



Life is Messy

Twenty flash fiction stories by Yossi Karp

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Drought

At least yesterday my mouth was sticky. Today, it's just dry. My tongue searches for liquid, any kind of liquid, even the sticky kind that's glued to the roof of my mouth. All it finds is dust. Dry, grainy, sandy dust. This is what a corpse must feel like as it slowly decomposes. Shrinking muscle, sinews, fat, slowly eroding away until it's indistinguishable from the dust around it. I look up at the sun. I manage to hold my head to it for a moment. Its white rays have drained the earth and sky, leaving not a drop. It now searches me. The sun tries to penetrate my skin, searching for any liquid it can extract. But I'm protected by the dust, which is caked over me like a shield. The sun wouldn't have found much liquid in me, anyway. Blood is all it would find. Blood and dust.

I tilt my head downward. The rim of my hat shades my eyes, bringing some relief. The sun retaliates with a hot wind, kicking up the dirt. I protect my face with my arm. I smell the earth on my skin. My body is the earth. I raise my eyes over my forearm, which remains covering my mouth. I squint into the distance as if summoning rain clouds to vanquish the sun. But only the nights can do that. Sometimes the nights bring cool relief. In those evenings, I sit on my porch and breathe in the precious breeze. I close my eyes and pretend the air is clean and I breathe deeply. The coolness calms me, but it's shallow and temporary. I dream of rain clouds, cold pitchers of water, and a bath. When I open my eyes again, the fantasy disintegrates into tiny granules, slipping through my fingers, leaving only disappointment and a parched throat.

Happiness

Is this the happiest I've ever been? Ever? Isn't that an impossible question to answer? Was I happier the day I landed a great job than I am today? Was I happier when my kids were born than when I woke up this morning? Perhaps my wedding day - was that the happiest I ever was? Maybe I was happier the day I graduated university than today? I remember getting my driver's license - that was a happy day - but was it a happier day than today? Perhaps the moment I found out that I'd passed my high school exams was the happiest day of my life - who knows? Could I have been happier the day of my Bar Mitzvah than I am today? Or when my Grandfather gave me a football for my 10th birthday - was that the happiest I've ever been? Could I have been happier the afternoon my mother came home with a new baby brother when I was 8 than I am today? Was there a birthday party when I turned 4 that filled me with so much joy that I couldn't possibly ever be happier? So is today the happiest I've ever been? How can I say such a thing? Can anyone make such a broad statement? You want to know the truth? Do you want to know why no day, not in the past, nor in the future, could make me happier than today? Why? Because today I achieved greatness, a god-like status among my peers when I finally solved BUG-39642 and the screen no longer flashes after a refresh. Happiness.

Age

My hair grows large, unwieldy strands of white. It's shoulder-length and tickles the back of my neck. You'd think the fringe would be so long that it'd obscure my face like a bride's veil. It doesn't. Instead, it curls itself upwards above my forehead, creating an overhang that shades my eyes. It then flows down around my cheeks, a white frame around a white, ruddy face.

If you were an ant crawling across a thick strand of hair on my overhang, you'd eventually fall onto my cheek. You'd follow the cracks and crevices over my pale skin until you reach the edge of my mouth, which is where the lines all eventually lead. You'd have to avoid my facial blemishes - the scars of my youth. But you wouldn't have to worry about stray whiskers. I'm a meticulous shaver with a strong aversion to beards. My unwieldy mop-top is enough whiteness around my features, there's no need to voluntarily add more. Besides, shaving gives me purpose and a reason to get up in the morning. Even on days I plan to stay home, days without visitors, when I could potter around in my underwear if I wanted to. Even on those days I shave in the morning. If, by the afternoon, I run my hand across my chin and feel the roughness trying to settle in, I might set myself towards the bathroom for round two with the shaver. Or perhaps not, because by then I'm tired and grumpy and would rather go to bed. I'd resolve to do it in the morning, unless I won't, in which case it's the undertaker's job.

