

GAMELIFE

A MEMOIR

MICHAEL W. CLUNE





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For Jenny and Sean

1.

Suspended

I wasn't surprised when the computer appeared. I'd seen it coming on TV. Television was pictures on a screen. After television came the words. In the den of our old Victorian house in Evanston, after the VCR tape of *The Parent Trap* was over and my sister Jenny dozed beside me, and my parents were upstairs and hadn't yet noticed the television babble had stopped, I watched the static. I waited for something to emerge. I was seven. After fifteen minutes, nothing. After twenty minutes, still nothing. After a half hour the static was like a pulverized alphabet. Ten minutes later I saw the first letter. V. Assembled in a flash from tiny gray and black slats, it jumped from one corner of the screen to the other and vanished.

So I was ready for the words at the end of television. My father set up the computer in the small second-floor room by the back staircase. My mother said that in the old days that had been the nursery. She said my great-grandfather had lived in that room when he was a baby. He was dead, I never met him. My mother said he was probably thinking about me.

The Commodore 64 was a swollen beige keyboard. The small television and the keyboard housing the mysterious computer circuits sat on a card table. I sat on a wooden chair—an extra from the kitchen table far below. Behind the ex-television screen, and slightly above it, a narrow window showed the blue summer sky. The pre-words of high clouds spun in the static of the sun. I realized why the default setting of the computer screen is blue. I typed in a sentence.

-Color 2

The screen changed to green.

-Color 3

The screen changed to red.

-Color 10

-ERROR

-Color 15

-ERROR

-Make Castle

-ERROR

The first thing a human needs to know about computers is that not every sequence of words will work. The second thing a human needs to know about computers is that almost every sequence of words will not work. I took a deep breath. I looked down at the keyboard, a hive of unknown words: XFK. CRYSTEP. SEPT1HLP. Which combinations would work? Which ones were error?

I stared at the red screen. The undersides of my legs grew sweaty on the hard wood chair.

-Make

I stopped typing. The cursor blinked at me. Make what? I closed my eyes. Nothing. The error was in me! I didn't know what I wanted from the computer.

When my father found me, he gently raised my head from the keyboard. He dried my eyes with the edge of his shirt. Then he started to tell me about computer games. A computer game is a device for giving people things to want from computers.

The game I picked out with my father at the store was called *Suspended*. It belonged to a now forgotten genre known as “text-based adventures.” It was made by a company called Infocom, which had practically invented the genre with their 1978 game *Zork*. The front of the box had a picture. On the back of the box were words:

A robot who hears but cannot see ...

You are suspended—physically immobilized, frozen but alive—20 miles beneath the surface of an automated planet. Three computers, supposedly perfect and fail-safe, control the entire planet's weather, transportation, and food production. You are linked to the computer system in case of an emergency—in case, for some unthinkable, unimaginable reason, the computers malfunction.

A robot who sees but cannot wander ...

Should the impossible happen, should something go wrong, you must fix the computers as quickly as possible, since people will be dying—victims of a utopia turned nightmare—unless you do.

A robot who feels but cannot hear ...

You cannot move. You have six robots at your disposal to do your work for you—highly specialized, programmed robots, all obedient, all helpful, all individualized. You will have to manipulate them in and around an Underground Complex where the computers are controlled. You will address and work them separately and jointly, and they will report back to you with their progress and perceptions.

Think logically. Act decisively.

This description mesmerized me. I read it through four times. Then I turned the box over to examine the picture on the front. A man's large blue face. His eyes closed. *Suspended*, I thought.

“How old are you, son?”

I jumped a little. It was a clerk, staring down at me through wire-rim glasses.

“Um ... seven,” I stammered.

He shook his head.

“This game is designed for older players,” he said. “Ages sixteen and up.”

He took the box from me and replaced it on the shelf.

“There's some games you might like over in the next aisle,” he said. “Fun games.”

I turned where he pointed and walked away, dazed. Sixteen? I did the math in my head. From seven to sixteen is ... nine. Nine years until I would be sixteen. I couldn't wait nine years!

I stopped. The aisle was piled with brightly colored boxes. I looked at them. Games about mazes. Baseball. There was even a box with Big Bird on the cover. No way. I turned around. Leaned past a shelf piled with computer manuals to scan the aisle I'd just left. The clerk had his back to me, talking to another customer. I inched back toward the *Suspended* boxes.

What if I got it anyway?

I looked over my shoulder, suddenly worried that my father was watching. But he was at the counter, chatting with the cashier. So what if I play it nine years early? I thought. It's a game. How could it be dangerous?

I'm going to get it, I decided. I crept up and snatched the box from the shelf, and walked as quickly as my legs would carry me to the counter.

Hurry, I thought, looking back for the bad clerk.

My father glanced at the box, nodded. I gave it to the cashier so he could ring it up. The cashier looked at me, but he didn't say anything.

My father had the radio on as we drove back from the store. President Reagan was on it. He was talking about Iran. He said that the best gift human beings could give to the future was an error-free world.

"We will not stand for error," Reagan intoned.

"Eliminate error," my father whispered to himself.

No more error, I thought. Outside the car windows, the giant summer daisies turned slowly on the stems. The road beneath us vibrated like an eyeless, earless, noseless robot. Deep summer blue above the color of swarming airplanes.

Everything is about to change, I thought.

* * *

"You have been awakened."

Floppy disk inserted, computer turned on, a whirring, and then this sentence, followed by a blinking cursor. I'd lowered the blinds over the window, but the rims of sunwheels slid through the slats.

