

Ouroboros

by Mathew Lebowitz

Garrett Stone stood on the balcony of his penthouse apartment, raised his arms, and let the misty night air swirl around his naked torso. It was cold and damp, but he felt more fiery and alive than he had in years. The main lights were off in his study and also out here, on the deck, so the furniture and potted plants were blobby shadows, and the night sky was a great purple bruise marbled with orange and flashes of silver. When he went to the railing and looked down, the city glittered like a bejeweled princess, waiting for him to join her. The thought made him dizzy. It was just the kind of self-aggrandized fantasy that Jens would have come up with if Jens were still alive to say such things—as if the entire outside world existed solely for his own enjoyment. Garrett often felt Jens’ thoughts encroaching and muddling his own. Lately it had gotten worse.

He stepped back into his study and slid the heavy glass door closed, the outside wind and traffic reduced to a distant hum. From the kitchen he could hear Angela talking on the phone, her voice lowered, which meant she was probably talking about him. Just a few hours earlier he had surprised her, coming home early and appearing in the doorway as she tucked her phone away, guilty.

“Who was that?”

“Cassie.” If he had hoped she might avoid the topic, she came at it head on. “There’s a new headset, Garrett? You weren’t going to tell me?”

“Oh. That.” He immediately backed off. “Well, maybe.” He opened the refrigerator and did some evasion of his own, looking for something to drink, the thirst that had been nagging all day suddenly sharper, triggered by her reaction. “There’s a new prototype, but I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“Garrett?” When he closed the door, she was still watching him. “Don’t you think maybe it’s time you stepped away from all that?”

He knew what she was saying. This effort in the lab, building the company, the search for Jens’ missing technology, it had consumed them both for so many years; Angela had been just as much a part of it as he had, from the beginning. But she was pregnant now, priorities were shifting.

“You may be right,” he said, popping a drink and taking a long swallow that didn’t do much but make his eyes water. “But I’m sure it’s just another dead end.”

Although he wasn’t sure of that at all. In his study, now, Garrett looked down at the device on the table by the couch, glowing in a soft puddle of light. It was a headset all right, but like none of the other prototypes: onyx with a bulbous, black, glassy visor and twin temple leads that unfurled and wagged as he came closer, sensing his proximity. It looked alien, organic, like something evolved through mutation rather than by design. Well, wasn’t that the goal, as Jens had always proposed it? “From the inside out!” It was nearly a mantra to the man who believed that society was a cage, and it was the duty of inventors everywhere to break out, to pursue the truth in all its forms, wherever that might lead. For Jens it meant abandoning his endowed chair, his comfy

office, his accolades, and his adoring students and retreating to a dirt-floored bungalow off the coast of Belize. For Garrett it meant following him down there.

For a moment, Garrett's mind blinked back to the stifling cabana on that hot, interminable night, palm fronds rattling in the tropical breeze, a single lantern palpating the shadows while Jens paced back and forth, knitting the air with his fabulous visions, ranting about wormholes and the multiverse and the great ouroboros of time that would swallow itself, swallow itself, swallow itself, and about the fantastic device he was going to build that would finally allow humans to harness it. Garrett would have thought he was entirely unhinged if Jens hadn't produced the actual schematics, unrolling the fine parchment sheets and holding them up to the lantern, one by one, so Garrett could see the exploded diagrams labeled with neat, precise notation.

Later, in the gray light of dawn, when the drugs wore off and Jens was dead, splayed in the single wooden chair, head thrown back and milky eyes glaring at some final cosmic insult, it was those schematics that gave Garrett the courage to venture to the door and look out, to believe that there was something to look out *at*. In the ensuing weeks and years, he continued to rely on them, first as the rungs of a ladder to climb back to sanity, later as a template around which he and Angela had built their company, and, finally, as the Mount Olympus he needed to summit to find truth.

And here it was, nearly twenty years later—that very headset—baked from the hieroglyphs of those original lamplit sheets. Garrett ran his fingertips lightly across the visor and felt the unit purr in response, the stems adjusting to invisible servos, the rubbery leads finding and vining around his knuckles. He lifted it and placed it on his head.

