

Curtain Call: 2038 (Part 1)

Laughter.

Your laugh echoes through the eternal streets. It sounds more like a cackle from a chicken or witch, airy and stuck. It rumbles through streets that once hosted your childhood, with an emerald sky, inhospitable. Through this very avenue you paraded with your parents' 2012 Suzuki Grand Nomade, live inheritance, when you got your driver's licence. Before the world ended, when there were still cars around. The few still visible have their tires so flat they may well be sinking into the ground, as if the heat of ten summers had melted the object and surface to fusion. They're houses for the fortunate. Tombs for the unlucky. Smells like sulfur.

The buildings curve towards the concrete like magnetized, their fall slowed by the sepulchral silence of late 2038. How they don't snap remains a mystery. They look like you.

Your body swings, light, unstable, walking on clouds, bouncing on weeds and seeds and feet. You don't feel your limbs, they sleep. It bumps against a lamp post, ignoring it and moving on. It was wrecked anyway. For a moment it seems to light up, twinkle, as if remembering

its job upon human touch. You stare at it, making sure. It does not turn back on. It's been so long.

Watch the smoke clouds rise among the celestial bodies and cover the stars. The island-valley of Santiago still stands among the seas. The mountains hold. It's curious. You spent your whole life complaining about them for keeping the smog in or climbing them to see above it. Now they're the only thing keeping your reverse fishbowl city alive. You should be grateful.

Who would've thought it'd end this way? No one knew. Whose fault is it? You let out a cackle. 'Fault.' Such a strange word.

You still remember the last time it snowed. You were twelve or so, awoken by your mom's excitement, who dressed you up in some uncomfortable Inuit suit that looked funny. You made snow angels while your dad captured the moment with his phone. The thick layer of white drowned all the blue forget-me-nots in the garden. By then, the news was spreading about the first bursts of a brand new virus from who-knew-where. The United States blamed China. China blamed India. Russia blamed the United States. Chile blamed cosmic activity from an active star core somewhere in the country. You remember it as tomorrow; sometimes you find yourself expecting the snow with eagerness before realising there's none left. You miss it.

There's none left, right? You laugh at the dichotomy, stumbling onto a scared and familiar boy. He's about ten years old. He cries.

'What are you doing here?' you ask.

He stutters, teared up, belly bloated. You haven't seen a kid as young as him in years. Most either fled to the mountain refuges or died.

'I just lost my rabbit.'

'Hope you find him,' you tell him with a wide smile and continue on your way.

The night is no obstacle for your flow. You walk with the grace of a ballerina, attempting pirouettes among the debris as if in the old Municipal. Going up the street slope daily keeps you in good shape. After all, there's no buses, no tube, nothing left. The hours you've spent walking rejuvenate you. Maybe you'll disappear if you keep at it. You laugh at your logic.

It takes a while for you to arrive. What once may have been called a heliport is no more than a modified stretch of concrete. Long, wide. With tall walls and barbed wire that have long since stopped anyone. Someone broke the gate chains again; the guard is gone. You go to welcome your guests as daily. Your mind distorts and your memories twist as the names escape you.

Cough. Your throat trembles and contracts. You're used to it. Then you see him, approaching you from the

landing platform. As stretched as a blade of grass. He did come; you thought he never would. You don't remember his name, but 'Louis' will do. His remaining life has treated him well.

Failed attempts at small talk.

'And the others?' you say eventually.

Louis frowns.

'Still with that?' he replies. 'Grow up.'

'Haven't opened the doors of adulthood yet,' you say with a wink. 'They look heavy.'

'Okay,' he answers. 'What was it you wanted so urgently?'

'I want to believe some things can go back to how they were.'

Silence.

'Tell me,' you add. 'Does it still snow up there?'

'Sometimes,' Louis says. 'Looks too white to be true. Stuff like that gets you melancholic. ...How have *you* been?'

'It doesn't snow here anymore. Anyways, you should do. Try to catch up.'

You walk through the crumbling streets. The endless streets. The streets of impossible length that stretch beyond the reach of memory. Or at least that's how they feel. You try your best to act normal.

