

The Dream
of Benjamin Ward

Luminous Nine

Contents

About the Author	ii
Prologue	iii
You Have a New Patient, Doctor Porter	1
Experimental Principles	7
The Descent Into Fear	11
The Trauma	15
The Meaning of Life	19
Love Is But An Emotion	22
Awakening	26
The Dream of Benjamin Ward	29
Epilogue	32

About the Author

Luminous Nine is a retired content-creator hailing from the Arctic Circle. Self-taught digital artist and a writer, specializing in story-telling. Interests include general creating, learning philosophy, languages, playing video games, music, and coffee. Quit school at the age of 16, and hasn't worked for more than three months in life. Didn't even start reading books until 2018, and even then highly selectively. Nevertheless, one of the most gifted beings in the universe.(The ego is strong with this one.)

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Prologue

There are so many things in this world that are not under our control. Love is one of those things. And when it hits you, there is no way to prepare for it.

Sure, one can have some preconceived notions as to what it will be like, or what its effects will be. But going through the experience is itself, is like being crazy. And being crazy is great, if you know how to handle it.

I know for my part, that I didn't take it so well. But, I wouldn't change it for anything. It is part of who I was, and still am. And that is never going to change.

We go throughout our lives without really thinking, what the content of love is. Is it just an emotion, or is it something which underlies all phenomena, is it gravity itself?

I'm not entirely sure about this. Love seems to be an entire spectrum, which ranges from love towards ice cream, to love towards your neighbor or friends, to parent's love, to divine charity. But if it were a force that moved everything in the cosmos towards something else, then I wonder.

If the opposite of love or bliss is fear, then I'm a kind of expert. I've been afraid for most of my life. Afraid of bullies, afraid of strangers, afraid of my own mind, afraid of losing control.

And what's probably the worst, afraid of fear itself.

But one of the things that sometimes takes away those things for a little while, is being asleep and dreaming. Dreams are very important to me.

I even learned the art of lucid dreaming some years ago, just so I could control my dreams, which meant that I could control the amount of fear in them. And occasionally, it has been sublime time.

But I ponder sometimes, if life itself is like a dream. I would like it to be. Because of all the horrible things that I've gone through.

Imagine, how great it would be if it was like waking up from a bad nightmare in the end. But I realize at the same time that, that feeling, is just me grasping or clinging for safety on the basis of having lived through trauma and neglecting.

Whatever the case, that idea is not entirely without merit. I am not alone in thinking this.

People think that if life was just a dream, it would undermine almost everything we've worked for as a human race. Well so what? Who gives a shit?

There's something still happening isn't there? We're still experiencing it all aren't we? People can go suck eggs for all I care.

This planet is a fucking circus anyway. So, to me it would be an optimal game rule to subvert all the sick shit we do, nothing more.

Yeah, it's insane. To think that the universe is nothing but a big pile of bullshit. But it's my own. And so I own it. All else can go hang.

I still find little things to do that make me smile from time to time. And those things act as a reminder that things aren't so bad in the end. For all my troubles, as fucked up as it sounds, I wouldn't change a thing.

Because for one thing, you never know if you would just be replacing one problem with another, worse prob-

lem if you had the chance to change it.

Fuck society. Fuck all the fake shit it produces, all the counter fit tech, all the so-called mama's new bread, fake cars, fake phones, that break after a week. Fuck all the advertisements, that they shove up your ass every which way.

Fuck all the fake people, that think it's "cool" to act like you care when in reality you don't. Fuck those who fake mental illnesses, I hope somebody gives them some real fucking illnesses.

Fuck the business men, who fuck people out of sheer greed. I hope all the big corporations come crashing down in a debris of smoke.

I hope surveillance-capitalism gets destroyed. I hope money itself vanishes from the face of Earth. Fuck everybody.

I need help, and fortunately it's not far away. Just a cab ride to the northern suburbs of my town, which the city's taxi services provide for free on the account of my disabilities.

I got new therapist, and about time considering I haven't had one in 18 years. I'm nervous as hell, but I'm sure it will go okay. And if not, I can switch her to somebody else. So, wish me luck, or don't, since you don't even exist. I'm out of here.

Chapter 1

You Have a New Patient, Doctor Porter

His mind was broken. His life was a shell, a shadow, and he dreamt of darkness. He was haunted by shame, and more so, guilt, one of the most destructive emotions one can have. He had no recollection prior to his 18th birthday. Nowadays he spent his days in anxiety and depression, savouring any moment of feeling less miserable. It was a form of self-punishment.

It was morning, 9.15 AM. Benjamin was getting ready to leave for the cab, which was supposed to come pick him up in 15 minutes. He had an appointment to see his new therapist, a psychiatrist by the name of Dr. Eve Porter.

He was racing nervously back and forth with a lit cigarette on his balcony. He was holding an old pocket watch on his left hand, which he kept looking at.

He put the cigarette out on an ash tray on a small coffee table and went inside. There were newspapers strewn about on the couch, the living room was filled with piles of books and notes everywhere.