Uniforms

My life has been spent wearing one kind of uniform or other. The blue blazer of my school uniform made me feel like an important businessman. Be that as it may, I couldn't wait to take it off in the evenings and free myself of the shackles of teachers and classrooms. I swapped the school uniform for the street uniform. Blue jeans and a T-shirt - the uniform of the youth. I wouldn't be seen dead outside the house in anything else. Drafted into the army, the self-imposed loose-fitting comfort of my casual uniform was replaced by the ultimate expression of the word. If I thought the school teachers were strict about school uniforms, I was in for a shock. Gone was any semblance of self-expression in my clothes, hair, or even the way I walked. The green uniform turned me into an obedient soldier, the same as all the other obedient soldiers. We stood to attention when commanded, we sat when told to sit, ate when we were allowed, and we all looked identical. Removing my uniform on the last day of my service felt like peeling off a ball and chain. The pants and shirt lay crumpled on the floor in an undignified mess as I returned to civilian life, instantly transforming myself from a soldier to an individual again. My newfound freedom, and jubilation at no longer needing to follow orders, led me quite directly to wearing another uniform. This one is orange.

Insomnia

The warm envelope of sleep that cocoons you as you slumber under your comfortable duvet has eluded me for years. You take for granted the refreshing feeling of a cold splash of water on your face, greeting you as your body begins to acclimate to the new day, powering you up after sleep. I don't experience that at all; I don't wake because I don't sleep. When I go to bed at night, I roll from side to side, trying to find a comfortable position. I try with the blankets on; I try with the blankets off. I lie on my back, close my eyes and try to count sheep, or work my way to zero from a hundred. I've counted lots of non-existent sheep and am now an excellent backward counter. So I might get up and potter around the house, read a book, slowly watch the sky outside change from inky black to a light grey, and eventually pale blue. My eyes sting. The bags under them droop, weighed down with thoughts and fears that prevent sleep. I've grown immune to caffeine's powers, but I drink a coffee anyway, hoping it might at least have some effect. I shower in cold water. I regard my teeth in the mirror as I brush them robotically. I dress in my dreary, ill-fitting clothes. I take a quick, disappointing glance in the mirror as I leave the apartment and head for the train.

Daytime is when sleep seeks me. All day I battle to stay awake. My eyes water because it's the only way to relieve them of the burning. I nod off at my desk intermittently and, when I wake, find I've typed a long series of the letter "t". I sleep in the bathroom stall, hoping that a fifteen-minute snooze will get me through the next few hours, and hoping I don't snore.

At home, I crawl into bed. Exhausted. I beg sleep to come quickly. I count imaginary sheep. I recite numbers backward from a hundred. And soon I find myself watching the sky change color again.

Trains

It was the worst train disaster in recent memory. Most certainly, there had been other accidents, but none of this scale. The passenger carriages lay at odd angles to the engine, which itself was no longer in contact with the rails. The coal carriage had completely dislodged from the engine on one end and from the mail carriage on the other. When the accident occurred, the strong magnetic connections had completely snapped, sending coal fragments flying in all directions as the carriage flipped over several times, finally coming to rest at the doorstep of a nearby farmhouse. If it wasn't such a tragedy, the crash would have been described as spectacular. The carnage caused by the engine derailment would take a long time to fix. The train was traveling full kilter and had just exited the tunnel. The Engineer had blown the whistle as was customary while passing over the train crossing, just before the bridge. As the train picked up even more speed on the long descent behind One-Tree Hill, the Engineer failed to pull the brakes on time to slow down even just a bit. He hadn't noticed that One-Tree Hill was now No-Tree Hill. The Engineer plowed the train full steam into the tree trunk that had rolled down from its perch onto the tracks.

The damage seemed incalculable. There would be a full inquiry into the incident. As soon as the accident happened - or rather, as the shock of it barely started wearing off - initial investigations pointed to foul play. The authorities will get to the bottom of it, at least, that's what Billy's mother said while she consoled her son through dinner, his bath, and well into bedtime. There will be severe consequences, she assured him, if she discovers that his older brother had purposely sabotaged the train set.

