingers to signal me the number. I think it was 393939 (hard to be certain with all those repeated digits). Anyway, I didn't have any coins on me, so the call would have to wait till tomorrow.

Meanwhile, the bassoon player is really testing my patience, and I keep forgetting to buy earplugs.

Day thirty-six

After the morning appearance of the vehicles (later than ever—7:15 A.M.), I located the pay phone under the bridge and dialed the pilot's number. I recorded our conversation on tape.

Pilot: Hello, who's this?

Me: It's me, from the bridge.

Pilot: How do I know that?

Me: I assume you saw me walk down from the bridge to the pay phone.

Pilot: Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. Maybe there is no bridge at all. If it really is you, then run a hand through your hair, right . . . now.

Me: From your current vantage point, the phone booth is obscured by the bridge, so even if I touched my hair, you wouldn't be able to see it.

Pilot: Good, that's what I needed to hear—proves you're not an impostor. Now listen: On this line we must keep the length of conversations to under ninety seconds. Also, we must use code words for certain terms. You will find a glossary taped to the wall above the phone.

He hung up. There was indeed a crumpled piece of paper attached with Scotch Tape to the wall of the booth. In all caps it read:

“HELICOPTER = WOMB, BUS = INCUBATOR, TRUCK = HAMSTER, MOTORCYCLE = SUNFLOWER SEED, BRIDGE = FRIDGE, HIGHWAY = DOLPHINARIUM”

I dialed again.

Me: So, I've given up trying to understand the ways of the purple . . . HAMSTER and the yellow SUNFLOWER SEED.

Pilot: And who may I say is calling?

Me: Oh, it's me from the bridge again.

Pilot: Don't you mean FRIDGE?

Me: Yes, of course. It's me from the FRIDGE.

Pilot: You're calling from a fridge? Did your air conditioning break down?

[His sense of humor, if that's what it was, revealed itself to be in even poorer taste than his metaphors.]

Me: I am not really in a fridge, I am in a phone booth.

Pilot: If you really are in a phone booth, then jump right . . . now.

Me: I would hit my head on the ceiling.

Pilot: Good, that's what I wanted to hear—an impostor wouldn't have considered this piece of phone booth trivia. Now, you were saying?

Me: Yes, so I said that I have stopped trying to understand the ways of the purple HAMSTER and the yellow SUNFLOWER SEED. I assume you're in a similar situation. We might be able to help each other.

Pilot: What about the double-decker INCUBATORS?

Me: The INCUBATOR with the film crew?

Pilot: Well, that's one of them.

Me: I think they are an anomaly, insignificant.

Pilot (after a moment of thought): Maybe they are. But I prefer to see nothing as insignificant.

Me: If nothing is insignificant then it must follow that nothing is significant. I am focused on the purple HAMSTER and the yellow SUNFLOWER SEED. I want to try and follow them to their source.

Pilot: And I assume you planned to do it from inside my WOMB, that you want us to track them from above? I'm afraid that's not possible. I must always keep my post here. I gather what information I can by observing the patterns.

[I found it telling that he chose to code the helicopter as "womb." This is most likely someone who does not feel safe when he's out in the world—the dead-animals cabin suits him well.]

Me: The patterns are inconclusive. I've been here long on the FRIDGE, and I have my theories, but I need to go deeper. I wanted to suggest that we use the cat to follow the vehicles for us.

Pilot: I don't know what cat you're talking about . . . don't know the first thing about cats. Ninety seconds!

And with that he hung up.

I was out of coins for the day. As I started to climb back up the bridge, the phone rang. I ran down to answer, but it was a wrong number.

DREAM JOURNAL ENTRY NO. 2

I am standing on the balcony of a high hotel room overlooking the beach. A bright, if somewhat unstable sun hangs over a cloudless sky. Wind-carved sand dunes stretch out on the shoreline like a blanket on an unmade bed. The sea itself is very calm, but under the sun's flickering, it's drifting, undecided, between blue and green. Slowly and silently (in fact in total stillness, as if sound is not a property of this dream world), movement spreads from all sides. Tens, or perhaps hundreds of manta rays appear beneath the waves, swimming toward an invisible point somewhere in the middle of the water. A voice calls me back into the room, but I stay on the balcony to watch the silent silhouettes of the manta rays, whose bodies have now acquired ink-like qualities and are beginning to merge into each other. "Please sir, you have to pay for your breakfast." I did not order any breakfast. I peek into the room, and instead of a room service person, there is a wooden truck the size of a small refrigerator, and it is burning (though very slowly and softly, with an inviting sort of flame, not unlike a country-house fireplace).