Immediately there was a snap of mechanics as the nosepiece and visor sucked to his face, flaps covering his ears, so he was trapped in darkness and silence. Then he felt the synaptic leads brush his forehead, creeping toward his temples. Panicked, he tried to block them—too late—felt a sickening crunch as twin needles punctured his scalp on either side, a hot serum injected into his brain. There was a sense of lucid unraveling, of falling backward, stark images tumbling past. And there was Jens! The man's smudged, unshaven face inches from his own, flushed and sweaty in the flickering glow of the lantern. They were back in Belize, in the cabana. The illusion was intensely real. Garrett could feel the man's breath, smell kerosene and smoke from the fire; he could hear waves crashing on the rocks outside.

"Mother of Mercy," murmured Jens. "What did you find in there, man? Tell us quick!" He shook Garrett by the shoulders as if to jar loose the information.

"He can't tell us anything," said a second voice: Angela? But that wasn't right. She hadn't been there. He and Jens had been alone on the island. Garrett tried to sit up, but found he couldn't move at all, not even his eyeballs. "He's paralyzed," she said, joining Jens. "The drugs will do that. I read about it. Nothing we can do but wait."

"Wait?" Jens rocked back on his heels, massaging the stubble of his neck. "That's a rubbish system. How's he going to tell us the answers if he's catatonic?"

"Maybe he'll report back from his dreams. I heard him mumbling. Why don't you give him some more."

"Good idea." Jens supported Garrett at the shoulders, lifting him partway off the mat to administer some more of the mushroom tea from the ladle. Garrett couldn't swallow so most of it dribbled down his chin, but some pooled in his mouth and trickled down his throat where he could feel the warmth spreading in his stomach. "There we are," said Jens, soothingly. "That'll

help you. Go get us some truth.” He rested Garrett back on the mat and stood next to Angela.

And Garrett could do nothing but stare up at them, transfixed in rigid horror. He wanted to close his eyes, to shut out this false illusion, but he couldn’t. He tried to relax, to match his breathing to the soothing metronome of waves against the rocks, but even that didn’t sit right; the sound was too harsh and aggressive, like he was inside a metal beast that was breathing for him. A shiver passed through him. If he couldn’t move or breathe, how would he ever shake himself back to reality? And with this final terror—trapped in a sinister illusion forever—he dragged himself from what felt like his own grave and opened his eyes.

Hush . . . tick tick . . . hush . . . tick tick . . . hush . . . Light streamed around him, a cascade of warmth and tingling sensations as consciousness returned. He was lying on his back on cot in a small bright room. A hospital? He tried to sit up but was restrained by straps around his chest and head. He patted his face, found the plastic valve of . . . a tracheal tube? The thirst was all around him, coupled with a painful abrasion in his throat. He tried to make a sound but all that emerged was an ineffectual wheeze. “Urshh!”

“Garrett!” Two worried, whispery figures disentangled from the foot of the bed and one hurried closer. It was Angela, hovering over him. “Oh, thank god! Are you okay?”

Garrett fell back into the pillows, tears of relief squeezing down his cheeks. It was Angela. The *real* Angela, here and now. The other one—the sinister one—had just been a deep and nasty illusion bred from his memory and the actions of the headset, that was all. He closed his eyes in recovery. But something kicked in the darkness, and he quickly opened them again.

“What the hell, Garrett? You scared the nightmares out of me!” They were in the dark confines of the coach, driving back across the long bridge toward the glittery skyline of the city. It looked like a bejeweled princess there, reclined on the horizon, waiting for him. That was something Jens once said. No, it was something he himself had thought, just a few hours earlier when he was standing on his balcony. It felt like eons ago, or something yet to come.

“What happened?” pursued Angela. Now that he was out of danger, she had converted her concern into interrogation. Because Garrett couldn’t, or wouldn’t, explain himself. He felt unable to. For one thing, his throat was still raw from intubation. And no matter how much he drank he couldn’t escape the indelible thirst. But there was something else; the magnetism of that other world, of what he had seen: the hut, the heat, the lamplit, fluttering shadows, the paralysis—it was all so real! Angela and Jens side by side, looking down at him, waiting for him to wake up.

“Were you there?” he asked, turning to her. He coughed, drank more water, tried again. “In Belize?”

“When!” She didn’t need to say more. The single word held all the impossibility of it. Of course she hadn’t been there. It was just him and Jens in the cabana, alone on the island. He toggled back and forth between the two scenarios. One had happened, the other had not. He glanced at Angela, catching her unawares. She had leaned back in the shadows and there was a sharp gleam of curiosity in the way she was observing him that made him jump. Then the outside light washed through the cabin, and he saw again the familiar Angela, the one he had been with for twenty years, older and softened, her features etched with all their time together, watching him with love and worry.