Exhaustion

Brady is dead, which is very bad. His body lies limp in the cockpit, hands draped over the armrests as if he's asleep. But he's not. He's dead. The room is spinning and Alice grabs onto a handhold to steady herself. The zero gravity plays havoc with her sense of direction and it takes her several moments to find equilibrium. She calls out to Mac who she expects to answer with his customary gruffness, but none is forthcoming. Alice turns herself towards the hatch and sees Mac floating on his back. His neck is bent at an unnatural angle. His boot is caught in a strap, preventing him from floating away. Alice breathes hard, preventing panic from setting in. Her body aches and wants to curl up on the floor. Her brain takes over and moves her toward the cockpit to silence the proximity alert that has been pounding at her head since she woke. Alice takes note of the screens that are flashing all manner of errors. The communication array is down. Electrical flow from the solar panels is at zero percent. There's damage to the propulsion system, and there's a slow leak in one of the O2 tanks. Alice nudges Brady's chair slightly, hoping he'll wake. Brady would know what to do. He'd know which system to fix first. The oxygen supply? Communications? Power? Alice knows she should push Brady and Mac out the airlock and commit their bodies to the vastness of space. It's what they would have wanted. Besides, they'll begin to smell soon. But Alice can't. She can barely hold her head up, even in zero G. Alice feels a warm trickle on her neck and when she checks, she discovers she's bleeding. Droplets form around her and suspend themselves in the air. It's quite beautiful. Alice takes the co-pilot's seat and straps herself in. She closes her eyes and watches the stars tumble through the window. Finally, her brain can't process her surroundings anymore and her body wins. The alerts keep going, but Alice can't hear them anymore. She crumples into her chair.

Success

There are those times in a person's life - and there aren't many - when complete and total success is the only option. Mostly, partial success is good enough. You achieve 80% or 90% of your goal, and that's okay. Maybe you were aiming for a particular score in Super Mario, or you were aiming to hit a particular salary in your negotiations for your next job, or maybe a record time for your sport. If you achieve success, you're elated. If you don't, you can always try again next time.

Sometimes, there's no next time. There are no do-overs. No second chances. Sometimes, everything rides on this one moment. It's all on the line. It's either total and utter success, or nothing. A surgeon working on a trauma victim isn't aiming for a "mostly alive" patient. Rocket engineers aren't going to claim success if most of their spaceship doesn't get destroyed on takeoff. And neither am I in my current situation. For me, it's literally do or die. My limbs are twisted at almost impossible angles as I perch myself precariously on millimeter-thin footholds. My fingers strain to steady my body as they fight against cramping. My back is to the rock face and when I look down, I see the remnants of my safety rope twisted around a plant that somehow manages to survive in this environment. I can't go down to it. I can only go up. The sun is beating down on me, trying to push me off this cliff face. I look up, stretching my neck backward as far as it will go. Maybe there's another 50 meters to the top. Maybe 100. If I had a climbing partner, we could share resources, make a game plan, strategize. But I'm up here alone with the wind and the sun. No rope, no safety, no way down. I need to flip myself around. I swing from my fingertips. My entire body weight is now on four fingers of my left hand. I reach with my right for a handhold. It's not very wide, but it's there. I stretch as far as I can. I'm holding my breath as I push my fingers out as much as they will go, maybe further. I can't hold on with one hand for much longer. I will my body to elongate, reaching, reaching - failure is not an option!

Alcohol

"What'll it be, Bill?"

"I'll take a beer."

"How about you, Cody?"

"I'll just have ice water."

"Ice water?"

"Yeah, because...you know."

"You're going for the treatment."

"I'm on a cleanse."

"For the treatment?"

"Well, yeah."

"So why did you come to a bar?"

"Why did I...? For you guys! We've been meeting here for years. I just didn't..."

"Oh. But you're having the treatment. Then what? You'll pop in to drink ice water with us and rave on about your new life plan and how we're all killing ourselves and what terrible people we are?"

"No, it's not like that!"

"Yeah, it's exactly like that. You take the Longevity treatment and you'll live for 300 years. So what? Your life will be dull, boring, and colorless."