The whole apartment was a mess. Ben loved to collect books, especially related to spirituality and self-develop-

ment. His latest book was called ‘Everything Is Your Own Doing’.

He grabbed his black jacket and backpack from the hanger and took a comb and a small mirror to make sure his hair wasn’t all over the place, after which he set them on the table and took his keys from it and opened the front door.

He saw there was a little kid leaving the neighbour so he waited them to go down the stairs before stepping outside into the hallway.

He came out of the apartment building, looking to his left and right, and saw that the cab was waiting for him in the parking lot. He felt his backpack with his hand to make sure there was a bottle of water inside it for dry throat which he sometimes gets when being anxious.

He stepped inside the cab and greeted the driver. His anxiety started rising immediately. He tried to look at the landscapes as they left and he had asked if the driver would take the little roads instead of the highway for his comfort.

20 minutes later they arrived at the northern part of town in the suburbs where the therapist’s office was located. It was surrounded by thick pine tree forest, relatively secluded from the rest of the neighbourhood.

A perfect setting, Ben thought. He got out of the cab while shivering from being nervous. This person was someone he was about to develop a relationship for years to come if he was lucky. And it wasn’t going to be easy.

He came by the door, and rang the doorbell. He counted seconds in his mind until the door was opened. It was the doctor’s dog first greeting him to his surprise. It was a golden retriever. “Come back inside, Donald,” Dr. Porter told it.

She welcomed him inside and to take off his jacket.

He was led to a room, a traditional looking therapist's office, with the couch stretched out.

As Ben was walking towards a chair opposite to the doctor, he glanced at a paper on her desk. His eyebrow went up and then he sat down. She took the paper off the desk, and put it in the drawer with other files.

Ben's heart rate had gone up and he couldn't speak. She quickly noticed this and tried some openers, to no avail. Ben was still silent, and anxious. This went on for some time.

The doctor sighed and set her pencil on the desk. She started telling a story about her own life and fears, and that whenever she found herself mute because of anxiety, she ran some thought-patterns in her mind to coax her up to say something.

It dawned on Ben that he needs to say something. The whole purpose of this visit was to start repairing and finding out things about his shattered past. But then, he couldn't help himself, but to ask about the paper.

"Board of Ethics. I saw the paper," Ben said.

The doctor got nervous and tried to redirect attention away from it. Ben realized that she wouldn't do that if everything was okay. So he wanted to continue, risking what little they had built up until now.

"I see. So something went wrong with them. What, you got let go or something? That would be pretty funny but messed up, since you took me on today." Ben laughs while still being anxious.

She then admitted to her great shame that the board had rejected her practice and permission to conduct therapy. And that the only reason he was there today is because the patient system had failed to notify of the cancellation. She wasn't expecting him.

"So why the hell would you play at this charade if you weren't even expecting me here? What kind of a doctor

are you anyway? Are you one of those charlatans who turn people into messes until they commit suicide?! The fuck, I'm reporting you after I leave."

Ben was getting ready to call the cab and was almost out the door when she yelled at him to wait, saying she could help him. He looked angrily at his phone and then back at her, until giving up on going, as something was compelling him to stay.

At least he wasn't anxious any more. He returned to the room with her and sat down with his hands curled up. He was still upset. She handed him a cup of coffee.

"The real reason why I let this go on for as long as it did, was because I was interested in your case very much, even before the suspension came to my knowledge, and I think I can help you, if you let me," Dr. Porter said.

"Really... You would risk your career to help me. And how exactly are you going to do that now that we've established you can't be my actual therapist?"

"Long before I became a practising psychiatrist, I was a medical doctor at the Haley Institute, as taking part in their research program. I used their laboratories to develop a drug I call X. Coupled with it, is a portable device, which my colleagues reverse-engineered. Their combination enables anyone to travel inside another person's subconsciousness, as long as they are both connected through the device. And this was the real reason why I was rejected by the Board of Ethics last week. They found out what I was up to."

"Are you serious? Why on Earth would you think that I would even sincerely consider taking the immense risk of having another person poking inside my mind?"

"You want to know what happened prior to your 18th birthday. And I know, from looking at your history, that you have been part of experimental drug research before."

"Well yeah, but that was to test a new kind of anxiety

medication, not fricking cracking my consciousness open and taking a stroll in it!”

It was obviously up to Ben whether to take part in this undertaking. They kept talking and as they were, he got more and more convinced by the notion that this might be the answer to his lost personal history and life.

And he wasn’t the sort of person to disregard the events that led him up to this moment in time, this place. It had to be for a reason. Somewhere along the conversation, they moved on to addressing each other by their first names.

Soon after, Ben left home, and couldn’t sleep the following night. He had to think things over, real hard. He had a dream where he was trapped in a box, and someone was knocking on it from the outside.

It was Morse code, which said: ‘Life is fleeting, do not hesitate for one moment to go through it.’ He woke up in the morning. His phone rang, it was Dr. Porter, or Eve. She asked him whether he was going to do it.