‘How’s your dream of having a kindergarten going?’ Louis asks during the trip.

You look at him.

‘I didn’t know you remembered that,’ you confess. ‘I think my inner child can’t learn yet. Much less teach. I usually dream at night. If I think about it too much during the day I end up finding plot holes and discourage myself.’

‘I see,’ Louis nods. ‘On my front, I started my company. At long last, I’m standing up to my dad. Soon I’ll...’

You let out a shrill laugh that cuts the wind.

‘A company! So you’re finally joining the war, eh? Or is it a theatre troupe?’

‘I’d forgotten I can’t talk to you,’ he says.

Even so, you notice in him a hint of a smile. You have to admit you missed him, even though it may not look like it. The decaying city gets shorter with the conversation.

Reconstructions and deconstructions haunt the place that a decade and a half ago you called «school». The children’s footsteps burn the entrance.

‘It’s been so long,’ you say.

‘Here?’ he asks, having just noticed where you’ve brought him. ‘Why?’

‘Rebirth,’ you say without looking at him.

Louis hesitates.

‘And why do you need me?’

‘Moral support. It scares me,’ you reply with a shrug.

You both walk, crossing the empty courtyards towards Room 9. Each garden is so *big!* This is the school? Ooh, it’s huge! And you’re telling me we’ll come here *every day?* As if the little children playing football were any more than immortalized steps in the gravel. The hallways extend to infinity, turning, twisting, and tunnelling through themselves in a manner impossible both to explain and to forget. Rooms within rooms within rooms. None the 9. You keep going, the buzz of electric lighting murmuring and following you. Don’t worry, being the new kid is never easy. You’ll get used to it.

The story of these halls is enough to write the greatest soap opera or the weirdest comedy. Classmates chatting, getting lunch, confessing, fighting. Talking about exams, music, ping-pong; tangible randomness. Playing games on their phones, rushing to the wall to get the socket first. Except there’s no one there anymore.

Then, the longest hallway of all. The hallway of the first day of class. You’re so small it’ll take decades to get to the end. Fret not. The more, the merrier, because everyone loves longer breaks. You’ve got all the time in the world. Right? You walk.

There's a podium at the end. The most glorious graduation is not enough to balance out the weight of a life of fourteen years. You don't know when, but you reach it. You enter the door to its right.

The smallness of Room 9 seems to have been designed with infants in mind, or for those not willing to grow. Chairs still hide behind tables, the marker and eraser on the whiteboard, some backpacks at the back, blue forget-me-nots spread around. As if waiting for a class that has been late for too long.

The door drawn on the whiteboard looks too good to be true. Louis frowns. He looks disturbed.

'I think we shouldn't be here,' he tells you.

'This is,' you say, 'where everything went downhill. ...Anyways, there should be a rabbit here. Where'd he go?'

You can see Louis does not understand. Something inside you moves you to leave.

'Let's go,' Louis says, his voice betraying him. 'Let's grab a coffee or something.'

You stop for a moment at the mention of coffee. As if a mere drink could help you forget. In your experience, nothing works. Alcohol only serves to burn your memories even further in your conscience.

You still remember the day you tried to make everything last forever. When you were young and innocent and attempted to control reality. You had no way

of knowing that your happy ending would always be exclusive to your memory.

2024. You stumbled upon the play on a family trip to Navarino Island. You only knew about it from a blog sometime earlier. You stole it, and upon reading it, shared it with your classmates. You had no clue what would happen, and are still uncertain of its consequences, but you know it changed something in you. Louis was the only one who didn't read it.

You ignore him and open the door on the whiteboard. Then everything changes.

A castle named as the world. A lake. A tattered king. The most beautiful black stars you've seen in all these long, strange eons. The wind whips you like a memory as you find yourself walking the abandoned streets of lost Carcosa. The city on the other side of the mirror.

It's never snowed here. The smell of sulfur is overwhelming. You have the undeniable feeling of having been here before.