Day thirty-seven

When I got to the phone booth in the morning, a new term had been added to the list of code words, neatly scribed with a thick black marker: "CAT = UNBORN CHILD." I called the pilot. He answered in a fake woman's voice; there was an attempt at an accent, vaguely Czech.

Pilot: Vera's Hair-Care Solutions, how may I be of service?

Me: It's me again, from the bri— FRIDGE.

Pilot: Are you calling to make a hair appointment?

Me: It's me from the FRIDGE. You just saw me go down the stairs. You can't see me right now because the phone booth is obscured. Also, I can't jump, as the ceiling of the phone booth would hurt my head.

Pilot (back to his normal voice): A triple proof . . . can't be too careful these days—impostors are everywhere!

[A big black fuel truck chose that moment to fill the air with a deafening horn blast. A strong smell of gasoline and a temporary hearing loss ensued, but a few seconds later, scores of tiny, brightly colored cars reemerged with their beeps and cranky motors and unruly children. I put a finger in my left ear to block out the distractions and concentrated on properly using the code words—it was important I keep the pilot happy in his little word game. I repeated in my head: UNBORN CHILD means cat; HAMSTER means truck.]

Me: I want to use the UNBORN CHILD.

Pilot: In what fashion?

Me: I want to parachute it to the roof of the purple HAMSTER. Then the UNBORN CHILD can penetrate the purple HAMSTER and broadcast to us images from inside. Even if he is discovered by the passengers inside the HAMSTER, they will most likely not suspect an UNBORN CHILD of foul play. That is, if the UNBORN CHILD robot can pass for a real-life UNBORN CHILD.

[A long pause.]

Pilot: Call me back in fifteen minutes.

I used the break to catch up on my morning sandwich, then dialed again. This time he answered in the role of a senile pensioner, which meant the impostor-screening portion of

the conversation lasted three times as long. Just before we exhausted the allotted ninety seconds, he instructed me to write down my address on a small piece of paper, unscrew the receiver cup, and place it inside. The cat would be delivered there tomorrow at nine in the morning.

Even though this was the best piece of news in quite some time, I reminded myself not to get my hopes up too high—if I was able to expose the cat in a matter of minutes, someone else might, too. So tomorrow, I plan to put that robot through some serious tests to see if it's up to the task. On the way home I stopped to do some shopping—milk, cat food, dog food, rat poison (let's see if it can tell the difference), matches, rusty nails, mechanical mice (I bought dozens of those—I have some vague plans for an angry-mob-type simulation), and blank tapes for the tape recorder. I also finally remembered to get earplugs.

Back home, the bassoonist was in full attack mode. More of those weird patterns, blurted out in incredible loudness—it's becoming a real pain (though I must admit that all this incessant practicing seems to have paid off—the speeds he played with tonight bordered on inhuman). This time I went down to his apartment and knocked on the door. He immediately stopped playing, which meant he heard me, but he didn't answer. Knocking harder didn't help. I put my ear to the door. There was total silence and no light was coming through the peephole, no sign that anyone was living there. I assumed he got the message and simply wanted to avoid confrontation, but as soon as I was back in my apartment, he started playing again, somehow even louder than before.

The earplugs certainly help, but some stray notes still manage to crawl through the ear tunnels and find their way to the synapses of my brain.

DREAM JOURNAL ENTRY NO. 3

The shining pyramids have returned. They are farther apart this time, more distant, and possibly even more enormous. I notice mild fluctuations in the intensity of their glow as well as short pauses in the humming, as if they stop to catch their breath. Their colors are brilliant, almost painful on the eyes, the yellow pyramid radiating as if it's built from pieces carved out of the sun. There is a presence far away in the black nothingness. I cannot see it yet, but I know it is approaching. Again, as before, there is the sense of anticipation. Something is about to happen; it will reveal itself. The presence is getting nearer. I can feel it entering the middle pyramid from the back and traveling in my direction, but the pyramid is so vast that this will take a while. I still don't *see* the presence; I only sense it. A physical sensation. Suddenly, the pyramids stop their humming, turn to dull white, play a short tone in unison, and I wake up. It is seven in the morning, and the bassoonist is already at it.