"At least I'll be alive!"

"Aint no kind of life if you can't enjoy it."

"Breathing above ground beats not breathing in a box below ground. Just take a look around.

This is the last bar in this district and it's almost empty. Look, you and I can live for centuries.

Everyone can. You just have to give up alcohol."

“300 years drinking nothing but ice water, eating that goop they call “nutrition”, and seeing the world in black and white?”

“Greyscale.”

“Whatever. No thank you, sir. I’ll have none of that.”

“Tom, you’ve been awful quiet. What’ll you have?”

“I’ll have a whiskey. Better make it a double.”

War

War is meant to be dark, bloody, gruesome. Fear is supposed to permeate the air as thoughts on life - your life and the lives you're taking - haunt you in the few quiet moments. There are supposed to be sounds - gunfire, cannon booms, explosions. The sound of boots grasping for grip, sliding over the ground as you run for your life to a foxhole. The sound of your own heavy breath as you gasp for air behind a broken slab of concrete. The jingle of bullet casings as they furiously spray out the side of a jeep-mounted machine gun. The cries of the wounded. The shouts of the medics. The silence of the dead.

But here you are, walking down a pleasant street, your shoes clacking happily along the pavement. It's twilight on a clear February night. There's a soft breeze. You're thinking about work and the problems you have to solve at the office. You stop for a moment to listen to the birds chirp in the trees and you regard their innocence with the kind of awe you normally reserve for your grandchildren. A motorcar honks its way around a corner and the driver shouts you a greeting. You lean on a concrete slab and wave back, returning the smile. The serenity of your environment is safe. You turn towards a jingling sound behind you. It's the neighbor's dog, dragging his leash behind him. He's escaped again from the garden. He lies down, whimpering as he plays dead, waiting for you to scratch his tummy.

There's a buzz in the background. It's far away, but it's getting closer. You stand up and brush your hands on your thighs. It's now a rumble. The air raid sirens begin to wail, the dog lets out a cry, and you scramble for the nearest shelter, but until now you haven't bothered finding out where they are. It's only been three months since you moved to Dresden.

Joy

The girls were on their way to the beach. Each carried a bag, water bottle, and a large inflatable tube shaped like a tire that said “Mud Madness” on the side. Their giggles of anticipation filled the train carriage and they finally settled into their seats, surprisingly quietly. The girls whispered loudly about what they were going to do at the beach.

“My sandcastle is going to be as tall as me!” exclaimed the youngest one. She raised her hands above her head.

“I can’t wait to ride the waves!” an older child squeezed her inflatable, coming dangerously close to popping it.

“Who wants to collect shells with me?” asked their mother. There was no audible response, but the girls all smiled in approval.

The train rolled into the beach-side station and the girls stepped onto the platform. It was still early. The sun hadn’t come out in full force, but the mother busied herself with applying sunblock to their faces. The troupe of girls made their way down to the sand. While their mother claimed a spot, the girls threw off their outer clothes and ran excitedly in their bathing suits to the water’s edge. The older ones wasted no time scrambling into the sea, jumping onto their inflatables, bouncing off them, and splashing into the water. The younger ones stopped short of the water and played catch with the waves. The youngest got busy digging into the sand near the spot where her mother camped. She’d go shell collecting later.

Dark

It's ironic that the last thing I saw was the most intense brightness I've ever seen. It was brighter than the sun, without any of the warmth. It's almost as if I saw the light being born in slow motion. At first, it wasn't there at all. Then, I spun on my heels, and the genesis of the light - more than a spark, smaller than a fire - formed in front of me. It grew rapidly. At first, it was merely a flash, but an aggressive one. It pushed the world aside and engulfed everything, even me. My arms raised instinctively to protect my face, but it was too late. The white force charged at me like a three-hundred-pound football player, knocking me clear off my feet and entering my pupils. By the time I hit the ground, the light had disappeared almost as fast as it arrived. My eyes were closed and my skin was split open.