The whole thing was fruitcake fantasy, that much was clear in the light of day. There were no puncture wounds to his temples, no drops of residual hallucinogenic serum, nothing like that. The company physician confirmed this the following morning, checking his skin first optically, then with a dermal scanner, showing Garrett the backlit films as evidence. Garrett was not convinced. The doctor might be a genius diagnostician, but he knew nothing about nanotechnology. There were microfilaments that wouldn't leave a mark. But his project manager, Cassie, was similarly dismissive. She listened well enough, nodding soberly, even bringing in the lead engineer to disassemble the unit and check for tampering, but Garrett could tell they were largely humoring him.

"He says there's nothing in there," said Cassie, after the man left.

"I know what he said," said Garrett. "But it happened."

"Or it *seemed* to happen." They were back in his office. Cassie was pleased. She poured two measures of bourbon from his decanter and brought one to Garrett. "C'mon, Garrett," she said. "It's *supposed* to seem real. That's the whole idea of it. We should be celebrating." She raised her glass. "To the ouroboros!"

"The ouroboros," he echoed, glumly. He clinked rims and took a swallow. But the liquor burned his throat and brought back the desolate feeling of thirst. "How did you get this idea, anyway?" he asked. "For the temple leads." Cassie and her team had been traveling in Belize for weeks, yet again, combing the rocky coast for any remnants or clues they might have missed during previous trips. She had returned with renewed excitement about this breakthrough approach. The leads were the key, she said. They would press against the user's temples and detect cortical activity, then transmit it back to the visor and the inputs, creating a loop of *self-generated* virtual reality! It was an inside-out methodology, just like Jens had wanted,

channeling a user's deepest dreams and desires as brand-new experience so vivid and compelling that it would be indistinguishable from the real thing. But she had been circumspect about how, or from where, exactly, the idea had emerged. Garrett thought he had a pretty good sense of how. "Tell me the truth, Cassie. Were there hallucinogens involved?"

"No, Garrett!" Her face tightened. "I told you. We were following protocol. We weren't taking shrooms!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Garrett waved it aside. He knew all about the rules and regulations. But he also knew what he had felt—a sharp, stinging injection straight into his scalp on either side, the heat of a spreading serum. And he knew what he had seen: Jens, holding the lantern, young Angela beside him, both of them watching Garrett with a hungry, feverish anticipation.

Cassie left and Garrett wandered his office, sipping his whiskey, feeling dissatisfied, and occasionally fingering the blinds and half-expecting to see the grounds replaced by a sandy fire pit of dawn. He felt suspended between twin vast forces, internal, external, past and future, but unsure which was which, or which way to turn, like he was inside a giant snake that was eating its own tail: the ouroboros. He thought again of Angela in the cabana. It didn't match up. It was just a misfire of neurons brought back to him by the electrodes and the cortical leads.

Garrett went to the bookshelf and removed the single volume that represented Jens' entire contribution to the canon. It was slim, but mighty, and had sent shock waves through the VR community when it was published. To Garrett it was like Jens was speaking to him directly from the page. When he was in high school Garrett had written his own paper about a prediction for the future of virtual reality. He had always been an awkward, precocious child, learning at an early age to disguise a nearly preternatural love for mathematics and microprocessors beneath

layers of things he was absolutely no good at. So, when he published this essay, he posted it anonymously to a message board where nobody knew him. Still, when it started to get interest and comments, he took it down. When Jens' book came out later that year and held the unmistakable imprint of Garrett's predictions, he didn't feel resentful. Jens was so much better suited for attention and acclaim; it was hard for Garrett to imagine that the ideas had not originated with Jens in the first place. Either way there was an intellectual connection between the two of them, he could feel it. And that fall, when he entered Jens' seminar, in the imposing tiered amphitheater with the high ceiling and curved Socratic desks, and Jens' eyes met his own for the first time, he knew that Jens felt it, too.