You walk, ever faster, pressed. You don't know where Louis went. You brought him because you feared loneliness, but it was to be expected that only you would remain. And the rabbit? He was meant to guide you. So said the book, but maybe he had no time. You'll need to manage by yourself.

The endless streets. The streets of impossible length that stretch beyond the reach of memory.

You run. You trip. You cannot stop time. You get up. What can you do? You don't remember. You press on.

It was long ago that you first met the rabbit. «Grow up», he told you then. He said he'd show you how. Your mentor. And now here you are, and you have no mentor. Louis hasn't shown up again. You're scared. What was it the rabbit said you should do?

The ruins of the grey city of Carcosa, with its buildings like tombstones, make you react, as those strong silences that hurt the ears. The rabbit was all you had. Then you found Louis and lost him again. Now you have nothing.

Of this place you know no more than through books, that never say much. What are you doing here anyways? Your thoughts get clear and blurry at a time. You can reason, but you can't remember.

You're lost. Why did you come here in the first place?

The only person you can see near looks fully out of his mind, judging by his walk. He approaches you clumsily, not noticing you until he trips on your feet. You don't know how to react. His face is covered by the mist of the mind.

'What are you doing here?' he asks, curious.

You have trouble speaking. You haven't talked for who knows how long.

'I just lost my rabbit,' you stutter.

'Hope you find him,' he replies with a wide smile. 'I think you're lost. As a suggestion... that depends on where you want to get.'

Nonsense. Then he keeps walking. His laughter echoes through the eternal streets. He isn't there when you turn around.

Where do you want to go?

You know you should grow up. You've known your whole life that you'll have to make the choice. Your heart rushes with your thoughts. You need to hurry. They won't wait for you forever. That's it; you have to go with the rest. You miss them.

You're running before you realise, knowing they won't wait for you. You reach the castle, going in and through it all, desperate, looking for the classroom, knowing the teacher won't let you in, knowing that on the throne already sits the king, knowing you failed but may yet be able to make it for the curtain call.

The curtain call: the prize for those who grow up, who leave behind all traces of the liminal for the certainty of what will be.

The hallways extend to infinity, turning, twisting, and tunnelling through themselves in a manner

impossible both to explain and to forget. Rooms within rooms within rooms. You always knew it would not be easy. Not for someone like you.

You don't know how many years you spend traversing the castle. It starts feeling like home. You struggle to breathe; your legs feel weak and your lungs blown. You keep running. You know you can't go on like this forever. You have to arrive, to decide.

For a long time you think you'll never make it to the throne room, but one day, there you are. This is it.

The castle is the world, you tell yourself, as every day of the last four years. You can't forget. You mustn't forget. The castle is the world.

Will you open the doors?

Their wood is cold at the contact of your hand. They look heavy.

Will you reveal yourself?

You know everyone will turn towards you the moment you go in. Don't worry, being the new kid is never easy. You'll get used to it.

You're terrified. What are you doing? Where did the little you go, who would've done everything to stay that way?

You hesitate at the threshold. Everyone else is inside already. But is this really what you wanted? You remember the little children playing football and their

immortalized steps in the gravel. You think about your ex-classmates and their ready lives. It's been so long.

Do you really want to grow up?

Then...

[If you open the doors, head to Part 3.]

[If you don't open the doors, head to Part 4.]

Curtain Call: 2038 (Part 2)

Your choice not to choose breaks everything.

Long, strange eons pass. You stand still at the threshold, staring at the door. You won't cross. But you also won't not cross. Anyways, how did you get here? You're cheating.

Your resolve not to look away from the door, no matter what, starts degrading you. You feel your grip on reality start fading away. What are you waiting for?

[Head to Part 1 or stop reading.]

How hard can choosing be?

The world changes behind you. Colours, lights, and shadows flood your vision. The world grows. The world reconstructs and deconstructs. Eventually, there's no castle. There's nothing.

You stand over the void, in the infinite blackness, in front of the door that you'll never stop watching and surrounded by the never-ending nothingness.

[Head to Part 1 or stop reading.]

The rabbit talks to you from beyond your perception. He says you're a rebel. 'What's the point of reading if you won't follow the text?' he asks. 'Do you not want to grow up? Choose to. Get over all this.'