I studied the card with the list of words the game recognized. It was a short list. "Report." "Move." "Press Button."

"Auda, report," I typed.

Auda was the robot who could hear.

"I hear wind coming from the sloping corridor."

I studied the colored map that had come with the game.

"Iris, report," I typed.

Iris was the seeing robot.

"I am in the Transit Control Area. The screen shows malfunctioning aircabs have now killed twelve thousand people on the surface. There are three buttons."

"Iris, press button."

"I do not have hands," she said.

"Sensa here," scrolled across the screen. "I am picking up a disturbance by elevator bank A."

“Auda, report,” I typed.

“I am hearing the sound of footsteps in the sloping corridor,” she said.

“Whiz, report.”

Whiz had intelligence.

“I am in the data library sir. What would you like to know?”

“What are the footsteps?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Iris here. Malfunctioning aircabs have now killed twenty thousand people on the surface. There are three buttons.”

“Auda, press button,” I typed.

“There is no button here,” she said.

“Sensa here,” scrolled across the screen. “I am sensing a disturbance in the library.”

I checked the colored map. The sloping corridor led from the elevator banks to the library.

“Whiz, report,” I typed.

“Whiz has been disabled,” scrolled across the screen.

“Auda, move to Transit Control Area,” I typed.

“I don’t know what that is,” Auda replied.

I studied the command sheet, studied the map.

“Auda, move southeast,” I typed.

“Moving southeast,” she said.

“You hear footsteps in the room outside your chamber,” the screen scrolled. “You see shadow shapes bent over the controls of your cryogenic suspension tank. Your life support systems have been disabled. You have failed.”

The screen went black.

“What the hell?” I said.

After a few seconds the frustration drained away, and it hit me: I’d been inside. I’d been *somewhere else*. I looked to see where it was I was.

An angle of sunlight cut across the reflection of the small boy in the computer screen. Summer wind moved behind the walls. The boy’s great-grandfather stood behind the wooden chair. He stood without eyes, without ears, without hands.

* * *

The next time I played, I discovered Waldo, a robot with multiple arms who could move quickly and lift heavy things. Waldo, Iris, Auda, Sensa, Whiz, and Poet. Poet could sense the flow of electricity. I also discovered the hulk of a seventh robot. I moved Waldo to the Transit Control Area, where he was able to operate the controls that disabled the aircabs, which ended the murder on the planet’s surface and delayed the arrival of the squad sent to disable me.

I also discovered a strange text on the back of the game manual, after the page with the commands. It was a paragraph long, and it described the game’s creator. His name was Michael Berlyn. The paragraph described how Michael was a valued and creative member of the Infocom team. It said that he drank a great deal of coffee. It then said that he had worked too hard on *Suspended*, and that he had become insane following completion of the game. At the time, I didn’t understand that this was game designer humor.

"Do you know anyone who has become insane?" I asked James.

James was my cousin from Ireland, visiting for the summer. He was three years older than me and had wonderful fair hair, and all the girls in our summer school class had a crush on him. We were sitting on the beach a couple of blocks from my house. James shrugged.

"My mother went insane," he said. "From drugs, it was."

I was taken aback.

"She's okay now, though?"

I'd seen my aunt just last summer. A large, warm, melancholy woman.

"Oh, ay, she's right enough now," said James.

"So ... when you become insane, do—"

"Why are you so fascinated with becoming insane all of a sudden?" James asked.

"I'm not," I said. "So when you become insane, what happens?"

He shrugged.

"I dunno."

"But you said your mother—"

"Look," he said. "Now I'm going to tell you just this one thing and then we're going to shut up about insanity, all right?"

I nodded.

"Right then," he said. "When you get insane, you can't talk right."

"Can't talk right. Like how?"

An idea occurred to me.

"Like you don't understand a lot of sentences?"

He nodded.

"What else?"

"Your hearing gets messed. Like I'll be after talking to her for ten minutes and it'll be like she's heard nothin'."

I was astounded. James noticed.

"Can she move her hands?" I breathed.

"You mean when she's insane?" He thought about it. "Yes," he said. "I mean no."

He looked over his shoulder. My little sister, Jenny, who we were supposed to be keeping an eye on, was making drip castles by the water.

"I'll tell you something else, if you keep it quiet," he said.

It was getting late. The sun's giant face was crossed with air transit lines, and on the lawns behind the beach, the daisies had stopped moving. The lake droned.

"Insane people see things that aren't there," James whispered.

"Oh!" I said.

"And it's inside," he said. "It's inside that it goes bad. When you're insane, it's the inside that rots. The things she'd say, her not understanding plain English, the look in her eyes. Well that's all small stuff, really. But it's what it *shows* that counts. What it shows about what's happening inside."

"What's happening inside?"

"It was the priest told us that," James said. "The priest said *her soul is disturbed*."

"Poet, touch seventh robot," I typed.

"I am detecting faint electrical activity within this hulk," Poet said.

“Iris, look at seventh robot.”

“I see a giant robot. Its eyes are closed.”

“Sensa, report.”

“I sense a disturbance inside the seventh robot.”

“Auda, what do you hear?”

“I don’t understand that.”

“Auda, listen to the robot.”

“I don’t understand that.”

“Auda, report.”

“I hear wind,” said Auda. “I hear footsteps.”

* * *

“I wish I could stay here,” said James.

“You have to go back to Ireland at the end of the summer,” my little sister told him. “You have to go back to school.”

“Shut up, Jenny.”

“Everybody has to go back to school.”