"There are ways to nudge reality, you know," said Jens. "You can't really change it, but you can nudge it." He was kicked back in his office chair, his bony bare feet propped on the desk and crossed at the ankles, languidly bouncing a rubber ball off the opposite wall and catching it again. He liked to teach this way—meandering, unstructured—and even more so during office hours, when he would muse as much to himself as to his audience. "For example, we were in the sanctum sanctorum this weekend, yeah? Practicing neuro transference? And Charlie came in and I was talking to him for a while, but I kept having the weird thought that it wasn't Charlie I was talking to at all but Pedro. You know they're quite similar, right?" Jens caught the ball and paused. It wasn't often that Garrett felt called upon to respond, even when they were alone like this, so he sat up and considered. Pedro and Charlie were part of the seminar, true, but they looked nothing alike. Charlie was chunky and asthmatic, with glasses and a quick, nervous laugh, while Pedro was lanky with a supercilious sneer. But it seemed that Jens was referring to some deeper resemblance.

“Yeah, you get it,” said Jens, smiling slyly. “You know what I mean.” He relaxed and began to bounce the ball again, returning to his thesis. “Anyway, so there I am talking to Charlie, right, but I’m thinking more and more about Pedro until suddenly . . . boom! It’s Pedro I’m talking to! It was Pedro, I mean literally Pedro—truth—not Charlie at all. Now, I know you’re thinking it must have been Pedro all along, right? I made a mistake when he came in. It was dim in the room, the lights were low, and we were both in the depths of some pretty murky ectoplasm, sure, and my brain was exploding with subroutines. But . . . what if it wasn’t? I mean, what if it wasn’t Pedro originally but instead I nudged this psychic collective into *becoming* Pedro. Why not? Maybe it could have gone either way until I focused and made it true. You’re familiar with superposition?”

“Um . . .”

“Subatomics. Heisenberg. Hey! Kid! Wake up!” Jens had caught the ball and snapped his fingers. Garrett *had* been distracted. Jens’ favorite TA, Angela, had just come in to deliver some documents, momentarily catching Garrett in her sharp, curious gaze. How could he not be distracted by her? Angela was Jens’ star student, with her quick retorts and brilliant mind that so effortlessly channeled Jens’ own. Sometimes she would lead his class entirely, walking to and fro while he sat in the background, hands behind his head, gazing up at the clerestory windows as if he were better suited for unspooling into the cosmos than tethered to the pedestrian roles of academia.

“Relax!” said Jens, adding his scrawl to the forms and pushing them aside. “Don’t panic, kid. We all have our fantasy worlds. And why not? Each one is as valid, and true, as the next. In fact, each one is out there, right now, waiting, in its own bubble of uncertainty.” His voice grew

softer, melancholy, as he creaked back in the chair and sent the ball thumping off the opposite wall. “The trick is figuring out how to find it.”

Yeah, well, Jens talked about a lot of things back then: wormholes, multiverse, reincarnation, ouroboros. Most of it was difficult to comprehend, never mind explain, as he was quick to point out. But he did his best, holding court to his close circle of adoring students, experimenting with a variety of unorthodox methods: induced sleep state, sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, hypnotic seances, mild ECT, and, of course, his favored: hallucinogenic psychoactives, all perpetrated on himself and a cycling array of eager disciples. It was behavior that couldn’t survive any university ethics panel. Jens was under review, then under censure, then on probation. When he vanished from campus one sunny afternoon, heading for fabled fungi fields on an island off the coast of southern Belize, it came as a surprise to no one. When Garrett received the invitation to join him, he began packing immediately.

“Were you there?” Garrett asked. It was a few days later and he was sitting at the table in the dining area of the apartment. Since his *neurotic break* (as Angela called it) she had been treating him with increased caution and solicitude, tiptoeing around him as if nervous about tipping him in the wrong direction, but also with a certain curiosity, like she was still trying to figure out what, exactly, had happened or where it might lead. Now, she had cooked him dinner (very unlike Angela) and brought it to him at the table.

“Was I where?”

Watching her, Garrett felt a pang of curiosity of his own. She had been so different back in college when they first met: focused, independent, self-possessed, and fiercely ambitious. She had been more obsessed with Jens’ topics than Garrett was, voracious about the future of

psychology and technology. After Jens died, they had joined in admiration for the man and his goals, agreed to carry on his mission, partnered on the company, then on something more.

“Oh, you know . . .” said Garrett. He had intended to introduce the topic cautiously—a *what if* scenario—but now it popped out with all the subtlety of a gum bubble: “Were you in Belize?”

“That again!” She spun toward him, her face flushed with disbelief. “Good god, Garrett, you’re a lunatic! Wait right there.” She marched out of the room and returned a minute later carrying the headset and placed it in front of him. “There,” she said. “Go ahead.”