“Before I say it, tell me one thing. Why would you want to develop a drug that enables you to travel inside patients’ minds?” Ben asked.

“Because I’m hoping someone will someday tell me that it was worth it. That I helped them. And I mean really helped them. It was made for extreme cases, and I can think of no better suited person for it than you. If it can help speed up years of work, that means more people can be helped in shorter time span. Is that not a worthy cause?”

“It is. But I guess I was looking for something more personal as a reason.”

“I think I died once. I have no memory of it, but I woke up from a hospital when I was 16. Nobody could say to me what had happened. Only that they found me lying on the gravel in front of an 8 story building, with

my legs and arms broken. And so I'm hoping that one day, someone will let me know what took place."

Chapter 2

Experimental Principles

Benjamin and Eve were sitting inside her office. Donald was laying next to Ben who kept patting it. He was having a cup of tea, while she was having coffee.

Ben had agreed to the procedure, but was anxious as he ever was. Eve was going through some research papers on her desk, to make sure that the dosage for Ben would be correct.

The dosage always stayed consistent for both participants after a point. But since this was his first time, it had to be lower than the optimum maximal amount, for safety.

The dosage was determined by several factors, his mood, his serotonin levels, and his general physique. This was helped by examining him with the device which they would use, by measuring his blood contents and values.

Eve got up and said she is going to now get them the device to determine the dosage. After waiting for a little while, she came back with what seemed to Ben as something out of a futuristic science fiction movie.

It looked like a combination of virtual reality goggles, attached to a blood pressure monitor and an EKG. Except it was nothing of the kind.

She explained that the other parts besides the goggles, was for regulating the amount of X in their systems, and at the same time making sure they would “pull them out” in case their body or mind was taking too much input.

That didn’t exactly calm Ben down as he had hoped. He asked for the specifics of the procedure. What followed was a series of questions and answers, and details on how the whole thing works together.

“As you know, this procedure is highly experimental, and questionable. It steps on certain ethics, and assumptions, of what we have about consciousness or the mind. The fact that it is possible to “travel” inside another person’s mind raises many questions, regarding the individual, and regarding what is possible,” Eve speaks in a calm tone.

“Yes, and I’m worried about many things. For one, what does “traveling” to my mind even means?”

“There is a ‘barrier’ that has been set up in our minds, which prevents them from crossing over into each other’s domain in the ordinary way. One could call it Ego, which I borrow from certain psychological and spiritual concepts. What the drug does, is it temporarily suspends this barrier, so that the device can move your ‘sensory-experiential field’ into an ‘other’ mind.”

“And once you’re ‘inside me’, what happens then?”

“Once I cross the threshold, you’ll know and feel it. That there is another presence inside you. The device makes sure that as long as there is not too much input or information overloading our minds, it keeps me with you at all times. The drug also makes it so we will see each other, in whatever form we choose. We can talk to each other like we can now, the only difference is that when I ask you questions about your childhood, your mind will manifest parts of it in our surrounding ‘space’. We can interact with them, but just remember that I will be with

you and protect you.”

“Probably what I should’ve started with, but, what are the possible side-effects of the drug, and of you poking around in my head?” Ben grasps tightly at his jeans.

“Derealization, spatial distortions, schizophrenic episodes, loss of personal identity, hallucinations, non-locality of awareness, and paranoia.”

“Well that’s just fucking great. I might be permanently destroyed in a psychotic episode then, is what you’re telling me.”

“That is partly why it is highly questionable and why I was suspended, but if it makes you feel any better, my last patient didn’t have any side effects,” Eve sighed.

“All right. One last question. What happens if something from outside disrupts our ‘adventures’ while we’re still there?”

“I would get trapped inside your mind. Or the other possibility is that I would die. I cannot really say because the time passing outside, is much less in quantity compared to our experiences while there. It is a kind of time-dilation. So the chances of something cutting out the device from ourselves is very small.”

Ben was a mess. He was taking deep breaths, with his eyes closed. Eve tried to comfort him and offered him more chamomile tea. Donald was looking at him funny. He was ready and not ready at the same time, looking at his pocket watch from time to time.

They agreed to start the measurements for his blood work. Eve attached electrodes to his chest and head. This was just the preliminary step but Ben was already terrified. She said that he had to calm himself down before the procedure itself.

Otherwise it was going to be a “bad trip like he could never imagine”. He managed to get his heart rate down by thinking. His serotonin levels were OK, and the rest

were as well. They were ready to begin.

She moved a couch opposite to his, where she went to lie down. The device was resting between them on a table. Both of them were wearing goggles, and both had just taken the amount of X they were supposed to.

She had taken 100 milligrams, and he, 30. They had to wait for 15 minutes for it to take effect, until both had to switch on their goggles, which sent a signal to the device that they were good to go. She had one last thing to say.

“I almost forgot. If you feel weird while I cross the threshold, don’t panic at that moment, it will not do neither of us any good if you do. It might make certain aspects of your mind wary.”