“Jenny, you be quiet,” my mother called from the front of the station wagon.

We were on our way to Studio M. Mrs. Larson, the third-grade teacher from St. Mary’s, the small Catholic school Jenny and I attended, ran a month-long summer session of creative activities for gifted children. The criteria for giftedness were elastic. Jenny’s gift, for example, was complaining that if James and I got to go, then she should be able to go. My gift was lip-synching. James’s gift was writing.

The low brick school building pulsed dully in the sun. We trooped out of the station wagon. I was the last to leave, and as I got out, my mother reached through the car’s open window to grab my shirt.

“Michael,” she hissed.

“What, Mom?”

“Shhhh!”

She looked furtively at the school entrance twenty paces away, where James and Jenny stared back at us. She pulled me close.

“James can’t stay with us,” she hissed in my ear.

“What?”

“He’s going to want to, and honey, I wish we could. God knows, he’s going to want to stay with us even more now that his mother—damn it!”

Jenny was running toward the car.

“What, Mom?” I asked.

“Nothing!” she called out, loud enough for James to hear. “Have a good time, children. See you in two hours!”

The station wagon sped off into the summer haze.

“What was she on about?” James asked.

“Who knows?” I said.

Inside, we joined the seven other gifted members of Studio M. Mrs. Larson stood over everyone beaming. She was a hyperactive woman gifted at projecting her facial expressions through time and

space using the funnels of children's brains. What Mrs. Larson expressed was happiness. Her face worked exclusively with happiness. Compacted into impossible densities in the pressures of her interior, concentrated happiness sprang out of her face, uncoiling through our spiral lives.

When her expression of joy emerges at the other end of us it will be a constellation in the sky.

I love her.

"Who wants to start?" she sang delightedly.

"Start what, Mrs. Larson?" we chorused.

"With a creative event!" She sprang to the blackboard, yellow chalk stick in hand.

"In the last week who has experienced a CREATIVE EVENT?"

And as our answers babbled out she answered herself, shouting, "Everyone! Everyone has experienced a creative event. Neil!"

"I finished *Prince Caspian*," said Neil, a blond kid whose father worked for the FBI and had a gun.

"*Prince Caspian* is one of the *Chronicles of Narnia*."

"Wonderful, Neil!" said Mrs. Larson, the magic words of the title unspooling from her pinwheeling hand at the board. "A wonderful book! To read a book is to create! Without a reader the words are just marks! They're nothing!"

"Errors!" I shouted.

"Yes, Michael!" she screamed. "Yes, exactly! A book by itself is an error! A reader like Neil is CREATOR! James!"

"I started writing a story, Mrs. Larson."

She had to sit down. She pulled up one of the tiny chairs meant for eight-year-olds and lowered herself onto it. We leaned forward.

"Now maybe," she whispered, "maybe your wonderful Irish accent has tricked my poor old ears, James. But I thought you said ... no! You can't have. You can't have started ... started to write..."

She looked at him imploringly.

"I've started a story, Mrs. Larson."

Looking directly up at God, she ascended from her chair like the space shuttle.

"But a story without a reader is nothing," Neil called out worriedly. "Reading is the creative part. Like *Prince Caspian*. Right, Mrs. Larson?"

"To write is to commune with the unborn," she said, "Tell us about the story, James."

"My story's called 'Firefox,'" he said.

"My story," she corrected.

"My story," he continued. "It's about a bad computer that comes through the power lines, like, and electrocutes people."

"That's amazing," she said. "Tell me more."

"That's all I've got, like. This wicked computer that'll come through the wires and blow up your telly."

"And then what?" asked Elizabeth, a dark-haired girl I was in love with.

"Whaddaya mean?" James said. "And so it blows up yer telly and then ya call the FBI and they pull out all the wires and they follow it to the computer and they shut it down and ya buy a new telly and it happens again."

Joy poured out of Mrs. Larson's face.

"It happens again," she breathed. "Every moment is unique. Every instant is singular. And

happens again. The secret of creation. It happens again and again and again. Listen! Do you know what the word ‘omnipresent’ means, children?”

We shook our heads.

“It means the Holy Spirit is everywhere,” she said. The quiet joy had come suddenly into her face. “And children, you might have something happen. Something like what happened in James’s story. Something rare and magical. And you might say to yourself, This cannot happen again. What are the chances? you might say. Once in a lifetime. Have you heard your parents say that, children? Have you heard them speak of a *once-in-a-lifetime event*?”

We nodded, thinking of Disney World.

“Well,” she said. “Let me tell you a secret, children. The *once-in-a-lifetime event* happens again. It happens again and again. Let me share something wonderful with you.”

She clasped her hands, the loud joy climbing back into her eyes.

“If I had a dollar for every once-in-a-lifetime event,” she sang, “if I had a dollar for every impossible, incredible, never-to-be-repeated event that will happen to every single one of your children! For example, if I had a dollar for every once-in-a-lifetime event that will happen to you, Elizabeth ... do you know how many dollars I would have?”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“Five *trillion*,” said Mrs. Larson. “Five trillion. Five trillion.”

* * *

“Iris, report.”

“Malfunctioning aircabs have now killed twenty thousand people on the surface. There are three buttons.”

“Waldo, press middle button.”

“I have pressed the middle button.”

“Iris, report.”

“Aircab activity has now halted.”

“Poet, move south.”

“I am now in the Outer Library.”

“Poet, move south.”

“I am now in the Index Peripheral.”

“Poet, move south.”

“I am now in the Central Core.”

“Poet, report.”