The rabbit's laugh echoes through eternity. Your body swings, light, unstable. If you continue like this, you're going to fall.

[Head to Part 1 or stop reading.]

You fall. The darkness takes you in, the door pulls away. Silence.

Then, a whistle, long, constant. It rushes and stabilises like a pulse. You open your eyes.

A white ceiling. White walls. White light. A heart rate monitor next to your stretcher.

The nurse that just walked in hands you a long and thin paper without saying a word. A bill.

It's charging for the girl you made cry when you were little, for the test in which you cheated, for the chocolate you stole, for the classmates you did not say goodbye to at prom, for that friend you abandoned when he needed you most, for the people, for the damage. For all that you did in life; a bill as true as the life now flashing before your eyes.

I told you to stop reading. It's sometimes easier.

You examine the bill nonetheless. Every detail. Then you hand it back to the nurse.

She turns over your stretcher and you fall again; a void of reality after reality. It's been so long. It's been too long.

You crash into snow. Soft, beautiful. It's only a few centimetres, but enough to make a snowman. It hadn't snowed for years. I'm happy you're here to see it, even if it's just the resulting white of the blending of colours that's the flash of your life.

You were going to start a kindergarten. You can't die here, not yet. But this is the price of not following the rules. It's curious to see how a person can regain the will to live when facing the final chasm. I've always felt attracted to the indomitable human spirit. Even so, you failed, and you'll be punished by the world. This society doesn't like those who don't take stances.

Cry. Shout all you want about wishing to live. Implore forgiveness from those who never offered it. See the beauty of life in those who took it from you. Be grateful for the gift of birth, even if in a world that ended so long ago. Allow yourself to miss those who ever smiled for you.

You start sinking in the snow. You can't swim. It soon covers you whole, and you continue down, down. Your vision turns white.

That's when you realise that you did start a kindergarten, even though you were your only student. You taught yourself to move forward. Too late.

At least it's snowing. Wouldn't you like to have a second chance?

[Head to Part 1.]

Curtain Call: 2038 (Part 3)

You choose knowledge.

The heavy doors rumble as you open them. A trumpet announces your entrance to the great throne and ballroom.

They're all there, swinging in pairs to waltz rhythm. Their elegant suits and beautiful dresses shine and complement the theatre masks they're wearing.

A wide smile crosses your face. You followed the path of time to the end, and the reward offered is greater than anything you could have imagined. Almost two decades trying to get here. You did it, even without the rabbit's help. At the end of the hall, seated on the throne in a long blue suit, is the king. His fist holds his masked downcast face.

Here your ex-classmates have their lives. One of your best friends is even wearing a tie, cutting a cake alongside a woman in a wedding dress. You frown. He and you had promised you'd never marry. You won't let that ruin your night.

There's people missing, you notice. What happened to them?

Then a bunch of classmates greet you excitedly. They take you to their table and the happy conversation flies by with childhood memories. You'd missed them.

You notice their greatest source of joy is reminiscing what was. The feeling hits you like an impulse. Isn't it better to move on? Here, you could get married. You could have children and your own kindergarten.

Louis approaches you.

'About time you got here,' he says with a formal smile and a cup of something unrecognizable. He winks. 'Welcome.'

'Here I am,' you nod. 'Now all I need is a suit and a mask.'

You laugh. What a weird situation.

Silence.

The waltz stops, the smiles fade. All turn to you. Louis seems uncomfortable.

'What do you mean, you have neither suit nor mask? Now that you mention it... It's true. Castaigne, my friend... I'm sorry, but I think you need to go.'

'No mask? No mask!' you hear the whispers of the rest.

Your heart skips a beat.

‘No... Please, no!’ you say. ‘I took much longer than all of you to get here! It was too hard! And now you want to kick me out?’

Louis stays silent for a moment. He purses the lips of his mask. Everything was going so well.

‘Guards, take him away.’

‘No!’ you shout and run through the crowd towards the king. You stumble and fall before the sapphire throne.