“Well what do you mean by that?!” Ben yelled.

“I mean that your mind might attack us.”

They fell under and so it began.

Chapter 3

The Descent Into Fear

Ben suddenly woke up in a space. He looked around and saw nothing except pitch black darkness. Eve was laying beside him, until getting up as well. They got their bearings and she guided him with the first steps.

"Remember, we are going through your memories in stages, or 'barriers'. In order to get to the 'bottom' of them, we have to go through them gradually. If you go too low too fast, your mind might retaliate and throw us out," she explained.

She told him that in order to "get anywhere", or induce any experience, Ben needed to focus on his last memories before they disappeared into forgetfulness. So he tried to remember his mother.

Rainy day. Ben was sitting on a porch of a house, with cracked paint on its front door. He heard yelling coming from behind him, from inside.

He tried to cover his ears but he could still hear dishes breaking. He had a twisted look on his face, like someone who's been through hell.

The door flew open, and his mother got thrown out of there by force. She slipped and fell with her face towards the pavement, and hit her head on it. Bits of teeth flew

out, and blood. She laid there, gasping for air.

Ben and Eve was looking at this from afar. Ben recognized her mother and himself, trying to help her. They couldn't interact with them in any way. Ben tried shouting at himself, with no effect.

"...I guess I have to relive this shit after all," Ben said.

"What did you expect?"

"Hazy imagery, maybe. I don't know. The rain feels so real."

Suddenly Ben's father came out, holding a large knife in his hand. He gave it to the younger Benjamin and told him to kill her. He refused and threw the knife away. His father got really angry, grabbed the knife and looked at him.

"Look well my boy. And remember what you did."

He thrust the knife into her heart, making her scream. She was dead.

Ben got very upset and anxious looking at this scene, with Eve trying to console him. They walked away from the house, the rain stopped and the scene turned completely white.

There came whispers from around them, in Ben's voice, saying Eve should leave at once. This frightened her.

A dark hall with people standing in a ring, surrounding an empty altar. Lit candles, books, and notes scattered all over the room. This was Ben's 18th birthday. He was standing with Eve in the background looking at the centre of the room with the altar.

"I don't remember this," he said to Eve nervously.

"Good, this is your first repressed memory then. Let's see it."

There was a woman in a gown being led towards the altar, she was blindfolded. The two people escorting her were Ben's parents.

They set the woman down, and spread her legs. A corresponding metallic dome was being lowered from the ceiling to trap the woman inside. Yet she didn't seem to resist.

The people around the room started muttering and chanting verses from books they were holding up, as if they were performing some kind of ritual.

The younger Benjamin was one of those people, wearing a hood. They then started a countdown from 10 downwards. And when they hit zero, something unspeakable happened.

The woman inside the steel dome was scorched alive, leaving nothing but a bloody, smoking mess in the place her body had laid. But what was even more disturbing, to both younger and current Ben, was what took place next.

The people that were in the room, rushed towards the dome and started eating away at the remains. It was almost like an orgy in a sickly form.

Ben felt sick to the stomach. He turned away and started to gasp for air. Eve felt equally disgusted by the events, and yet tried to remain calm, but almost failed.

They ran from the hall, to a corridor. By this time the voices from before were echoing louder, telling Eve to back off.

They dropped suddenly through the floor, into a school yard. Ben's friends were drinking alcohol, but he wasn't feeling it. It was the summer following his quitting of school at the age of 16.

Younger Benjamin had been curious of some older men that were laughing in the inner school yard, away from his friends. Eve and Ben followed him to them, just to witness younger him being beaten into a bloody pulp. His friends were shouting at him to get away, but to no avail.

Ben tried to help himself, but nothing worked. Eve got left behind and Ben noticed this, and yelled after her. He then noticed a shadow figure standing next to Eve. He got an extremely uncomfortable feeling about this, and shouted her to run back towards him.

Ben grabbed Eve by the hand and they ran for it, the shadowy figure chasing after them. Ben made it clear that he wanted out of there right at this minute. She understood perfectly, they had been through a lot in a short period of time. They came out of it.

She noted that it had not gone as she had planned. The whole point was for her to ask questions about his past, but it's as if his mind systematically decided to show things to them both, before they got a chance to inquire into it. This was making her quite concerned.

"...What the fuck was that last thing?" Ben said while he had cold sweat pouring down from his head while laying on the sofa.

"I really don't know. It might be some repressed aspect of yourself that is trying to come up to the surface. This wasn't a thing with my other patients. So this is unknown to me too. Are you willing to continue tomorrow?"

"As much as I hate to say it, yes, I am. But I need a fucking breather."

They had tea, and Eve was looking at the results of the devices. All the numbers showed normal, except for one thing. His serotonin levels were off the charts during the shadow figure's appearance.

Chapter 4

The Trauma

The next morning. Eve and Ben were making the necessary preparations. Eve checked his vital signs and blood levels, and made sure that the new dosage was now adjusted properly to meet the coming "trip".