“I detect massive watts of energy moving in knots behind the panels.”

The knots were words, I knew.

“Whiz, report.”

“I am in the Central Core.”

“Use.”

“Use what?”

“Use knots.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Read.”

“Read what?”

“Read energy knots.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You hear footsteps in the room outside your chamber,” the screen scrolled. “You see shadow shapes bent over the controls of your cryogenic suspension tank. Your life support systems have been disabled. You have failed.”

* * *

“How many times can you die?” I asked James.

“Three,” he said. “You mean in *Pac-Man*?”

“No, in life,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. He thought. “I don’t think you can die too many times.”

“How many?” I persisted.

“Well,” he said. “Jesus. Now, come on with yourself.”

“What?”

“Well, how many stories have you heard where someone dies, and then they die *again*?”

“In *Suspended* I die every day,” I whispered.

“What?”

“*Suspended*,” I said. “In *Suspended* I die all the time.”

“Whaddaya mean, you die all the time? How many?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, Michael,” he said. “If ya had to venture a guess about how many fuckin’ times you can die in fuckin’ *Suspended*, what would you say?”

His swearing made me anxious.

“I don’t know!” I said. “A trillion.”

His eyes widened. “A *trillion*, is it?”

“If I had to guess,” I said. “Yes. One trillion times.”

He seemed impressed. He looked down at his feet, the way he did when he was thinking about something secret. The way he did after his father called on the phone from Ireland. Finally, he shook his head.

“Listen to us two fools! *Suspended* is only a game. Sure, how many lives you’ve got in *Suspended* doesn’t mean anything more than how many lives you’ve got in *Pac-Man*.”

“It’s nothing like *Pac-Man*,” I said hotly. “*Pac-Man*’s not even a person.”

“And *Suspended* is only robots! You told me yerself.”

“There’s more than robots,” I said. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, James. *Suspended* has a person in it.”

“Oh yeah, who?”

“Me!” I said. “I am. I’m a person in *Suspended*.”

“But come on now,” James lectured me. “You can’t move or touch or see or hear or anything in *Suspended*. You need a robot to do everything for you. I don’t call that being a person.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not a person,” I said.

“Yes it does,” he said.

That night I imagined myself lying on my bed. Then I took away my hands. Okay, I thought, now

can't feel the bedsheet. But I'm still a person. Then I took away my mouth. I can't talk now, I'm still a person. Then I imagined my ears closing in on themselves like flowers at night. No sounds, but I'm still a person. I took away my eyes. Now I couldn't see myself lying there. I couldn't feel myself on the bed. I couldn't hear anything.

I'm a person, I thought. I am a person who can die one trillion times.

* * *

James never played *Suspended* with me. After dinner, James and Jenny and my mom would gather before the big TV downstairs where the Atari was plugged in and play *Pac-Man* or *Donkey Kong* while I climbed the back stairs to the computer room alone. James never came.

"To be honest with you, Michael," he said to me one evening at dinner, "that game sounds boring as hell. I don't want to play it. And to be perfectly honest, I don't want to hear about that fucking game again."

"James!" said my mother, shocked.

"Sorry, Auntie Barb," James said, looking into his potatoes.

My sister smiled at me. My mother placed her knife and fork on her plate.

"James," she said, "you might be able to say those words at home in Ireland. But you are not home now."

"Yes, Auntie Barb," he said.

"This isn't your home," she said. "This isn't *like* your home in Ireland."

"All right, Barb," said my father, swallowing his last mouthful and pushing back his plate.

"I'm just saying," said my mother. "Jenny and Michael are here."

"All right," my father said.

That night I made my great breakthrough in *Suspended*. I'd been trying to get Whiz to tell me what was in the library data banks. I knew it would help me. I'd gone as far as I could on my own. I stopped the aircabs from killing people. But the planet's other systems, the air and water and food systems that were responsible for, they were too complicated.

I now knew that I had only six turns after each new success before the footsteps of the mysterious strangers came to shut me down. I needed another success. I needed a hint, a clue.

The answer, I believed, lay in deciphering the obscure fate of my predecessor. I learned of this shadowy figure by accident. I had been moving Poet through the underground complex to the Hydroponics Control Center, but I must have gotten lost. When I asked for his report he said: "I am in the room with the seventh robot. The one your predecessor disabled."

"Who is my predecessor?" I typed with trembling hands.

"I don't know what that means."

"What is predecessor?"

"I don't know what that means."

Whiz, I thought. Whiz could tell me. The fifth robot possessed enormous intelligence, and once I moved him to the library, he had access to the accumulated knowledge of an entire planet. But I didn't know the command that would unlock it.

That night, after the dinner where my mother had twice reminded James that our home was not like his home, I found the correct command.

"Whiz, tell me about predecessor."

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Speak to me about predecessor.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Communicate to me about predecessor.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

I got desperate: “Pray to me about predecessor.”

And then I let go and fell into the darkness:

“Whiz, know to me about predecessor.”

“Understand to me about predecessor.”

“Make predecessor known to me.”

“Press button of word, predecessor.”

“Tell me about predecessor, please.”

“Open predecessor word.”

“Use word. Predecessor.”

I searched my brains for the correct command. And then the breakthrough. This is the breakthrough: When you meet the thing that lives outside of nature, do not look inside your own head to discover what to say.

Look in the book.

Look in the card with the list of words. The card that came with the game.

Methodically, I typed every word on the list before the word “predecessor” and pressed enter. This was the first methodical thing I had done in my life.