‘Castaigne,’ says the deep and reverberating voice behind the mask. ‘My son. What is it that you wish for the most?’

You don’t hesitate.

‘Let it snow again.’

Then, as the guards make their way through the people, you start hearing a clattering from beyond the roof. It gets ever more constant, stronger. The partygoers look up, muttering, waiting.

Is this what you wanted? The last glance you take of the room burns the moment forever in your memory. The last grains of sand from the hourglass start to run out.

They were all so happy here. You could see smiles on their masks. Why did you have to do all this? Wasn’t staying put enough?

These were the same people that ignored you at the ten-year reunion, you tell yourself. Those who made

progress and left you behind. None of them called you at your lowest. None knew. Even so...

It's hard to admit that you feel close to each and every one of them. You miss the hallways full of people; now they're all empty. Your biggest regret is not having said goodbye at prom. When your wings were cut off. When everything changed.

It's too late to think about that. You look at them, one by one. You'll miss them. Even so, you know that your dreams are worth more than their friendship.

'Don't forget me,' you tell them.

At long last, like reverse fireworks, the roof collapses, and from it falls an avalanche of snow, the cosmos seeping through, post-explosion smoke.

You stop thinking. You ignore all feelings, lifting your arms, and you laugh. You did it. It's snowing again. You laugh as snow floods the room, as they're all smashed by the avalanche and cut off forever.

You laugh. It's snowing again.

The end?

Curtain Call: 2038 (Part 4)

You choose ignorance.

You turn around and run far, far, and you dive into the lake of clouds, and you fall crossing the sky, and you try to spread your wings. But they cut them off, long, strange eons ago.

You pass by shelves as you fall, full of textbooks, and toys, and pictures, and CDs, and theatre masks, and laughter, and crying, and people who chose to grow up when you decided to stay back. You recognize two tomes. Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Chambers' *The King in Yellow*.

You slam into a mirror shard and fall right through. Then you're not *you* anymore.

'Good morning, Santiago! This is Channel Y, coming along for a brand new day, here at the end of the world.'

That day is blurry, as if watching through stained glass. But you can remember clearly what you said then, in the studio.

'Exciting things today, fourteenth of November, 2038,' you started. 'Modern developments, breaking news, global announcements! A lot's happened since yesterday. And when not, eh?'

You remember enjoying this.

‘Where to start... Hmm. I don’t think you’d much enjoy this. New progress in the research of the vaccine against the RCRD-o... Ah, how so? You *are* interested? Ha, ha! I know, I’m just teasing. But let’s leave the best for last. Gotta keep you all hooked somehow, right? Ha, ha.

The tower of reports and news, opposite your microphone, feels menacing. You pick one each day nonetheless, like cards from a deck, to communicate to the world what it wants to hear, no matter its veracity. Credible fabrications.

‘In an official announcement from the World Empire, the word was given that, due to the previously promoted new strategy, climate change should be over by the year 2047!’ You clap at the microphone. ‘Though here at Channel Y we agree that this new hope could hurry a bit, it seems to mean that this Earth *will* have a future. So, be glad! Mankind will not end with us. ...Probably.

Nevertheless, you have to hand out real news too. You can’t ruin your title of trustworthy source. Even if it hurts.

‘On the other hand, the shooting at the Football World Cup finals –the first World Cup to be played aboard an artificial floating island– has received confirmation of a total of 1,003 dead, along with 277 gravely injured. Surprisingly, the Skyland did not drop,

but with no hope of escape for the audience, tragedy was inevitable.’ Along with some theories and slight gossip, it’d keep listeners tuned in. ‘It’s believed to have been the criminal organisation known as Limen-14, as the message written in the hands of the captured terrorists... says... «We’ll never stop crossing the threshold». Research hasn’t been precise, though. Ecoterrorism adds to anarchism, weird philosophy, extreme determination, and the long etcetera that holds Limen-14 already. «This will be terrible for the economy», the president of the United States commented on the matter.’

Good, good. You’re doing great.