Now it's dark. The bandages over my face itch, but I can't raise my arms to scratch them. From time to time muffled voices surround me. I can't hear what they're saying, and I'm not sure I want to. I try to call out, but my chest is too heavy. My days and nights are blackness. I know there's light out there. I can still make out the sound of the light switch when it's flicked on, followed by the artificial hum of the fluros coming to life. In my imagination, their glow bathes me in white, accentuating the stark contrast of the bandages against my dark skin. I know I'm surrounded by light. I try to feel it, but it's cold, elusive. I might not ever see it again, but I won't stop trying.

Beach

Steve was older than he looked. He was tall, and because his walk exemplified relaxed confidence, he seemed even taller. He was naturally well-built, dark-skinned, and handsome. Some would say his easy smile was his most attractive feature. Others would point to Steve's luscious dark hair that somehow never ruffled, even in a strong breeze. He wore very loose-fitting clothes. His pants seemed to billow around his legs, adding to the illusion that he was floating along the beach. His shirt was light and breezy. He always wore it with the first two buttons undone so you could see his perfectly formed hairless chest whenever he leaned forward, even slightly.

Steve was always at the beach. He'd walk its length several times a day, slowly breathing in the sea air, allowing it to cleanse his lungs. From time to time Steve would stop and face the waves. He never went in, but the waves would lap gently at his toes as he contemplated. Eventually, Steve would find a place to sit. He'd usually position himself quite a distance from everyone else so he could easily notice the girls who would invariably try to hit on him. He wasn't interested in complicating his life with relationships. But he would sometimes choose one to come home with him. It would be her last time at the beach, or anywhere, for that matter. But Steve would be back tomorrow because he craved the simplicity of the sand, the soothing, predictable surf, and the solace of his thoughts.

People

It's the end of the Summer holidays and the platform is crowded. The 6 PM train is running late and it gives me time to people-watch. I lean against a pillar and scan.

There are two teenage boys chest-bumping and play-fighting in the corner. A bodybuilder wears a too-tight tank top and is talking to a girl (probably his girlfriend) who's probably half his size. A rabbi is thirstily draining the water from a bottle, and a priest in full clerical garb stands on the opposite platform drinking coffee from a paper cup. Two teenage girls sit on one of the benches pointing slyly at the passers-by (I'm now a person watching people watchers).

A train rumbles noisily to a stop. It's not mine. The doors open and, despite the signs urging travelers to allow passengers to alight before they board, everyone tries to get on and off simultaneously. A mother frantically grabs her three-year-old child as he stumbles and drops his toy. He manages to recover it and takes two giant steps, boarding the train with his relieved mother and all their bags.

A businessman wears a baseball hat. A woman taps her phone. The platform's security guard whistles at a child who dares to step a toe over the yellow line. A hippie with an afro is oblivious to his pants nearly falling down. A college student wearing a polo shirt, tennis shorts, and hiking boots is listening to the largest set of headphones I've ever seen.

My train pulls in. The voice on the loudspeaker announces its arrival, but you can barely hear it above the squeaking of the wheels. We all crowd around the doors and crush our way in, despite the alighting passengers clamoring to get out. I take my seat and, as I slowly doze off to the rhythmic rocking of the carriage, I know that others will watch me.

Crowds

"Where are you now?"

"I'm standing in a field."

"Describe it."

"There's tall grass, and those flowers you blow."

"Who's there with you?"

"Nobody. I'm by myself. It's so quiet, I can hear myself breathe."

"How do you feel?"

"Relaxed. I like being here."

"Good. Now, I want you to remember that feeling. Can you do that?"

"Yes. I'm looking around, committing everything to memory."

"Good. Now, take a deep breath. Take two. We're going back to the city."

"Okay, if we have to."

"We do. You're standing in a square. On one side of the square is a busy road. Behind you are tall buildings."

"I recognize this place. It's where the protest was."

"That's right."

"There's a breeze, but it smells of smog and pigeons."

"Who's there with you?"

"I can't make out anyone in particular. There are people everywhere. They're pressing up against me. They're chanting. No, yelling."