"I'm re-calibrating the device a little. I realized that it wasn't ready to the level of potency your mind underwent in such a short time. It was dangerous," she said with a slightly nervous tone.

"...Yeah. I don't know what the hell that thing was, that kept following us. That figure," Ben replied.

Ben asked for another cup of tea and that if he could get it himself. They bumped into another, and Eve giggled. There was a change in the air. They were becoming friends.

As the day passed, Ben started to feel like he had known her for far longer than they had. She felt somewhat similarly.

It was strange, like two old friends, meeting each other again after long period of time. This wasn't a conventional doctor-patient relationship after all.

"Okay, I think we're set. Whenever you're ready," she said to him.

They underwent the procedure and took off. Some moments later, Ben woke up in space. He called for Eve but couldn't see or hear anyone near him. He tried yelling louder but to no avail.

He started running towards nowhere, shouting after Eve, but it didn't help him much. He suddenly tripped on his feet and started falling through space, until slamming on a wooden floor. He saw himself standing in front of himself as a small boy, but looking past him.

The boy had splatters of blood on his shirt and pants, and was staring with a horrified look on his face towards the family bedroom inside a house somewhere.

The bed was covered in fresh blood, with severed limbs arranged neatly in different shapes, and two heads resting apart from their bodies on the pillows, with their mouths and eyes open.

Neither of the Benjamins could comprehend what had happened. He didn't recognize the people chopped up into pieces. Suddenly the front door of the house smashed open, and a figure in a hoodie and a mask came inside.

The figure sat down besides the petrified young Benjamin, and sighed.

"...You know, you're very lucky," the man said.

Benjamin kept crying, and older Ben was too afraid to move. He closed his eyes, and but heard the man talking.

"I never wanted for you to be here. But now that you are, I'd imagine you're going to go through a hell in your life. I can't say whether that's a good or a bad thing in the end. Just know, that I'm letting you go. Your parents wanted to die, you know. They hired me to take care of them. Well, one of them did. But that's between you and me, you got that?"

Ben was grabbed by the shoulder by a shadowy figure from behind. It was the being that had chased him and Eve from before. He froze absolutely still in terror, with

his eyes still closed.

"...This is the image of trauma," the shadow figure said with a voice that resembled a distorted old television broadcaster. "These events set up an extreme block in your psyche to prevent you from remembering them. These people were your parents. But now that you are confronted with this memory, your mind can no longer return to the waking world. The experiences of people killing each other you witnessed in your earlier adventures were nothing but echoes of the real thing. Your mind created them out of "residue" that the blockade had failed to prevent from being remembered. I can help you. But only if you let me."

Ben opened his eyes. The killer, and his child form had disappeared. The bed was clean, with no blood in sight. He looked around, and was startled by the shadow figure, but he was able to calm down quickly.

"Who are you? And where is Eve?!" Ben asked anxiously.

"...You wouldn't believe it if I told you. Right now, we're going to try searching for her. Follow me."

The scenery seemed to change into a large thick forest during the eventide. The figure followed Ben a little further back from him.

It told him that Ben is the one who needs to find her, because he knows more about his own mind than anyone (or anything) else.

"Right now, Eve is going through your life in a reversed chronological order. In other words, this forest is where you got lost about 24 years ago. Whereas she started her trip from your most recent important memories. It is my theory that you two will meet in the 'middle' somewhere," the figure said.

"Great... So in other words, it might be some time," Ben replied.

"Yes, in fact, since neither of you can leave without the other, it is my estimate that it will take approximately 2 weeks of "local time" before you will see each other."

"...Fucking beautiful."

Chapter 5

The Meaning of Life

Ben came up to a little opening in the forest. The late sun was shining gently through the twigs and branches and into his face. As much as he wanted to enjoy it, he knew this wasn't the time.

Suddenly a boy ran past Ben. It was himself at 8 years old. The trauma had come and gone and there wasn't a trace of it seen on his expressions. He was living life as any child normally would. It seemed like he was lost in the woods alone.

The boy picked up a stick on the ground and stopped at a bark, and started tapping on it, as if Morse code. The shadow figure came up to Ben, and pointed out the tapping.

"...That is your mind trying to communicate something to yourself," it said.

Ben walked up to the boy, knowing he couldn't see or touch him. The boy stopped tapping, lifted his head, and turned straight at Ben, and looked him in the eyes.

"...Do you know your deepest, darkest secret? You think you do, but you have no idea. Let me tell you the meaning of life. What is it that remains, when you eliminate all possible unknowns? What is truth behind

all appearances? Who exactly do you think you are?" the boy asked him.

The boy's face became distorted, with a crooked smile, until morphing into part of the landscape. This left Ben dazed, and disoriented.

"This memory is not safe any more," the shadow figure said. "Your mind has started to become self-aware. It is alert to its own mechanics and cues."

"What the hell does that mean?!"

"It means we should move on to the next memory."

