

Specimen Zero

By Manon Carrié

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II.

What a soft bed, he thought.

‘Now take a breath, and relax. This will only hurt for a moment.’

He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of metal separating from metal, attaching to his skin, a sterile coolness penetrating his veins. The lights faded in and out, until darkness blanketed his nerves, sheltering him from the electrical surge about to invade.

I.

Margo removed her makeup. The television had been put to sleep, and she had yet to speak to her husband, doing so only at the appropriate moment when her words had been carefully chosen.

‘You did a good job tonight, darling,’ she said. ‘How does one lie so well on national television?’ Aloud, they seemed harsher than she intended.

‘I didn’t lie.’

‘Misrepresent,’ she adjusted. ‘Exaggerate the truth.’

Margo was supportive in the utmost fashion of always posing a challenge. She was proud of her husband. Still, someone had to ask him the uncomfortable questions.

‘You know very well,’ he said pushing his glasses to the topmost point of his nose and turning the page of the newspaper resting on his lap. He liked to read about current events at the end of the day when they felt less critical and more like historical background.

‘Do I?’ she said.

‘It’s an established and fully functional theory,’ he explained in the fashion of a PowerPoint presentation. ‘It’s realistic, logical. Endorsed by intelligent supporters and

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authenticated by coherent evidence. Everything up to this point has been nothing but cognitive terraforming. Inconclusive, lacking in proof. Hopeful, but merely speculative.’

His left hand gripped the paper, eyes still sweeping the headlines, as his right hand lay open, repetitively pushing forward, back, and around in an emphasis of his argument.

‘Falsity in my theory is but a speck on the potential of its global authority. Virtually negligible indeed. It wouldn’t be capable of becoming a necessary universal principle without almost absolute solidity, and the urgent demand for change.’ He scanned the obituaries for a familiar name. Margo folded the horoscope section that she had withdrawn earlier for herself, concentrating on Leo.

‘I don’t know, my love,’ she sighed, pausing at the Cambria typeface under the zodiac label. ‘Maybe it’s my simple mind, but I don’t understand how separation like this, this sudden force to cease belief, can really bring what you’re labeling as intimacy. We have intimacy. You and I.’ She looked at him to create a profound effect, then back at the page. ‘The intimacy you’re advocating seems more like isolation. Do we really need to become more obsessed with our own design?’

‘Your design is part of my design. We are intimate, my sweet, but we are intimate humans. I am not alienated from you and you are not alien to me. I’m trying to preserve this purity.’ He rested his hand, radiating heat and sensitivity, on her wrist without glancing at her expression. He never needed to look at her to know what she looked like. She was embedded into his imagination, and the sound of her breath, the temperature of her skin, all surrounding elements in her vicinity bestowed directly into his torso the sensation of her.

‘You’re beginning to worry me,’ she said quietly. ‘Sometimes I feel like I’m hearing the words of a dictator.’

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‘Careful.’

‘Just don’t let me forget that I married a compassionate and gentle genius. The sensitive, sensible, considerate kind. I know he wouldn’t change on me suddenly, right?’

She looked at him. Through him. Behind him. She surveyed the sweat rolling down the back of his neck. This was his virtue. Sweating with purpose.

‘Try not to think of it as isolation,’ he said nestling his hand behind her lower back and pulling her into his hip. ‘It’s a concentration of our nature. Commitment. Exclusivity.’ His eyebrows raised at these slogans in an attempt to entice the buyer, sell the product. He lifted his right hand and caressed the air in a wondrous, futuristic motion, grasping at an invisible other.

‘Through keeping your eyes on your neighbor, your lover, by not looking at or imagining anyone else, the relationship can become indestructible.’ He rested his eyes on the strands of hair curled over her collarbone. ‘It is this that allows me to say you are the one, my sweet. Humanity needs what you and I are so lucky to have. Monogamous stability.’

‘You mean masturbation,’ Margo teased.

‘What could be more intimate?’

Margo tilted her head and pursed her lips, forming a small, cynical smile.

‘And what if the planet is unfixable? What if we can’t make amends? What if we’ve damaged it beyond repair and we’re left to the planet’s wrath, or neglect, or some miserable downfall of this fantasy affair between Earth and the human parasite? Then what?’

He kissed her on the chin where her cleft delicately absorbed his lower lip, his favorite spot for the very reason that when he kissed her there he felt like a puzzle piece attaching to its counterpart. He closed his eyes and enjoyed this brief gratification, but said nothing—the pregnant nothing he’d honed over the years that made seams stretch, but never snap.

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Margo sighed and returned her gaze to the page. She felt her husband lace his sight over and through the curves of her appearance. Margo, the masterpiece exhibited at a private showing of a one-hit-wonder portraitist.

#

‘Specimen A-S nineteen-one-three. Caucasian male. Temporarily unconscious.’

He heard the faint clicks of a typewriter as the words were dictated. Mild sniffing and an adjustment of eyeglasses upward. He could not yet open his eyes, but he instantly felt the isolation of the room. The smell of sweat and a thick combination of colognes rose into his nostrils.

‘Physically unharmed, no visible alterations. DNA intact. Case of high importance.’

He practiced use of his vocal chords and released a sigh that transformed into an, ‘--I...’

‘Specimen shows signs of consciousness.’

His hands and arms tingled. A strikingly cold metal penetrated his left ear.

‘Temperature reads 99.2 Fahrenheit. That’s 37.33 Celsius, 310.48 Kelvin. Room is mildly warm, air conditioning under repair.’