‘Concerning local news, the count of those infected with RCRD-o here in Chile is rising, with Rancagua and Talca just added to the list of fully-quarantined Chilean cities. «The number grows as the cases multiply», explained the President of the Republic in a brief press conference earlier today. «This leads to an increase; a rise, so to speak. What I mean to say is that there’s ever more.»

A little conspiracy...

‘What we’re all asking ourselves is, has the President caught the disease too?’

And now, the grand finale.

‘Moving on... What you’ve all been waiting for!’

You then casually check the state of the stream in the monitor behind you. You freeze.

‘I can’t believe it. It was not streaming. That’s frustrating. So much time and inspiration thrown away! Johnny! What do you mean this is not streaming?! I’ve been talking for so long! ...Johnny? Johnny, are you okay?’

You can’t understand what he’s saying. His face is blurry, his voice muddled. He sounds desperate.

‘Hey, hey,’ you say as he approaches. ‘You look wrong. Don’t get any closer. You hear me? Do *not*...!’

He touches you and you fall again. Further down through your mind, forward in time, right into—

The sound of the air guitar you’re playing is indeed there, you tell yourself. Even though only you can perceive it.

Your flat’s CD player is one of your few remaining possessions, but selling it would mean giving away who you are, and you’re not there yet. Acoustic contamination is irrelevant in a world where the present is the only certainty; no matter how much the neighbors complain, they’ll soon forget.

This CD you’re listening to is about your life. The memories that flow through the song lyrics, the roaring guitars, the pulsing bass, and the drum beats are yours. The moments that rise from your past to your consciousness are happy, energetic, active. Alive.

You savour the warm returning feeling of adventures lived with your brother. Seven years your elder, he could've easily pushed you aside, but didn't. Those long races through the countryside you'd run together are of the few things that you still enjoy merely because they happened.

You for sure enjoyed this week, these particular moments of your faraway and wonderful childhood.

You take a look at the long CD collection lining the shelf next to the player, thinking, analysing. Which will be the one for the following week? Which disc will be chosen to fabricate your next past?

Part of you feels disgust. This addiction has consumed your mind for so long that, even though it is inevitable, it's got you exhausted. Exhausted, but addicted nonetheless. The memories you fabricated this week are breaking, fading, as the acidic aftertaste of a stale candy.

You lie on the floor for a long while after the album's over, enjoying the last instants of those warm memories before they disappear forever in the deep dumpster of lies you carry in your heart.

Then, the familiar void. The concrete surface of your apartment is cold and hard. Cold and hard. No identity. No past, no future. Just a floor.

Who are you? Nobody. Who were you? Nobody. Who did you want to be? Your body feels so light. So heavy.

You're desperate to play the CD again. To bring back the prerecorded memories of a brother that never existed. But you know how it works. It'd feel fake, forced, as it's felt so many times before with so many other discs. You can't force your disease to do its thing. You know that there's certain albums that, with enough listening, can fabricate memories, but you've long since found out that you can't repeat them. You don't get to choose how this works. No one controls the RCRD-o.

You don't know how long it takes for you to get up. You take some worthless cash from your pitiful safe and leave your flat. Crossing the serpentine and endless streets you make an effort not to look at the brown vault, so contaminated that, rather than a sky, it's a roof. A roof in such poor state that it'll collapse anytime now on all those who below it live. But keeping your face down forces you to look at the people. The lucky ones, in tents, the others fallen on the street, or on planters, or under dead trees. The small lottery winning ticket you once got has kept you in your flat, but not for long. Your feet stop from time to time while walking and you have to force yourself to keep going if you want to live some more.

Going into the park that once held your childhood you see the masses that fill it, every corner a home to someone. The old lady with the ancient CDs is in a corner, she who has unknowingly kept you alive for so long. You get to her and take a good look at her current items, scattered on a mat.

None catch your eye; none has the feel you're looking for. ...Except for one at the end of a pile.

The band is called «Phase Seven». The album, *Roulette*. The artwork, a picture of a girl running through the forest while covering her face.

You frown. You've seen this one before, you're certain of it. The strong and unexplainable sensation that this memory is not fabricated strikes you in the chest. But, where from? It doesn't look popular at all. In fact, the packaging seems amateur. Even so, it's so intriguing you can't do much beyond stare at it for several seconds. You ask for it.