They appeared in an old industrial site with heavy machinery and warehouses. Ben walked inside one of them, and saw the same boy, with not much difference in physical appearance, climbing close to the ceiling with some friends.

Ben tried yelling them to get down before someone gets hurt, but to no avail. They laughed and it looked like one of the other friends pushed young Benjamin off a ledge, making him fall to the ground. The drop must have been 3 metres or more.

Ben rushed towards himself, with the intention of helping. But then the boy stopped holding his leg, and stood up all of a sudden.

"I'm not the one who needs help here. It's obvious, you love her. You always loved her, even when she pushed you off the ledge," the boy said.

It was then that Ben looked up, and saw that the girl who had pushed Benjamin down was in fact young Eve Porter. Eve was crying after young Benjamin, shouting that she didn't mean it. The boy replied it's all right.

"...But you know, this will turn out to be your end. The very act of loving her is what is keeping you from your fate," the boy continued.

"My fate?" Ben replied.

"Yes, you can't move on, until you let go of her. That is your entire purpose in being here now."

Ben didn't understand. She had just met her. At least that's what he thought. But now it was becoming apparent that he might've known her all her life. But if that's the case, why couldn't he remember her?

The shadow figure stood beside him, saying nothing. Ben was starting feel uncomfortable, as if everyone knew more about him than he did, except he was inside his own mind, which made it even worse.

"...I love Eve? Yes, I love her. I felt it before we came here. It was faintly there in the background of things. I wasn't sure what it was though. But now I do," Ben said.

"...You should be careful," the shadow figure replied. "Now that your mind knows a lot more about its memories, it might start repelling you two back."

"How is that a bad thing? We would just wake up, right?"

"Hardly. Eve explained the various symptoms that might come about as possible side-effects of the experiment, no? Those are the sort of things I am referring to. Now that your mind is becoming self-aware, if it can't handle the input generated by your traumatic memory, it might backfire in terms of hallucinations, or other things. You already witnessed your own memory talking back to yourself, which should not happen. And I fear, that is just the beginning."

Chapter 6

Love Is But An Emotion

The shadow figure was making Ben choose. Either they move onto Ben's next memory involving only him, or they switch to one where Eve is part of it. This was not a choice at all for Ben, he needed to see her.

However, the figure warned him that the more memories they see where Eve is present, the more retaliating his mind would get, though Ben couldn't quite grasp why this was.

They had now been travelling for over a week, and were getting into Ben's mid-teen years. The next memory, took Ben on the roof of a large apartment building. Ben was watching himself sitting with Eve on the ledge of the building. It was almost night time, and the air was nippy. Some of the stars were out.

"You promise?" Eve asked.

"Yeah, I promise. I'll never leave you."

"Okay, then prove it!" Eve got up and jumped down from the ledge, to the shock and horror of Ben. She laid down looking lifeless on the ground. Both Bens rushed down from the roof, while the younger Benjamin phoned for an ambulance for her.

The paramedics took her and Ben joined with the

shadow figure in the ambulance. Even though Ben knew that Eve was now alive, the memory was affecting him deeply, to the point of having a panic attack.

At the hospital, the doctors declared she had fallen into a coma. Ben decided to stay with her, alongside his younger version, but the shadow figure had something to say.

"If you stay here, your mind will backfire at you. The more you emotionally invest into her, the more it will hurt. I cannot explain right now why this is, but you need to trust me. Also, you do want to see the real Eve, right? We need to move forward," the figure grabbed Ben by the hand, and Ben agreed reluctantly.

The setting shifted again, this time to Eve's home, in her 19th birthday. She had gotten over the coma, and was now staying with a trainer for rehabilitation, and Ben visited him often.

They were happy then, with Benjamin and Eve sitting out on the porch. Benjamin broke the silence.

"Why did you do it?"

She turned not to the younger Ben, but the older. And looked him in the eyes: "If you really wanted to be by my side, you would do it even if I died. I wanted to prove to myself that our love persists even if everything else would perish. Come hell or high water."

Ben bursted into tears at that moment. He collapsed on the floor, and went into a fetal position. Then, a hand came down and rested on his shoulder. It was Eve. The real one. The love of his life.

They hugged tightly, after which Ben started to explain everything that had happened. But then he started to wonder. How was it that Eve felt the same way?

Eve then explained her own side of the story, explaining that she had gradually found memories of Ben which had her by his side. She spoke of kissing, wonderful mo-

ments, and seeing into their true relationship.

But why she had lost all those memories was still a big mystery. Furthermore, why doesn't Ben remember her after his 18th birthday? They got both lost in thoughts about this.

Suddenly there was a loud screech coming from every direction. It scared Ben and Eve to their very core. Even the shadow figure was surprised. Everything turned to black immediately, and then quiet with no sounds at all.

The figure said then: "I think that the threshold of your experiment pulling you back to the waking world just passed. You are on your own now." The figure then vanished, leaving them to their own devices.