No one remembers the first time they saw their mother. No one remembers the moment they first recognized that the thing in the mirror is *me*. But the generation of humans who were approximately seven years old when PC games first became widely available, we remember the first time we did something methodical.

“*Drop* predecessor.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“*Enter* predecessor.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“*Exit* predecessor.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“*Find* predecessor.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“*Go* predecessor.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Look at card, look at keyboard, type word on card on keyboard. When you have gotten to the bottom of your senses and your capacity to think, you are ready to embrace method. To embrace method is to become the pure servant of fate.

One of Goya’s Black Paintings depicts a vast thickening shapeless yellowy mass. At the very bottom left corner, a few daubs of brown and black paint depict the head of a tiny dog. The dog senses twitch baffled at the edge of the mottled yellowish endless stuff of the world. It is a picture of the animal getting to the bottom of its senses. It is a picture of the basic animal experience of wonder.

A human is a dog with *method*.

“Halt predecessor.”

“Hit predecessor.”

“Join predecessor.”

“Kill predecessor.”

“Lift predecessor.”

Look at card, look at keyboard, type word on card on keyboard. Method. A wheel made out of simple repetitive movements. It wears through the rock of the world like a river.

“Query predecessor.”

It was the last word on the sheet. I typed it and pressed enter.

“Your predecessor,” said Whiz, “was removed for gross incompetence. He caused millions of deaths on the surface. His cryogenic suspension life support apparatus was disabled. His life was terminated.”

Trembling, I typed: “Query removed.”

“Your predecessor was removed because he became insane,” Whiz reported.

* * *

“If I just had another week,” James said, “I could finish ‘Firefox.’”

He’d covered dozens of pages in the notebook Mrs. Larson had given him.

“And I could finish *Suspended*,” I said.

He looked at me sharply.

“Are you nuts?” he said. “*You’re* not the one has to leave here and go back to fuckin’ Ireland.”

We were at the beach. In the distance, by the water, Jenny dripped wet sand into piles until it made wet sandpiles. That’s how it is in this world.

“What happens next in ‘Firefox’?” I asked, to pacify him.

“The computer, it’s after strangling people up with the cords of their own telephones,” he said, looking into the white sky. “And so the agents, like, they’ve all resolved to do without telephones and tellies and anything electric. And now one is after looking at the other and he says, All right, Agents Red, Firefox can’t get at us.”

“But,” I broke in, “but then the agents can’t get to Firefox. It *works* through telephones and TVs. It is *in* them.”

“Exactly!” James said. “Fucking *exactly*, Michael. It can’t get to us but, like, how in Jesus’ holy fucking name are we to get to it?”

“Without the things it works through, Firefox is, it’s like a television without...”

I stopped and we stared at each other.

“It’s like a telly without a telly,” James finished.

“What’s left of a telephone,” I said softly, “after you take away the telephone?”

“Not nothing,” he said. “Firefox is still there.”

“Oh I know,” I said. “It’s still there. It’s worse, even. Now it’s *everywhere*.”

“I wish I had another week,” he said, pounding his fist into the sand. “I could finish it if I had another week.”

“I really wish you would play *Suspended*,” I said. “It says it’s for ages sixteen and over and you’re three years closer to sixteen than me and we could play it together and then we’d be, like, seventeen and...”

But he was shaking his head.

“That game’s driving you mad,” he said.

The sky had gone flat white and the sounds of the birds had died. Jenny dripped wet sand onto wet sand.

“Michael,” he began. “Where I live in Ireland, like. It’s not the way it is here where you live.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Never mind,” he said.

He turned to look at the lake, and I stared at him. Sometimes when he wasn’t looking I stared at him. If James is here, I thought, and then he goes away, then what’s left of him?

Not nothing, I thought. Not nothing. Not nothing.

I shivered. The sky was a flat white sheet.

* * *

By the time we got home, the sky had thickened, turned yellowish, mottled. My mother was on the steps, her tiny face tilted up to the gigantic sky.

“There’s a tornado watch,” she said distractedly.

“A tornado!” said Jenny.

“A tornado is nothing to be happy about,” my mother said severely. “It destroys houses.”

Jenny smiled at her. I was terrified.

“Shouldn’t we go to the basement?” I asked.

My mother shook her head.

“It’s just a tornado *watch* for now,” she said. “If it becomes a tornado *warning* the sirens will go off and then we’ll have to go to the basement.”

“But what if there’s not enough time?”

“Go to the den and watch TV.”

It was so dark outside when we got to the den that when James turned his head away from the TV beam to speak to me, darkness erased his features.

“What?” he asked.

“I said, D-d-don’t you think we should turn the v-v-volume on the TV down,” I stammered.

The television threw its pictures one after another into my brain, where they melted.

“Are you pulling me leg, Michael?” James said.

“He’s scared of the tornado,” said Jenny. “He’s scared he won’t be able to hear the siren.”

James laughed.

“But how will ye hear the tornado siren, Michael,” he said, “with all the other sirens?”

Then he cupped his hands to his mouth and began to imitate the high whine of a police siren.

“Weee-ooo-weee-ooo-weee-ooo.”

Jenny clapped her hands and joined in.

“Weee-ooooo.”

“Shut up!” I shouted. “Stop it!”

Behind their braying imitations, I could hear the true whine starting. The thin serrated alien voice of the tornado siren. It came into the house and cut through their voices like a whipsaw through chicken meat.

“Jesus,” James said. “Listen.”

Jenny's small voice now harmonized with the siren. Her face took on the wan and serious look she'd had when singing in the first-grade Christmas concert.