"How do you feel?"

"There's so much pushing! And signs. People are angry, so passionately angry. They're pulling me! Pushing me!"

"Breathe."

"I have to get out of here. They won't let me pass! They're tearing me apart! Let me out! Get me out of here!"

"Think about your field. Breathe. Slowly. In and out."

"I can't breathe. Oh, my chest. It's tight! I'm dizzy again! Make it stop!"

"Breathe. Breathe. You must breathe! Think of the field! The flowers!"

"I...can't...breathe...help me! Can't...breathe...!"

"Sir! Sir! Can you hear me? Are you alright? Someone, call a medic!"

In the morning, the newspapers accused the therapist of being the first person to use hypnosis to assassinate a sitting Prime Minister.

Morning

When the alarm sounds, dreams are unapologetically cut off. Whatever world the husband was in instantly ceases to exist, and is simultaneously forgotten. The relentless alarm continues to play its annoyingly persistent tune, and the husband rolls over, trying desperately to focus on the phone's screen so he can silence it before it wakes any of the kids. As he does, the reality of the situation slowly dawns on him. The night is over, and whatever rest he managed to get is going to have to do him for the day. He tries some mental calculations of how much sleep he got. What time did he actually manage to go to bed? How many times did he get up in the night? The husband throws his legs over the side of the bed, forcing himself to stand up. He pads to the bathroom, eyes still half closed. The brightness of the bathroom light is harsh. When he's finished, the husband washes his hands. The colder the water, the better. His eyes invariably threaten to close and he momentarily contemplates falling back into the soft embrace of his pillow. Instead, he begins to dress, knowing that the bed is a trap that will throw out his whole day. Deciding what to wear draws the husband more into reality. As he selects his clothes, his wife mumbles from inside her pillow, "Turn the light on, please." And with that, the fog of sleep is vanquished for yet another day.

Hospital

It's four o'clock in the morning. I've wandered out of my room. The nurses were too busy dealing with some kind of emergency to notice me enter the elevator. I press any button. I hold onto my IV pole for stability, but because it's on wheels, I stumble as the elevator descends. The doors slide open at Floor 2. I poke my head out, shrug, and roll my IV behind me. There's a long corridor that goes on for miles. The shiny floor is punctuated by colorful diamond shapes every few meters, serving no purpose other than to tell you that the building hasn't been renovated since 1986. There's nobody around. The hum of the air conditioning and fluoro lights are the only signs that this floor isn't abandoned. I make my way down the corridor, picking a direction at random. The corridor is so wide that it seems wasteful for one old man.

The doors are all locked. There's a glass door - unusual for a hospital. I peer through, intrigued. I see a carpeted floor, pot plants, and some desks. Small lights on computer screens flash intermittently. There are more offices inside, like a Russian doll. The water machine bubbles. My breath has made a pattern on the glass. I reach for the door handle, but it's locked.

"There you are!" says a relieved voice from behind me. I turn around and it's one of the harried nurses from my ward. He says something into a walkie-talkie, puts it away, and turns back to me.

"Dr. Phillips, you should come back to the ward." I must look confused because he continues, "You're a patient now. Let Dr. Boyle run the hospital."

We turn around and head for the elevators. I'm tired. Did I mention it's four o'clock in the morning?

Introduction

“So this guy turns up to the meeting today. He’s, like, six foot nine - huge - built like a train, right? I mean, you can tell from the way he sits that he’s packing muscles everywhere. It’s not like he was showing them off, or anything, but, boy, this guy was all business. So he sits down and we’re all kind of looking at him, but trying not to look at him at the same time. He’s expressionless the whole time and doesn’t say a word. So when the meeting’s just about to start, this guy stands up, and he’s super-tall, right, and we’re all sitting down, so he’s like a giant. He stands up, clasps his hands behind his back, and starts talking.”

“What does he say?”

“He introduces himself, like he runs the meeting, you know? He just fully takes over. And it’s not like we’re going to argue with him. The guy’s a gorilla. You should have seen Joyce! She just let it all happen - like, what’s she going to do? Tell this guy to sit down and wait his turn?”