Day thirty-eight

The pilot's package arrived on time. Delivered by whom, I couldn't see, as they left it on my doorstep and were gone by the time I answered the door. It was an unimpressive cardboard box, several lifetimes past its original incarnation, with quite a few crossed-over addresses and labels, the most prominent of which was a handwritten promise of "Socks" (this was either cautious camouflage or, more likely, just plain, horrid stinginess, as it didn't quite smell of roses).

I contacted a man I know who had just bought an old carpentry workshop and got him to let me have the place to myself for the entire day. He's in the process of converting it into a bowling alley, and in the meantime there's total

disarray—only one lane has been completed and to the side of it are piles of chainsaws, chisels, and industrial drills intertwined with all manner of cheap plywood and silver tin cans with indecipherable labels; an overbearing smell of varnish looms over the entire place to complete the ambiance.

After I finished building up the various devices and booby traps, I unpacked the cat. Taped to its forehead was a xeroxed brochure titled “Electromechanical Taxidermy Cat Unit for Surveillance (ETCUS) — Operation Manual.” It contained detailed instructions on how to connect the radio receiver to a TV set so that it displays the video captured by the cat’s internal camera, followed by explanations on the remote control unit and then multiple tables and graphs with temperatures and acceleration rates and stuff that is possibly important but that I couldn’t really bring myself to care about. Unfortunately, it neglected to describe how to install the batteries, so it was only after some embarrassing trial and error that I finally discovered that the batteries are placed by opening the belly of the cat from underneath. There is no power switch—the robot simply comes to life the moment the batteries touch the terminals to form a closed circuit, which was unfortunate, as it resulted in multiple scratches on my forearm. That was obviously quite disconcerting for me, but a point chalked up to the cat robot for realism.

It occurred to me this was the first time I had been alone in a room with a cat, even if it was only a mechanical one. I have never owned or taken care of one, so I have no firsthand experience of the psychological peculiarity that is the cat-human relationship. However, I believe it is exactly this lack of empathy toward the animal that has in turn enabled me to put it through rigorous trials while maintaining the necessary scientific detachment.

I spent the day performing numerous tests and observing the behavior of this curious artificial creature and did not leave the workshop until very late. When I came back home, I longed to unleash the cat on the bassoon fiend, but I'm not supposed to use it for my personal affairs, and besides, it was already packed in its box and I had no wish to once again go through the painful process of inserting the batteries.

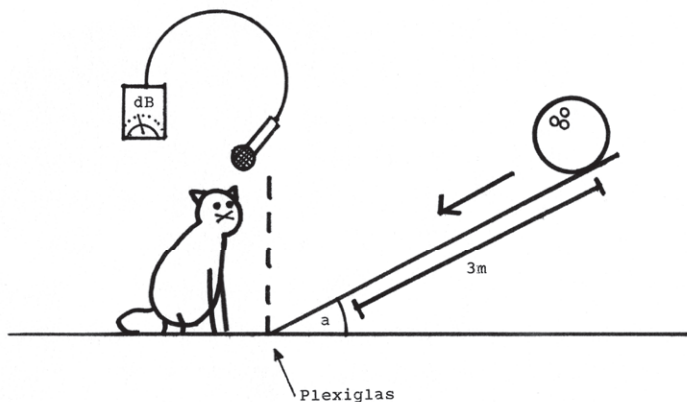
I sat down and wrote a letter to the pilot, which I then wrapped around the cat's detachable tail and placed inside the package.

"Dear pilot," it went, "I am very thankful that you agreed to send ETCUS to me for inspection. I took careful care of him and I return him without any physical damage, and let me assure you that any so-to-speak psychological damage incurred during his time with me was due to actions that were crucial to the evaluation process.

"Although covered with fur of the utmost quality, ETCUS is still a machine, a robot enhanced with so-called artificial intelligence—a set of variables, conditions, equations, and loops aimed at imitating a living creature's thought process. But this is all it is—an imitation. However, if constructed in a particular fashion, the difference between the imitation of life and the presence of life becomes irrelevant. *I look like I think, therefore I look like I am.*