"Weeee-oooo-weeee-oooo-weeee-oooo."

"Shut it, Jenny," James grunted. "Yer ma's calling us."

"Down to the basement!"

My mother stood at the stairs shouting up to us. We ran down the staircase. I imagined the tornado dropping its trunk through the roof like an elephant and drinking the staircase up in a swirl of wood chips.

We huddled in the basement under a naked lightbulb. My mother had a small radio and Harry Caray's voice announcing the Cubs game came through whirling chips of static.

"They'll say on the radio if the tornado's coming," my mother said.

"Jesus," James whispered.

"James!" My mother yelled.

But he wasn't swearing. He was praying. His lips pressed into a pale wavering line, his face born white in the stark light. His hand reached out and grabbed mine, squeezing tightly.

"It's going to be okay," I managed to whisper.

"It *destroys houses*," he said through gritted teeth.

"Be quiet!" said my mother.

I squeezed James's hand tightly. Harry Caray spoke out of the radio, heartless.

"And it's still the top of the eighth, and there's still only one out, and, folks, if these Chicago Cubs have ever needed divine intervention, boy, I am here to tell you it is today, folks."

Thunder spoke through the bones of the house.

"Don't let go of me hand," James whispered.

"I won't," I whispered.

* * *

The tornado uncoiled harmlessly into the air it was made of. The warning expired after a half hour. The Cubs lost. James left for Ireland a week later. The next time I saw him, four years had passed. My family was visiting my grandmother in Ireland and he came into the kitchen where we were drinking tea and talking. He had changed.

When he was leaving, I said I had to go to the bathroom and ran out and caught him in the hall and asked him. What about "Firefox"? Oh, that silly thing, he said. But what about the notebook, I said. You still have the notebook. Oh, I don't know what happened to it, he said. My mammy probably tossed it. He left.

I wanted him to ask me about *Suspended*. What about *Suspended*? How did it end? What happened with the seventh robot?

I don't know, I would have told him. I never finished it either. Just like you with "Firefox."

But it wasn't just like him. "Firefox" was gone in the way of being completely gone, but *Suspended* was gone in the way of being everywhere. It was my first computer game. I played it at the right time. I don't know what would have happened if I had waited until I was sixteen, but playing it at seven changed me. It gave me a new direction to grow. While my parents and friends and teachers were helping part of me to grow up toward the people, another part of me had begun to grow out, away from them.

2.

Four Hundred and Ninety Points of Damage

It isn't easy to grow away from the people. You need imagination. My imagination was as weak as a baby's arm until computer games trained it. I can't even remember the things I imagined before computer games. Giant Legos, maybe? Flying dogs? People's faces? When I was eleven, computer games taught me how to imagine something so it lasts, so it *feels real*.

The secret is numbers. Imagination fumbles outside reality like a child at a locked door. The key is numbers. In 1986 I discovered *The Bard's Tale II*. It was the first computer game I ever played that was derived from *Dungeons & Dragons*. *D&D* was created in 1974 by Gary Gygax, who had discovered the secret to making imaginary worlds real. *Dungeons & Dragons* adds numbers to fantasy.

When you play *Dungeons & Dragons* and your character attacks a giant wolf, you roll the dice to see whether the blade connects with wolf flesh. You roll the dice again to determine the extent of the damage dealt. The Dungeon Master rolls the dice to see if you will encounter a giant wolf in the first place. And every aspect of your character—his strength, his dexterity, his intelligence—is composed of the numbers revealed by the dice. *D&D* is a fantasy world governed by numbers. Numbers add the flavor of reality to fantasy. Roll the dice. 22: You encounter a giant wolf. 17: You fail to cast the spell *fireball*. 14: The wolf's bite severs your leg. You're not just making this up, read the dice. 3: You successfully cast the spell *fireball* and the wolf burns into a shadow on the cave's wall.

Gygax brought numbers into fantasy. But every force for good is also and equally a force for evil. There is a dark side to *D&D*. This darkness has two dimensions. The first is moral and the second is practical.

The first problem is that at around age one, a healthy human being discovers the world is made of words and delights in this. That's a dog. That's a Lego. The Lego is under the table. At approximately age one, the human child feels the power of words awaken within him. He delights to discover that the world responds to his words. When he calls to the world in words, the world hears and answers. The dog comes. The Lego is a Lego. The child rejoices to know that the world is made of the same wordstuff as his new mind.

But actually he's wrong and the world is made of numbers.

Actually the child is dead wrong and words belong to the people but nature or the alien thing we call nature or God is made entirely out of numbers. If we talk to nature or God in words, it doesn't understand us. Words just sound like noise to nature. Science has proved this. Science has shown that humans live in this world but it isn't for us. We can use numbers but numbers are not our natural language, and when we use numbers we are borrowing them from someone or something else.

Probably numbers belong to the devil. Almost certainly they do.

This dark truth constantly leaks from the dice of *D&D*. People in the eighties made fun of the

evangelical Christian groups who wanted to ban *D&D*, but I don't think you have to be an evangelical Christian to know that there is such a thing as an evil truth and to know that it leaks constantly from the fantasy of numbers.

That's the moral drawback to Gyax's creation. The practical drawback to *D&D* was that I couldn't get anyone to play it with me.

"That shit is for hyper nerds," said Eric, mashing buttons on his Sega controller. His quarterback threw a ninety-yard pass over the heads of my defenders.

"Forty-eight to nothing," he sang.