'Local early '20s pop-punk,' the old woman says, uninterested but knowledgeable. '2024 or something. Five pounds.'

The price doesn't matter. Hypnotized but unsettled, you buy it, just that one, and take it home.

The slight tremor of your body is not due to the temperature change. The rush in your heart is not exhaustion. The expectation with which you open this

Pandora's Box is greater than any other feeling of yours from the past ten years.

There's not much beyond the disc in the case. A small pamphlet, with the song titles and some additional info. You don't read it. You insert it in your player with a hand that won't stop shaking. Why, you wonder.

Often, for a memory to feel as yours, you have to loop it while you sleep, so it blends in with your dreams. Often, it's a slow process where your mind's self-deception acts with your heartbreak to fake catharsis stolen from a compact disk. Often, it feels fake, but you bathe in the memory and enjoy it. Not this one.

The energetic electric guitar fills your apartment along a crystalline female voice, opening the album. You know that guitar. You know that voice. And with the song's intensity going up enter the second guitar, drums, and bass, shouting and expressing. The voice sings of good times getting worse, of a decadent world, of a call to action and awakening. She sings in a desperate cry for humanity not to forget. You know that voice.

'Because, hey, it's great, yeah?' someone says inside you.

'Yeah, but I think we could record once more. To make sure.'

'Sure, let's go. We're doing it.'

'This is the only way of not being forgotten, right?'

‘Transcending.’

Whose voices... are those? Then you start associating, connecting, bonds cut and lost years ago, friendships, relationships that should exist but don’t. The reason you’re so obsessed with CDs. Tears streak down your eyes. The reason why you’re always searching for something. What you feel you’re lacking. Why you never reach what you’re looking for.

‘What are you looking for? Your pick? It must’ve slipped in here somewhere. You can play with your fingers, yeah?’ the memories whisper through your mind.

‘And how are those lyrics going? Are you inspired? Yeah, must be hard to write like that.’

‘Not sure, I’ve never been a poet.’

‘And you act humble. You know you’ve always been the best of us.’

The tears fill your face.

‘Okay, but it’s fine if it’s not ready for the session. I mean, this is a hobby. Don’t kill yourself working either.’

‘I’m fine. We must do this; transcend, be remembered. Isn’t this what you wanted?’

Lines after lines after lines. Emotions. Your past, returned to you. The desperation with which you open the song pamphlet barely lets you read its content, but you can see your name, and others. Names you promised you’d never forget. Is this... your reality? The more you

listen to the album the more you're convinced it's you. It's really you.

The initial epiphany fades away the moment you realise you'll forget again. You got the hit. Now it won't be as strong when you loop it. This incurable disease, this curse, will distort your mind again, and you'll forget. You grab onto the sound flowing from the CD player, to your life essence, like a shipwrecked man to his wooden plank. You'll lose them again. This neurological degradation will mock you again.

You start getting desperate. Now what? Now *what?* You pick up your phone and look up the singer's name on the Internet. Nothing. In all social media you can think of. Nothing. Is it a pseudonym? You look up the other names. Nothing.

You haven't long. You know that, the moment the album runs out, your memories will get blurry again, will merge and blend and get messed up with the eternal and insatiable fabrications. You don't know how much longer you have.

Then you search for «Phase Seven» and her name. And there, a tiny mention in a diminute forum with a phone number. You call without even reading the full post.

Your heart beats as hard as your band's. Eternity.

‘Yes?’ A voice. Her voice. Older, grown up. Her voice.

You stutter. What can you say?

‘Hello?’ she asks.

You breathe in deep. Then, you hesitate.

What for? Why remember if you’ll forget again? What’s the point? You haven’t long. You know it. Then, why?

Her voice awoke something in you. Suddenly, you want to be seventeen again, and make music, and still have hope that problems can be avoided, and have a voice to shout your messages, and share CDs with your band, too late for week nights, and record, record, until some recording comes out good, until each of you have in your hands a copy of the work you’ve achieved together. For the future. To remember.