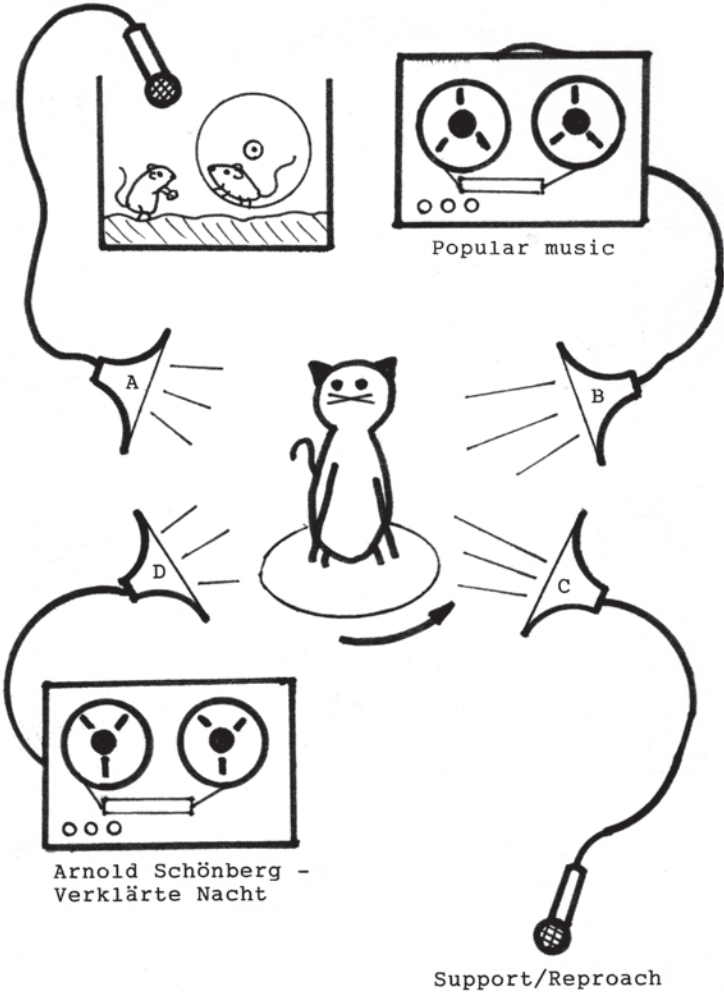
"A child at birth is already endowed with the ability to love, to fear, to feel wonderment, warmth, confusion. Later on it picks up pride, inadequacy, disappointment, bitterness, existential emptiness, suicidal tendencies. A cat is no different, and if ETCUS is to masquerade as a living, emotional being, then he must first learn how to feel. At exactly two o'clock, I stopped supplying him with food, thereby introducing bewilderment and confusion into his system. Next, using the

joystick, I directed him under remote control mode to stand in front of a sheet of transparent Plexiglas, and I tied him to the spot so that he could not move. I then started to hurl bowling balls down a slope in his direction, raising the slope's angle by five degrees after every trial. A microphone was placed above his head that measured the decibels of his voice. Sure enough, his cries became louder in direct relation to the angle of the slope (and therefore the speed of the approaching bowling ball). He looked and sounded (I could tell you took my advice and rerecorded several versions of each sound) like a terrified cat—a very positive result.



“Of the many tests I performed, the most significant one was the revolving chair test, in which I examined the cat’s reaction to rapidly changing emotional stimuli. Using a set of tapes, microphones, and directional speakers, I was able to condense a spectrum of emotions that one would normally experience in the span of a few years into a twenty-five-minute session. The motor-controlled revolving chair on which the cat sat continuously altered its speed and direction, and as a result, the cat in turn faced two distinct types of

emotion-evoking music (B, D), the amplified sound of defenseless mice (A), which he could not attack because for this experiment I again tied him to the chair, and words spoken through a microphone by me (C)—at times words of praise ('You are magnificent. Your fur is sublime'), and at times words of disapproval and scorn.



“I have attached here the four pages of data I collected in this experiment, but you may disregard them, for while perhaps interesting from a research perspective, they are not essential to my assessment. In the first minutes of the experiment, ETCUS tried to counter the bombardment on his emotional centers with several different techniques (the most interesting of which was trying to meow along to Schönberg’s music, though he had a hard time following the rapidly shifting harmonies), then he became visibly angry, hissing at me, scratching the chair, growling. His resolve was steadily weakening as the minutes passed, until finally, he gave up. His eyes blanked, his tail lay flat and motionless, and his gaze became that of a dead man. This, I found to be the most profound aspect of his being: he could no longer endure the fluctuation of his emotional self, and instead he embraced apathy.