Sega games, Nintendo games, PlayStation games, Xbox games, Wii games. Unlike PC games, video games will always be with us. They require actual hand-eye coordination. Like the real sports they resemble and are often about, video games have a place in social reality. But they lack contact with the reality beneath society.

"I think my controller is broken," I said.

"Is that number on Eric's side a 48?" asked Rich, Eric's preternaturally intelligent little brother.

"Shut up, Rich," I snapped.

"I mean," Rich asked, "is that, I mean is that a zero on Mike's side?"

"Why does your little brother have to hang out with us?" I asked Eric.

But Eric was looking at Rich.

"Yeah, it's a zero, Rich. Mike's losing again. So what?"

"Is it okay if I bring Mike to my science class?" Rich asked.

Eric threw back his curly, athletic head and laughed.

"Shut the hell up, Rich," I said.

Rich jumped up and stood in front of the TV screen, pointing at the numbers.

"No, I'm serious," he said. "Look—48 and Mike has zero. Last game it was 64 and Mike has zero. Before that it was 71 and Mike has zero."

Eric laughed. Rich jumped up and down.

"Eric! Eric! Can I please bring Mike to my science class?"

"Why do you want to bring him to your science class, Rich?" Eric asked, grinning.

"I can't say!"

"Why can't you say?"

An anxious eager serious look sprang out of Rich's face.

"I can't say, because it's a bad word," he said. "I mean, it's a real natural thing and it's a good thing 'cause it's natural, but I can't say it because the only word I know for it is a bad word. Can I bring Mike to my science class, please?"

"Shut the fuck up, Rich," I said. "Eric, why the hell does Rich have to hang out with us?"

Rich was squirming around before the television screen like he had to piss. "I want to say it!"

"What's the word, Rich?" Eric asked him. "What's the word for what Mike has?"

I hit Eric on the bicep.

"Mom will get mad if I say!" Rich whispered.

"Say it," Eric said, laughing, wriggling easily out of my attempt to get him in a headlock.

"It's a natural thing!" Rich yelled. "It's not a bad thing!"

"Say it, Rich," Eric demanded. "Say it, Rich, or I'ma beat your ass."

Rich looked furtively down the hallway.

“Retarded,” he whispered.

I got up.

“It’s not a bad thing!” he yelled. “It’s a natural thing! Forty-eight to zero, 64 to zero! It’s scientific thing! Mike’s retarded!”

I pushed him to the ground. Rich waited until I had sat down again. Then he leaped up and was incandescent in the television light. His little body shook with anger. He pointed at me.

“You can’t push me,” he said through tiny gritted teeth. “You can’t tell me I can’t take you to my science class. You can’t do anything. You are *retarded* and my science teacher said that *retarded* people CANNOT decide by themselves what to do or where to go and that means you CANNOT decide whether you will come to my science class or not!”

“Your little brother creeps me out,” I told Eric.

“Me too,” he said.

Eric wasn’t laughing anymore. Rich stood in the center of the room vibrating at a thousand times per second. His mouth was open and his teeth looked like broken bits of television.

“Time for your nap, Rich,” Eric said uneasily.

“No!” Rich said. Numbers writhed under his tongue.

Eric turned off the TV and hit the lights, and it was a little better. Then he picked up a shoe and hit Rich across the face with it, and Rich ran off crying and we were alone.

“You do suck at Sega football, though,” Eric said.

“I want to play *D&D*,” I said. “Come on! I know where to buy a book and dice.”

“It’s for dorks,” Eric said. “Everyone at school would make fun of us. Everyone on the basketball team. Elizabeth would break up with me.”

“No one will know,” I told him.

Eric was a fun, healthy kid. He had a broad, open face and a tall, strong body. He was constantly laughing with his wonderful laugh that rinsed whatever was laughed at in sun. When Tim fell off the top of the tornado slide and broke his neck, Eric laughed. It was a laugh without malice. Eric laughed a laugh that loved the bright surfaces of the world. He laughed out of pure, thoughtless devotion to noise and color. Especially if he saw something new, he’d laugh. He couldn’t help it. He even laughed at an aluminum baseball bat the first time he saw one. I was there, I saw it.

Eric’s laugh was spiritual and it wasn’t at all what the counselor said after Tim got hurt. The counselor said sometimes shock makes people laugh when they feel like crying. The counselor said it in a dark way that implied that anyone who laughed at someone breaking their neck because they felt like laughing was infected with devils. But I knew that Eric was maybe the one person in America who could laugh at someone who’d just broken his neck and do it from pure spiritual joy. Tim didn’t die from the fall and I don’t know about him, but for myself I can say that if the last sound I hear when I do die is Eric laughing at me, I will consider the sound to be appropriate and even holy.

But Eric’s brothers were different.

“My brother Henry plays *Dungeons & Dragons*,” Eric said finally.

Many years older than Eric and me, Henry lived in the attic. He was far into high school. I didn’t know how far. Far enough to drive a car by himself. And Henry was bad. Something was wrong with him. Even my mom said so. No one ever told us how he was bad, but everyone knew he was. So when Eric said that Henry played *D&D*, I understood that it was his final word on the matter and that nothing would ever convince him to try it.

But one Saturday later that fall, while Eric was being lectured to in the kitchen by his harried single-parent mother, I crept up the attic stairs. Henry's door was ajar. I could hear Eric's mother's voice from far below like a dozen frantic chickens, gobbling up the spaces left by Eric's inaudible replies.

I drew my breath in slowly. I put my foot to the back of each step, where the creak was mildest.