"I love you and I won't leave your side, you got that? We'll get through this together," Eve said to Ben. "Okay, mental imagery. Let's try imagining something pleasant where we both are. Try picturing us in a sunny house garden with swings."

It worked. They were now both sitting on a swing set right beside one another in a small garden outside a house. The next step, said Eve, was "shocking" themselves out of Ben's mind.

But it had to be something really devastating. So they did the only thing they knew that would make themselves pull out. They imagined that they would lose each other for forever.

And this was of course, more than they could bear, each of them having felt it in their bones through imagination, that loss of their other half. And everything was sucked into itself, and then turned inside out. Ben opened his eyes.

It was noon at the same day they went inside. Ben quickly looked next to him. Eve was sitting there, looking at him too. They both got up and hugged each other tightly, after which they kissed.

"I'm never going back there," said Ben to Eve.

She understood him completely. She never wanted to go there again either. After discovering his true trauma, his lost memories, and her "death attempt", they felt like they got all the answers between themselves.

Except an explanation for the question of *why* Eve had lost her memories regarding him, or equally why half of Ben's life is missing. They both calmed down after a while. Ben was having tea.

Something caught in the side of his eye, in the mirror. He turned to see what it was. It was the shadow figure from his mind, staring back at him.

Chapter 7

Awakening

Ben dropped the cup on the floor, shattering it. Eve was startled by it, and she asked what was wrong. Ben said it was nothing. The figure was gone from the mirror.

Ben asked Eve if he could take Donald out for a walk, and she agreed. It seemed like all the blistering anxiety that had gripped Ben from the start, was now but a passing shadow. Speaking of shadows, thought Ben, the fuck was that earlier?

He came by a small forest, that was grey and a little darkened. The day had turned into evening. As Donald was doing its thing, Ben noticed something moving by the trees further away. It was the same figure from before. It had to be, he thought.

"Hallucinations huh, fucking hell," he said to Donald.

Ben was ready to leave back to Eve. He took a turn and stopped on his tracks. The figure was standing right in front of him.

"They are not hallucinations," it said. "You'll see soon enough." It was gone.

Upon getting back to Eve, Ben was utterly lost in thoughts. She took notice of this, and asked him what was bothering him. He explained that he had begun to

see the figure even now, when they're not inside.

They slept together in the same bed that night. The shadow figure appeared even in his dreams, even when they are in lucid form that Ben is an expert of by now.

"You know, they'll never stop until you fully wake up from this," the figure remarks.

"Wake up from what?"

"Your so-called life is just an illusion."

Ben woke up in the morning. He ate, and went to the living room, where the equipment were still in position. Eve was scribbling something on the paper at her desk. Then, she yelled: "I got it!"

"Got what?" Ben asked.

"Why I don't have any memories of you."

She said that it was the very experiment she had designed and the drugs she took over the years that had destroyed her memories. The drug had a specific component related to memory which enabled the dilation itself during the state of being in someone else's mind.

What she hadn't taken into account was that while the patient is perfectly safe from its altering effects, for the one travelling the case might not quite be the same. And the unintended side-effect had to be that the component replaced her memories with nothing, so as to not to overload her mind during the state.

Ben understood it, and advised her to never use them again and she agreed. He went to the bathroom. Upon washing his hands, he looked up at the mirror and almost had a heart attack. The killer from his traumatic memory was standing behind him.

The man opened the bathroom door, approached quickly towards Eve and took her by the hair. He slit her throat in front of Ben. Ben crashed on the floor, with his fists clenched, face contorted in agony, and tears running down his face.

He had lost everything. His sanity, his love, his entire purpose. What was going on? He couldn't make any sense of any of what had happened. Did she die? Or am I dead? What's going on?!

Then, everything was suddenly calm. The figure was sitting on the couch, looking at him, and laughing. Ben was in a rage, and couldn't put any words into coherent sentences. Nothing was coming out of his mouth.

The figure then pointed something up on Eve's desk. It was a letter, written in her handwriting. Ben opened it and started reading:

"My love, I know you didn't mean to leave me alone that day. It's okay. But you have to move on. You can't drag me around for eternity you know. Just know that we'll be together again. But you have to make that choice, or stay here until time's end."

Ben didn't understand what was going on. He had a mix of anger, frustration, confusion, nostalgia, a Deja Vu, and all sorts of emotions simultaneously.

"...I think, that the time has come that we had a little chat about what you are actually doing," the figure on the couch said.

Chapter 8

The Dream of Benjamin Ward

"You never had an inkling, did you? That your life is a facade. That your very existence is nothing but smoke and mirrors," the figure claims to Ben.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It was me. And you. I am you. Your repressed "truth" about your own life. The truth that you have perpetually hushed under the carpet. The truth I will now tell you," the figure continues.

"What truth?"

"You died. A long, long time ago. But that is not all. You created an entire universe, just to be with her again."

"N-no... Stop!"

"It's okay. You don't have to cry any more. You're about to be freed."

"Then tell me everything..."