“For the rest of the day, he was very difficult to control. He frowned at me whenever our gazes met, tried to scratch me multiple times, tore up the upholstery of the only sofa in the room, and then proceeded to hide inside a trash can. I tried to reason with him, I even mixed extra milk into his cat food and removed nearly all the leftover rat poison, but that did nothing to improve his attitude; he just crouched in the corner of the room and meowed at me in defiance, switching to threatening hisses whenever I got close. This behavior was very realistic, and while it may help him pass for a real live cat, I find that this giving in to petty social behavior can also hinder his ability to function as a surveillance unit. Therefore, I suggest that you consider supplementing ETCUS with an inner voice—a loudspeaker inside his brain that only he can hear, and that, through radio waves, would transmit whatever the operating person voices into the remote control. This would lend him a conscience of sorts, and even more importantly, a friendly

voice inside his head—someone to give him words of encouragement when he's out there all on his own.

“If you are willing to make this modification, then we can parachute ETCUS to the roof of the purple truck. I am certain this will teach us far more than our observations from the bridge ever could.”

Day thirty-nine

The bassoon business is getting out of hand.

Already with the very first note in the morning, I could sense that something was off. The playing—it was darker than usual, which I hadn't imagined possible. *Ominous*. His style had more than evolved, it underwent some sort of mutation. There wasn't even the pretense of a scale anymore, just violent mechanical jabbering, loud and dirty—as if a family of snorting pigs had moved in, and in between belches, they were feeding shards of glass into the grinding teeth of an industrial wood chipper. It was an ugly sound, vulgar, almost obscene. But there was more to it. It wasn't simply the playing that was different; there was something novel about the quality of the sound. Somehow it was rawer, more direct. I could even hear the clicking of the metal keys against the bassoon's wooden body—as though the actual acoustics of the room had transformed.

I went through the house and double-checked that all the windows were shut; that wasn't it. The door to the staircase was closed as well. I knelt down and put my ear to the floor to try and get a better idea. And then I spotted it, right underneath the center of my bed—a hole! Drilled all the way from the ceiling of the bassoonist's apartment to the floor of mine, a clean drilling job complete with sandpaper finish, and it wasn't narrow either—I could almost fit my entire hand in it.

I rushed out of the apartment, climbed down the stairs, and banged on his door with an angry fist. No reaction—he didn't even bother to stop playing this time. I ran back up, pushed my bed to the side, and stuck my eye in the hole. Pitch-black. I still hadn't bought a flashlight, so I took a coin and dropped it into the hole to see what sound it made. However, the bassoon was so loud that I couldn't hear anything, and two seconds later the coin shot back up and hit me right in the eye.

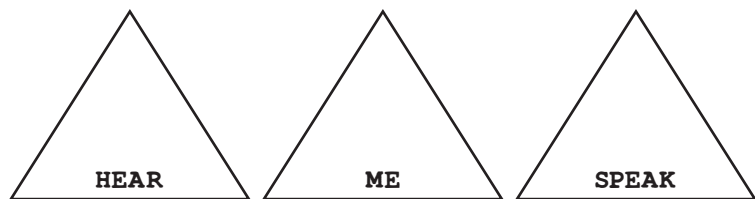
I fetched the broom from the hallway, carefully inserted it into the hole, and swayed it around. I could feel resistance on all sides, as if there was some sort of tube attached to the bottom of the hole—solid material but with a certain degree of elasticity, I assume rubber. I jerked the broom around to try and get a feel for the shape of the tube. The bassoonist, clearly not happy with my intrusion, protested by barking through the instrument like a rabid dog. Unfortunately, this was accompanied by a gust of air that also carried a fair amount of liquids—most likely some inadvertent spit from the insides of the bassoon. The rubber tube must have been directly connected to the instrument, thus delivering its unfiltered sound directly into my apartment—a perversely conceived amplification system, as viciously efficient as it is primitive. What's going on? Why go through all this trouble? I cursed and shouted profanities into the tube, I stomped on it—all to no effect. Then later I came up with the idea of pouring water into it, but that did nothing except transform the noises from the barks of an angry pit bull into the shrieks of killer whales in heat.

Is it simply a case of an insane individual? No, I know better than to dismiss it so carelessly. Is he connected to the truck people? Did they notice me and are now sending a message? I have absolutely nothing to go on, all empty guesses, and I definitely can't think clearly under all this noise.

I took a trip to the hardware store and got an all-purpose premixed joint compound (generally intended for drywall repair, but I was told it should do the job) and emptied the entire bucket into the hole. It will take twenty-four hours to completely dry, but it's already an improvement.