“What did he say?”

“He introduced himself.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, I mean, his voice was mesmerizing. We’re all sitting there, looking up at him. He spoke in a low vibrating grumble, like he was on the edge of exploding, but still under control, know what I mean?”

“Who is this guy?”

“He’s like this ex-army dude or something. Nobody you’d want to meet in a dark alley. Probably killed men with his bare hands. I don’t remember what he said, but I can tell you this: his name is Darren and he’s an alcoholic.”

Hero

You think you're safe at night. But are you? You lock your doors and turn off all the lights. You crawl into bed and cover yourself with your blankets. Snug as a bug in a rug. You drift off to sleep and the world around you disappears. Your brain enters a sleep state and you lie there, unconscious, exposed, vulnerable. What happens outside the walls of your home when you sleep? What happens in your bedroom as you just lie there? These are the wrong questions. The correct question is: what happens to you when you sleep? Scientists will tell you about the stages of sleep and the levels of unconsciousness your brain enters. But none of this is actually true. It's a veil. A smokescreen. The scientists are certain they're correct. After all, they've run experiments. But their results are invariably false, and they don't even know it. The truth is hidden from you. Obscured. So you want to know what really happens to you when you sleep? I'll tell you. Ever had a dream? Dreams are figments of your imagination, or subconscious thoughts, or replays in your mind of the events of your day, right? Wrong. They're real. They're you in parallel universes. You're experiencing real events, real emotions, real delight, real danger. Most people aren't ready to hear this. But you're still listening and I can see you want to know more. This is how it works: Your consciousness leaves your body and travels to any one of billions of parallel universes, and you from that universe travels to yours. You experience each other's passions and fears, joys and failures. But when you wake, you can't remember what you saw. It's fuzzy, a jumble; it fades. That's because of me. I travel between worlds. One of many Dreamcatchers. We obfuscate, delete, and blur your memories. Otherwise, you'd all go mad and humanity would never survive. What happens while you sleep? We save you. I am your hero.

Honesty

“You have all been handpicked, thoroughly vetted, and screened. And you’ve all passed. Congratulations! Welcome to Utopia! Soon we’ll all take the pledge and become the founding members of our new enclave - based on truth, honesty, and openness. Lies and dishonesty have ravaged the world for too long. Trust is completely eroded. We reject that! Inside our gates will be a haven for truth. Our shared ideal of living in an honest society where leaders don’t lie, where neighbors get along because we’re open with each other, where truth is above all else, will bring our community to prosperity! I wholeheartedly believe in this, and your joining me today marks the first step to making this dream a reality! Now, let’s take the oath! Repeat after me: I do solemnly swear to never lie, to always be honest, and to uphold the truth beyond all else!”

The assembly repeated the words and turned to each other in congratulations.

“Fellow citizens of Utopia, are we ready for our future? Let’s begin!”

A voice from within the crowd of newly sworn-in citizens called out, “I’m not sure!”

“Oh? Good! Honesty! Why aren’t you sure? Do you have a question?”

“I value honesty, of course! It’s why I was attracted to Utopia. But I’m not sure if I’m ready to commit.”

“But you just took the oath, right?”

“I did, and I believe it, but I still have questions.”

“Go on.”

“Well,” he took a deep breath, knowing full well the 176 founding members were all listening to him with bated breath, “are you sure you’re qualified to lead our new society? You don’t actually have any practical leadership experience.”

“No, I’m not sure, actually. I have many doubts.”

“How many doubts?”

“Um, OK, so to be completely honest, I’m 85% sure this experiment will fail.”

“So we’ve given up jobs, families, friends, for only a 15% chance that our new society will ever work?”

“If you put it like that, I...well, sure, I guess, yes, to be honest.”

“I’m out.” The questioner turned around, pushed his way through the 176 others, and left the room. There was a momentary awkward silence before another founder left the room, and another, then more. In short order, only the leader was left.

“To be honest,” the leader said to himself, “I was 95% sure this would happen.”