You don’t know what happened with yours, or with you. But you want to know, desperately, even if you’ll forget again. You want to live, even if for a short while. You want to believe some things can go back to how they were.

Then you say hi. You ask how she’s been, and what’s been of her life, and you tell her about yourself, that you found the «Phase Seven» CD, and that it was all real, and it worked out, and even though you forgot, you

did end up remembering, and that you all did transcend. You did transcend.

It worked, because even if you hadn't found it, someone else would have. Someone in some corner of the decaying and disastrous world would have found the CD, *Roulette* by «Phase Seven», and would've known about you. You'd have been remembered.

You tell her all that through the phone, before forgetting, and you start tripping on your words, and you don't know what you're saying anymore, and you rush through an apology, saying you had the wrong number, and you hang up.

You lie empty on the floor. No identity. No past, no future. Just a neurodegenerative disease and a void for a present. But eventually, someone knocks on the door.

You get up, rush to it, and... it's that blasted rabbit again.

'Hard stuff, eh?' he says with a wink. 'Don't lose your head.'

With that, he vanishes, and you're falling again. A white surface approaches, fast, too fast. The wind whips you like a memory. You blink and everything changes.

The bench from which your legs hang is almost too tall for you to get down. The wood is soft, the touch of varnish and process having cut off any splinters that might try to harm you. You swing your legs. Forward,

back. Like a pendulum, like those from the tall and pretentious clock towers.

The night is cold. No matter. The scent of the grilled meat is enough to make staying out here worth it. The adults' laughter, playing games on a nearby table, cuts the wind. Blue forget-me-nots and a thin layer of snow decorate the garden.

You've filtered this moment in your memory so many times throughout the decades that you don't know if you should trust. You let it play out nonetheless.

Near your hand you can feel the warmth of another. But the face to which that hand obeys is jotted out by memory. What is her name? It'd be stupid to ask now. It's been so long.

You search your memory; you try to uncork, unveil, understand. But the name does not return. Even so, you're back. You're finally back.

In the adults' table, at the game, you hear something about a thief. Someone seems to have stolen a rabbit. You frown. Then their voices get blurry again. The meat's almost done. Ah, no, it's still too rare. Aren't you cold? No, thanks, I'm good.

The voices melt. Take a seat. How long? Aren't you sleepy? I can drop you off. What do you mean you don't want to go? Everything is going to...

Except there's no voices. None addressing you. The wood of the bench is so soft it's a folding chair. The night's darkness, so cold it's a room that has never seen the sun. The cutting wind, a cheap fan. Her face and hand, as fake as a TV star. Your memory, as fabricated as the ideal of childhood.

The chair you're sitting on loses its balance with the weight of your conscience and you fall again through your white sky.

You slam against the school courtyard. Your classmates are reunited around you, crying and saying goodbye. It's the day they cut off your wings. When everything changed. And it's snowing.

It all happens so fast. The surface crumbles under your weight like broken glass. You stretch your arm up as if someone would grab you. But you can do nothing to stop falling. To stop growing.

Your eyes light up. You watch the smoke clouds as they rise among the celestial bodies and cover the stars. The island-valley of Santiago still stands among the seas. The mountains hold.

Who would've thought it'd end this way? No one knew. Whose fault is it?

It's been so long.

It's been too long.

Even so, it's snowing.

The end?

Curtain Call: 2038

(Epilogue)

‘What’s the diagnosis, doctor?’ Louis asks.

‘A sum of factors,’ he replies. ‘Among them, schizoaffective and borderline personality disorders. That’s what we’ll tell the public eye,’ he adds, looking at him. ‘You know this is RCRD-o.’

‘I see,’ Louis nods slowly. ‘What can we do?’

The doctor seems to think about it.

‘Stay silent. Our best agents at Limen-14 are working hard to resolve the situation.’

Louis glances through the window next to the sign reading «Patient 11795».

‘That theatre mask,’ he then asks. ‘Did you put it on him?’

‘No,’ the doctor replies. ‘That’s the problem.’

THE END.