DREAM JOURNAL ENTRY NO. 4

The three pyramids. I've been expecting them. Red, yellow, and green. Glowing. Beyond them, blackness. The humming, now low and loud and mean. All as before. The moment of anticipation. The presence approaching, slowly. Or fast? It is almost at the front side of the center pyramid. I can start making out its shape. Like a huge leaf, or actually a manta ray, not swimming or floating—flying? No, hovering. As if it's standing upright on its tail. It is approaching. Its eyes have all the colors of the universe. It has arrived. It is here. It is staring at me now, ready to speak. A wonderful voice, low and monotonous; I can't tell if I really hear it, or if it is only felt. And every word that is spoken appears on a different pyramid in huge letters. One word after the other. And the manta ray presence utters these three words:



Day forty

There is no choice but to leave the apartment, at least for the time being. Not only was the joint compound completely

removed from the hole during my sleep, but right next to it, three brand-new holes appeared. How he drilled them without me waking up is a complete mystery—even with the earplugs, I was bound to hear something. So now I get the bassoonist's cacophonies in full quadraphonic experience. This can't go on! I packed some stuff and headed for the bridge—the situation in my apartment was severe, but I had more pressing things to attend to.

When I got there, I called up the pilot to talk about the cat robot, also known as ETCUS, also known as the UNBORN CHILD in the coded language of our pay phone conversations. Surprisingly, he skipped the usual security questions and jumped right to it.

Pilot: The UNBORN CHILD will be ready in two days' time.

Me: I am very happy to hear that. How will we parachute him?

Pilot: We won't. We'll just throw him off the FRIDGE. He's an UNBORN CHILD; he'll land on his feet.

Me: That makes things simpler.

Pilot: Anything else?

Me: Yes, you wouldn't happen to know anything about a bassoon player?

[A shot in the dark, but I decided to take it.]

Pilot: What's a bassoon?

Me: A woodwind instrument, like an oboe but bigger and longer. It has a deeper sound.

Pilot: I've never heard of such an instrument in my life. In fact, I don't know the first thing about musical instruments. Ninety seconds.

[Bleep.]

Day forty-one

I spent the night in a hotel. Had a dreamless, and more importantly, bassoon-less sleep. I took the breakfast deal, which proved to be a total rip-off (overcooked tea, shady sausages, a disturbingly happy group of caffeinated tourists), and then the room was no vision either—a tasteless mixture of yellows and browns; apparently when I told the desk clerk “single room, please,” the guy heard, “one mustard jar, and make it stuffy.”

I know I shouldn't complain, but I am still very much outraged by my imposed eviction.

Day forty-two

Did nothing of consequence. Walked the hotel corridors, stared at the ceiling, even found myself browsing the three channels of the wall-mounted TV (only a hotel situation could ever make me turn on that appliance)—a monumental waste of a day. But I don't care: tomorrow we throw the cat on the truck.

Day forty-three

I missed.

Though not by much—he landed instead on the driverless seat of the yellow motorcycle. Then he just sat there frozen, frightened out of his artificial mind as the motorcycle carried him away at eighty miles per hour; in less than a minute, he was already out of sight.

I ran down the stairs as quickly as I could and stepped into the control module—a trailer we'd parked under the bridge, with a cheap leather chair in the back and a monitor that receives the transmission from the camera inside the cat's left eye socket. The picture I was getting was very shaky. ETCUS

was obviously overwhelmed—his stare was locked on the motorcycle seat—and consequently my monitor was displaying a wobbly image of vinyl upholstery. It was exactly for this type of situation that I'd had the pilot install a loudspeaker inside the cat's head.

I switched on the microphone: "Can you hear me? Shake your head twice if you can." Nothing. "ETCUS, can you hear me? Can you move your head?" No movement. I assumed that even if he was hearing me, he was too distressed to respond—artificial or not, he was in a genuine state of shock. "Okay," I said, "take a deep breath. Try to relax. I will be here with you the whole time." I waited for a while, then tried again with as empathic a voice as I could muster. "My dear *friend*, are you all right? Can you hear the sound of my voice?" For a few seconds there was no response, but then the monitor showed a hesitant tilt motion toward the sky. The personal touch worked. We were in business.

"Okay. Here is the situation. You are on a speeding motorcycle. This was not the plan. You do not know how to drive a motorcycle. In fact, your arm span is too short to control one. But don't worry, I've witnessed this motorcycle on many occasions, and let me tell you—there's no other vehicle I'd rather find myself stuck on. This one is as calm and safe as it gets. Easy rider. Smooth as milk." (These were of course blatant lies—the yellow motorcycle was prone to risk taking and the picture was shaking like a Chilean earthquake—but my audience was a cat robot so I allowed myself some leeway.)