"Your life was a happy one. It was full of joy, ups and downs, and love. You met Eveline before she turned 17. And you stayed with her until the very end. That is, her end. She was killed by a mugger in a hoodie and a mask

in front of you," the figure kept explaining.

"But after that incident, you couldn't let go of her. In fact, you went so far as to refuse to transmigrate, because of the sadness and sense of loss that you kept with you, even after death. And so you created an entire fabric of space-time, with everything in it as much akin to the original life as possible."

"And then what?"

"Then something went wrong. You started to confuse what you had created, as a creation, to a mere shadow of itself. Your mind became twisted in due course of time, until creating aspects, such as yours truly. Which also explains your and Eve's so-called memory loss and duplicate memories out of the "residue" of the so-called trauma. You created a framework of fear, because you were so lost in the end. But I existed, to pull you back out of the dream."

"A dream?"

"You could call this the dream between your life, and the state beyond. And as long as you are attached to Eveline, you will keep yourself in this dream."

Ben sighed. He couldn't let go. Not any more. He had seen too many things with her. If he had to create the universe anew, he would do it all over again. Endlessly, until the edge of oblivion.

Even though his current existence was only the stuff of fantasy, he knew that by creating a new world, he could lose his memories of her again, thus meeting her all over from the beginning. Fall in love with her again.

"I have made up my mind," Ben said.

"The right kind of choice, I hope."

"I'm not leaving here. I can't. If a dream is the best I can do, it's better than vanishing into nothingness. I can't stand the idea of never experiencing the thrill of being with her ever again. So this, is goodbye."

"Oh, you won't get rid of me. I'll always be there by your side, in case you change your mind. You have all the time in the world, as they say."

"Then let's get started."

It was morning. Ben walked into the kitchen, and grabbed a cup of tea. Eve greeted him by throwing him a newspaper. Ben read the first headline: "A mugger kills a woman in broad daylight!"

"What is the world coming to?" he said.

"Don't know. But I do know it's a world I'd rather have you in it. Now, and forever."

Epilogue

Time was coming to an end. A being on the outskirts of the Milky Way, had been on a voyage for billions of years. It had created this existence, to overcome the loss of its loved one.

Do we really want to sustain an indefinite existence, where we are as it were, locked or frozen into a kind of mode of being, where we don't notice time passing?

Does a dream necessarily require the cessation of being awake to reality? What then is the meaning of a "lucid" dream, where you are both dreaming, and aware that you are doing so?

If Ben had a choice, between reliving his actual life, or keeping to his nightmares, could he have made the distinction which was which? We think that we are apart from things. But truly, are we impartial to dreams? Or are we ourselves dreams?

If existence was but a dream, would it negate anything when it comes to the human psychosocial and technological developing? This dream can also be equated with a simulation, or a game. All of them designated really the same central feature, of pretentiousness.

It is this pretence, that is really at the core of phenomena. This is why Ben had such a marvellous time. He had the capacity to pretend that his dream wasn't one.

All beings hope, that things will turn out okay in the end. And this "okay-ness", is also a quality of dreams. Because in the background of your mind, you always know that you'll eventually wake up, even from the most awful nightmares.

Did Ben have this premonition of sorts? Did he subconsciously sense that the shadow figure was really part of his own psyche? I think our difficulty is to consider our Shadow, as it was coined by Carl Jung, as all the things that we perpetually repress and hide from our conscious bubbling attention.

There is also the collective unconscious, where the universality of everything can be discovered in different forms, or symbolisms. Was Ben aware of this symbolism? Was this why he makes such a case in the Prologue about The Fool's point of view, of basically throwing society to the birds?

There is also The Trickster archetype, which befits the shadow figure, as he's the one responsible for pretty much every major turn in the story. He's the one behind Ben's unexamined actions, and assumptions. He moves the darkness. He *is* darkness.

But what is the dark, really? It is the Hide aspect of the cosmos. If the game or the dream is Lost and Found, everything having to do with the Lost side, has to eventually enable the Found side. But this is a difficult idea to convey.

If Ben's story is taken as an allegory for this Hide and Seek dream-game, then every thing in the story that has to do with the Hide portion, necessarily moves the narrative forward, thus the relative motion of it is always towards the Seek. This is known as the "art of leading" in writing. Or what I call it anyway.

The pyramid of plot points, tells the same thing. The base of the pyramid on the left side, is called Hide. This

is the part of the story where we are absolutely oblivious to almost everything that's about to happen. And the other side, is Seek. Where the conclusion, the resolve, and the reflection is achieved.

There is also the exploration of the psyche, and our fears. These also fall largely into the Hide side. But also to the Seek side. Because it's all interrelated. As soon as you want to find something that's missing, you're already seeking, thus increasing the potential finding of it.

But Ben's story, is also a symbol for a certain state of mind. And that state of mind, is the ephemeral. The temporary quality of everything. That's why the story is so rushed. That's why everything within it, its pace, is so brief.

It's going by almost too fast, for us to fully grasp it. And that is the dream of Benjamin Ward.