Three steps from the top, I heard a sound coming from Henry's room. It was a sound like rain on a tiny dome. A small, circumscribed clatter.

I crouched down on the landing and put my head through the door.

The sound got louder. Rain on a miniature glass dome.

Henry's back was to me. The dark curls of the bloodline he shared with Eric spilled down the back of a dirty Christmas sweater. White, with green and red clocks on it. He sat before a long wooden table. Another kid sat next to him. A bad kid. Hunched over the table, greasy blond hair spilling down a green sweater with red Christmas trees.

The sound of my fast breathing. The sound of my fast breathing and the sound of rain on the windows of a tiny dark town. Clatter. Clatter. Clatter.

And every five seconds Henry's right arm jerked back behind him. His right arm jerked back behind him and released a sound like the clatter of rain on a tiny dome.

And then through the opening he made when he raised his arm, I saw the scarlet flash of *red dice with white numbers*. And then a hand gripped the back of my neck and I spun around, opening my mouth to scream and Eric's other hand shot over my mouth, his pupils like the heads of black nails and Henry's voice now booming out over us:

"Hey, you kids like to watch us play? You twerps like to sneak and watch us play? You *fucking* little rats like to sneak up and watch us roll these *fucking* dice?"

Booming out over us as we raced down the stairs passing Eric's mom going slowly up with an ashen face, not even seeing us, hands clasped, intoning, "Now, Henry, calm down. Calm down now. Henry, calm down. Calm down, calm down."

And that Sunday in church, my father did what he always did. While the priest droned out the words of God, my father leaned down and directed my attention to the wood panel with five rows of three-digit numbers beside the altar. Every pew had a thick hymnbook, and the numbers referred to the hymns that were to be sung at that morning's service. But my father, though he sang dutifully with everyone else, was interested in the numbers for themselves.

"If you can memorize those," he whispered. "There's five dollars for you, Michael."

He'd quiz me a few hours after the service, and if he saw I'd written the numbers down I'd get nothing. I had to commit them to memory. There were words all over the church, but my father never asked me to memorize those. He wanted to improve my memory and the hymn numbers were tougher than the Bible phrases. He saw nothing sacrilegious in what he was doing. He saw no spiritual significance in the fact that numbers are harder to memorize than words. He saw no warning in the fact that a child's soft brain resists numbers. That the neural tissue swells up around a number like the soft skin of the thumb swells up around a splinter, pushing it out.

For one hour every week of my life, I stared at numbers while words to and about God rose and fell around me. I stared at numbers during the reading of the New Testament. I stared at numbers through incense clouds when the deacon swung the censer. I even stared at the numbers while walking slowly back from Communion, head bowed, the Eucharist dissolving in my mouth.

“We will now turn to hymn number 490.”

I bought *The Bard's Tale II* with the money I earned from memorizing numbers in church.

* * *

The illustrations on the *The Bard's Tale II* box left no doubt that it contained a computerized *Dungeons & Dragons*. For one thing, there was a large circular picture of a dragon menacing a party of adventurers on the front. For another, the picture was surrounded by hundreds of tiny black runic characters on a gray faux-stone background. Runes are druidic hieroglyphs. They resemble bent and burnt G's, Y's, and X's. Runes are letters, frozen in the process of turning into numbers. They are the universal symbol of total fantasy.

I had to buy it. It was the only way. The practical problem with *Dungeons & Dragons* was that you had to find friends to play it with. And even if you had such friends, there was still the basic paradox of fantasy games. The basic paradox is that the very power of a fantasy fused with numbers saps your ability to maintain the social relationships that are the scaffolding that supports the game. Enraptured by the gameworld, you find it hard to remember or care about the qualities that made the people sitting around the table your friends in the first place. Eventually you lose them.

Eventually Henry would roll his scarlet dice alone.

But unlike *D&D*, *The Bard's Tale II* was designed to be played alone. Even if I had been able to find some perfect friend to play it with me who would never stop being my *Dungeons & Dragons* friend, no matter how much we grew to loathe each other in real life, *The Bard's Tale II* was still better. Instead of some kid pretending to be the Dungeon Master, the fathomless computer was the dungeon master. And instead of rolling dice to determine the outcome of a giant wolf attack or a fireball spell, you pressed a key and the computer generated a random number.

I had never played a game like this. Technically, the name of the genre that *The Bard's Tale II* was an early example of is “computer role-playing games” (CRPG). But this name is highly misleading because every game—from *Pac-Man* to *Super Mario Brothers* to *Call of Duty*—places the player in a “role.” You play as Pac-Man, as Mario, or as some World War II soldier.

The genre “role-playing game” is even more misleading if you think that games in the genre would have particularly fascinating roles for the player to play. As if the genre appealed primarily to the theater-club crowd.

“How did you get your start, Christian Bale?”

The actor strokes his chin.

“I guess it all started with computer role-playing games,” he says. “Then I started acting in movies.”

The truth is that the role you play in a role-playing game is as unimportant as the role you play in *Pac-Man*. In *Pac-Man*, you play a yellow circular being who loves dots and fears ghosts. In computer role-playing games, you play a medieval adventurer who loves weapons and fears dragons.

The role is not important. What is important is the thing you see through the hole of the role. The genre should really be called: “The cave where the Numbers become flesh.” I inserted the floppy disk and turned on the computer. The machine whizzed, the television bristled with static, then smoothed out blackly. The title—*The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight*—scrolled across the screen. I hit enter and the blinking icon hovering over “Start New Game” froze, the screen went blank, and the new game started.

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