“What do you mean?” The thing looked smaller now, like a child’s toy, the leads rubbery and lifeless.

“I mean, make a choice, Garrett.” She rested one hand on the headset, the other on her protruding belly to make it quite clear what the options were.

And she was right. Garrett looked around. The apartment, the lab, Angela, a family: It was everything he had ever imagined and wanted. He had it right here, around him. There was no reason to look elsewhere. He got up, took the unit, brought it to the kitchen, and dumped it into the trash bin. He closed the drawer, pressed the pedal. There was a grinding crunch of material, the slow crush of components, a pop and ping as items compacted into each other. Then: silence.

“There,” said Garrett, slapping his palms together and brushing imaginary dust from his sleeves. “All done.”

But was it done? Angela was right. He had everything he had wanted, and everything to lose. But she was also wrong. There are some events in life that are so momentous they exert a gravity of their own, always drawing attention and energy back to them. And later, when Angela was

asleep, Garrett slipped out of bed and down the hall and stood in the kitchen, gazing into the shadowed bin, and knew that this was one of them. The unit was there, on top of the other trash, faceplate-up like it was watching for his return, internal lights blinking sequentially. One of the temple leads had draped itself over the rim as if trying to climb out. He reached in, carefully lifted it out, wiped the smudged lens. In response, the unit hummed and vibrated, the leads wrapping affectionately around his fingers.

This time, his eyes were wide open and he was immediately lucid, though he was no less immobile, all his muscles seized in the same painful cramp. The lantern was still burning on the table, but it was a halfhearted glow, not really necessary given the gray light coming through the open doorway and beneath the gaps of the walls. Two people were in the room with him—Jens and Angela—and they were moving around purposefully, gathering belongings and talking in hushed tones as if afraid to wake him.

“Hallucinogens?” said Jens. “You think *that’s* the clue to this whole infernal riddle?”

“That’s what he said. Some kind of injection component in the headset itself, like hypodermics at the temples or something crazy like that. But who knows? The kid’s got genius perception on things, that’s for sure. We’ll buy more mushrooms in Belmopan on our way to the airport and continue testing from there.”

“And that’s it, then?”

“That’s what?”

“You’re going to leave him like this?”

“What do you suggest, Jens? Carry him in our luggage? He’ll be okay, eventually, right?”

“Hm.” Jens came back and stood above Garrett, looking down, then crouched to study him closer. “Mother of Mercy.” He rubbed his stubble, distraught. “I’m going to lose my tenure for sure.” He reached forward, and gingerly brushed Garrett’s eyelids closed. The world went dark. “Well, ah, goodbye, kid. You’ll be fine in . . . a couple of hours or so. And, ah, thanks for helping out with . . . all this.”

Then they were gone. Garrett could hear their footsteps receding on the gravel outside, tugging their bags behind them down the path. “You know, I think he had a thing for me,” said Angela, her voice growing distant.

“A thing?”

“Yeah, a crush or whatever. An infatuation. He mumbled about it during his hallucinations. Something about us being together in a future world where we own a technology company and partner on building a headset.” There was a pause. “I was pregnant. Or . . . *will be* pregnant, I guess, if you look at it that way. I wonder if there’s really a world like that out there, somewhere.”

“Pregnant! That’s a scary world.” Jens’ laugh turned into a yelp. “What?”

“I could be pregnant. Why not?”

“No reason. Just, er, not in this world, okay? I need you as a partner. Because, I’ve been thinking, we should start a company together, right? Fifty-fifty. What do you say?”

There was a pause. “Sixty-forty.”

Then they were gone. Garrett tried to reposition, but he couldn’t, tried to scream but he couldn’t. Nothing came out. Nothing around him but darkness, a terrible thirst, and a sense of fantastic dreams being torn away and discarded, shreds caught in the breeze, dissipating and evaporating. There had been a shining city, in the future, or somewhere, spun from his own

hubris and imagination, a world where he lived with Angela. They had pursued Jens' vision, found the key to a headset that would unlock the cycle of time, the great ouroboros. He had been happy there, they both were. They were in love; they were going to have a baby. Garrett tried to swallow the rising apprehension, the pressure of tremendous loss, but his throat wouldn't even manage a simple contraction. All around him was nothing but silence, the ticking fire, the *hush* . . . *hush* . . . *hush* of waves against the beach, and the gentle static of an endless cycle of time.