"Now, I know you're thinking it was cruel of us to leave you without some sort of protective headgear, that your head could have, and still might, smash into tiny bits. And the truth is we knew full well it was dangerous to throw you without a helmet, but do not think for a moment that it means we are

not your friends. The fact is that a cat with a helmet would have seemed out of place, unnatural, and we couldn't risk it. But more than that, it shows that I trust you to be okay. You are a brave and wondrous cat—always remember that. Always. This is a great adventure. *Your* adventure. Tell me something: Are you just another alley cat rummaging through filthy trash bins for leftovers? Are you a fat house cat sitting at the feet of your chubby middle-aged bourgeois owner who loves you to death but whom you despise? No! You are out and about, investigating! Your occupation? Curiosity—the highest calling of the feline.

“Aren't you glad you're alive? Forget about danger for a moment. Observe the side of the road. Look at all the colors of the flowers passing by. Isn't the world beautiful? Forget about the people driving the cars, forget about your destination or the circumstances that have led you to this moment in time—these are all trivialities—and just look at the beauty of it all. Cars, machines, going from place to place. In many different colors. Boxes on wheels. Look at the gray road, with all the symbols painted on it—a language! Look at the bridges passing above you every other minute, carrying more cars, supporting all this weight for years upon years, not giving in. And above it all, the skies, stretching forever, with clouds hanging like giant pieces of unprocessed cotton. Some say they look like sheep. I disagree. Not that sheep hanging in the sky would not make for a pleasing spectacle, but sheep are too weak, too helpless, too *sheepish*; sheep are not independent cats like you! No, I say clouds are like mountains of timelessness, gateways to another realm. A prettier realm, where everything is slow and orange. Close your eyes. See that orange.

“Yes, relax. You are a beautiful relaxed cat. You are not afraid. Fear, for you, is but a word—even less, a senseless

succession of sounds, a toothless syllable, lines etched on a discarded piece of paper. Mere words can't hold you down, vowels can never touch you. You are bound by nothing. You are free.

“Good. I feel you relaxing. Think to that orange realm above the clouds. Very good. Orange. Can you see it? The orange is slowly changing. It gets some blues, a light and beautiful gust of blue wind is flowing into it, and the orange is transforming into purple. Can you see it in your mind's eye? Good. You are a wonderful being. A top cat. Purple. Magical purple. You enjoy that purple. Very good.”

He was primed. It was time to take charge.

“Open your eyes! Look to the sides. Do you see a purple truck? You love that purple. Jump on it. Now!”

The monitor flickered with jagged lines and spurts of white noise as ETCUS took a leap full of spirited agility that landed him directly on the roof of the purple truck. Phase one was complete. Now all he needed to do was find a way to penetrate the truck's cargo container so he could start transmitting images of the people inside.

ETCUS scouted the container for possible entry points, but evidently there were none. The only way in would be to bore a hole through the roof using his high-powered reinforced-steel robot claws. This could be tricky, but as long as he didn't employ maximal power, the sounds of the highway and the noise of the truck's own motor should be enough to mask the action from the people in the belly of the truck.

After twenty minutes of intense drilling, when the hole was about the size of a tennis ball, I told ETCUS to operate more quietly—there was still much work to be done and we couldn't risk detection. For him to be able to sneak into the truck, the hole needed to be about three times wider (he may have been

modeled after one of nature's most flexible creatures, but his metallic skeleton was as stiff as a dead dinosaur's). It was an excruciating process, not only for ETCUS, but for me as well. Every few minutes he seemed to be losing interest, and I had to keep encouraging him through the microphone not to give up, remind him what a great hero he was, and occasionally throw in a good word about the pristine quality of his fur. (Not only this, but it seemed that the level of compliments had to constantly be escalated for him to remain invested.)

The hole was finally wide enough, but still it was impossible to make any details of the insides of the truck; no matter how I adjusted the monitor's brightness and contrast dials, the picture remained too dark. I asked ETCUS to insert his head carefully through the hole and take a peek inside, but he wouldn't comply—apparently, at that moment, licking random drilling residue carried a more glamorous allure. I pleaded with him for another ten minutes, repeated the clouds monologue, and the oranges, and the fearlessness, and then told him that he was not only a great cat, but in fact a great person. This last line piqued his interest enough to stave off the licking, but still he wouldn't cooperate. So I decided to hold my nose and temporarily promote him to the stature of a monarch. "King ETCUS," I declared, "the sun, the stars, and the moon are in awe of your everlasting beauty."

That did the trick. In fact, it worked too well. He was so thrilled with the compliment that he threw all caution to the wind and, with too much force, popped his head into the hole. This made him lose his grip on the roof and sent him free-falling into the truck's cargo hold. The metallic clunk of him hitting the floor was transmitted to my high-fidelity headphones in agonizing precision that left my ears ringing for the better part of an hour. This was going to be a disaster.

Only, it wasn't.

Because, as it became clear once he could collect himself enough to have a look around, there was no one there to see him. No people holding remote controls, no multinationals taking turns, nobody—all my theories were proven wrong. In fact, not only were there no people, but there weren't any seats either or anything to suggest that a person had ever occupied that space. Instead, there were just tens of rows of cassette tape recorders stacked one on top of the other. They probably didn't contain music but some form of data. They had no speakers; the only sound coming from them was the mechanical rattling of their transport motors. Some were spinning slowly, some were idle, and some were frantically alternating between fast forward and rewind, occasionally pausing in between. And except for a few gray tape recorders in the bottom row, they were all arranged in a checkered pattern: half of the tape recorders were purple, and the other half, yellow.

ETCUS was dizzy from the fall and seemed incapable of moving his legs. He just lay there, tilting his head around like a cheap bobblehead doll, the movements probably having more to do with the shaking of the truck than any voluntary motion on his part.

"It's okay," I said into the microphone, "you did great. Just stay on the floor for now and relax." It was important that he rest, and even more important, I wanted to keep him from fiddling with the tape recorders. That they were color coded in purple and yellow meant in all likelihood that they controlled the purple truck and the yellow motorcycle, and as far as I could tell, even the slightest disturbance in the operation of the tapes might make the truck drive head-on into a lamp-post, ruining itself, the cat, and my only chance of knowing what had always been most important—the trip's destination.

The already faint picture on the monitor was continuously deteriorating, until at some point it vanished completely, giving way to some geometric patterns in green and orange. When I called the pilot, he told me it was actually a positive sign—had ETCUS been completely destroyed, my screen would have just displayed static noise; the patterns meant he was in sleep mode, conserving energy.

I stayed in front of the monitor for the rest of the day. Every hour or so the cat robot drifted back to life and a shaky image would appear for a few seconds, always taken from the same corner of the truck. The cassette tapes had labels on them, but the bad quality of the road, coupled with the cat's damaged motor skills, made for difficult reading. So it's with caution that I consider this list of words that I managed to jot down by sundown:

Purple tape—ROUTE 1

Purple tape—ROUTE 2 (or 7?)

Purple tape—ROUTE 4

Yellow tape—ASPIRATION LOOPS

Purple tape—KATHY (?)

Purple tape—GROCERIES

Yellow tape—JOYRIDE (?)

Yellow tape—THEATRICALS

I had almost no communication with the helicopter pilot the entire day, and by early evening he was already gone, but I decided I would spend the night here in the trailer. I left the headphones on so that whenever ETCUS reemerged from his sleep, I would wake up with him.

He did switch on for another short moment around 2:00 A.M. The picture was not shaky anymore. He was standing closer to the wall of tape recorders now, and in the middle of the frame was a purple tape recorder with a labeled cassette.

I had just come out of sleep, so the light from the screen was too harsh on my eyes, and by the time I found the brightness dial, the picture had already faded. I can't be sure, but I think the inscription was something in the vein of "ALPHA PATTERNS."

At five in the morning, I took a quick stroll to shake off the fatigue, and when I returned to the trailer, the cat's camera was broadcasting again. However, it was no longer showing the insides of the truck. Underneath some mild noise patterns caused by electrical interruptions to the transmission, a beautiful picture emerged of the sun rising behind the foggy silhouette of a small mountain.

Day forty-four

I don't know how ETCUS got out of the truck, whether he was detected by someone or is still in the clear, but never mind that for now. This was the destination (or the source), this is where the purple truck and yellow motorcycle drive to every afternoon, and this is where they leave from in the morning, and now I had eyes on the place.

Unfortunately, the transmission was getting weaker with each passing moment; yesterday was a busy day and I had worked ETCUS to exhaustion. He had to be turned off for now so that the batteries would replenish themselves through the solar panels in his nonfilming eye.

He went to sleep in some bushes. I will sleep in the trailer. As long as he is there, I must remain here by the monitor. This is my new home.