‘Get him a glass of water.’

At the sound of a scuffle he began to exercise his eyelids, while simultaneously breathing in a gust of stale air. ‘It’s hot in here,’ he gasped.

‘Senses functioning well.’ A few clicks on a keyboard.

Someone chuckled in the corner, ‘We’ve got small talk, folks.’

A glass clinked as a man set it on the table. Another man entered the room with a small plastic briefcase and began covering the subject in its contents—wires attached to round adhesives attached to velcroed body wraps attached to a clip that was snapped onto his pointer

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finger.

‘Subject will undergo polygraph questioning. Report follows. Thank you, gentlemen. Please leave the room. Jensen, new report and we’ll get going.’

‘What’s going on? Who are you?’ said the subject, blinking his eyes and watching several figures exit a through single door next to a wide mirror.

‘This isn’t about me.’ He marked a piece of lined, yellow paper with a swift gesture, then thrust a finger in the air. ‘And before you unleash your confusion on me, I will stop you now and tell you that I know nothing. My job is to ask questions. Make sure you’re cleared for integration. Whatever questions you have for me, I can’t answer them. So, comply with the standard procedure, and you’ll be out of here, free to ask all the questions you want.’

He cleared his throat and nodded to the left. Jensen set his gaze on a small screen in front of him. ‘Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.’ He took a breath and began. ‘Do you know where you are?’

‘I’m obviously in an interrogation room,’ he replied.

‘Do you know how you got here?’

‘Can you at least give me some food? I’m extremely hungry.’

‘This will only take a few minutes. Do you know how you got here?’

The subject wiped his eyes and exhaled. ‘No.’

‘What is the last thing you remember?’

‘I was....driving. I was on the highway.’

‘Was someone else with you?’

‘No, I was by myself.’

‘Did anything out of the ordinary occur while you were driving?’

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‘No. I was just driving.’

‘Were you intoxicated in any form at that point?’

‘No. I don’t drink.’

‘Drugs?’

‘No.’

Some nodding, and a cough.

‘Are you married?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is the name of your wife?’

‘Margo.’

‘Maiden name?’

‘Devaux.’

‘Did you experience any conflict with her, a fight or argument, before you got in the car?’

‘No. We went to bed, but I couldn’t sleep.’

The examiner underlined a word.

‘Do you remember your former profession?’

‘I’m a scientist.’

‘What particular discipline?’

‘Astronomical sciences.’

‘Do you have any knowledge on extraterrestrial studies?’

‘Yes. I’m an advocate of inter-human focal relationships.’

‘Can you briefly elaborate?’

‘I promoted that Alienism is a myth and that we should center our attention on the human

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race. I wrote a book about it.’

‘Good. Almost finished for this session.’ He ruffled through a few papers and brought out a new sheet.

‘Do you have any tension or discomfort in any part of your body?’

‘No.’

‘Do you have any mental images or thoughts that feel unrecognizable?’

‘No, I feel fine.’

He began to feel weary.

‘Do you remember having any experience with extraterrestrial life prior to this moment?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Do you have any recollection of what happened to you five years ago?’

The subject scratched his temple, and paused. ‘I was abducted.’

The examiner raised his gaze from the page and onto the subject’s mouth lines. No visible tremble. Neither blinked or breathed.

‘You were abducted by who?’

‘By...’ Beneath the table, his legs shook, in order to keep his upper half composed. He cleared his throat. ‘By aliens.’

The examiner lifted his eyebrows and jotted small print onto the page, circling every other word. He flipped the paper around and squinted through his spectacles, reading an italicized excerpt on the back. ‘Mmh,’ he nodded. ‘Right. Can you please give a detailed account of your abduction,’ he read aloud, separating each word, ‘including the moment before being abducted and the moment of your return?’ He dropped his spectacles to the bottom of his nose and looked over them, peering at the subject.

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‘No.’

The examiner sighed. ‘Can you explain why?’

‘Because I don’t remember.’

‘You’ve just stated that you were abducted. What is your evidence of this claim?’

‘I don’t have any.’

‘Then what causes you to pose this argument?’

‘I only know it. I can’t show you anything. But I know.’

The subject’s expression suddenly turned gentle, pleading. It was the uncanny appearance of memory and misunderstanding. Of constant and parallel transformation, immoveable yet infinite. It was inconceivable. The examiner searched for a recognizable signal in his look, but received none.

‘Can you describe this sensation of knowing?’ he asked.

‘With all due respect,’ he replied, staring into the scrapes of the table’s metal, ‘that’s impossible.’

‘Do you feel altered in any way, mentally or physically?’ said the examiner, moving his papers aside and pronouncing his words carefully.

No, he shook his head. ‘I feel perfect.’

#

‘You’re on in five...’

Lights dimmed over every pupil in the audience, each set widening with anticipation. He stood at the podium, his face examined by the lens of a large, black machine, which would tactically scatter his appearance onto every functioning screen—deskbound, suspended, handheld—worldwide in a matter of seconds. His genius would guide from the shadows, then

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transmit itself globally.

The speaker fumbled with a piece of paper and hesitated while the population inhaled in unison, preparing for the anticipated words of their guardian. To them, he was something beyond a savior. Children prayed to him. Some spoke his name in vain, while others wrote letters to him at Christmas addressed to his research center in the North Pole. His recent volume on intergalactic theory took a strong hold of the number one bestseller spot, his previous volume struggling in second, the bible in third. His image appeared on money, trading cards, and was reported to be seen on blackened toast. His proof was their truth, and they sought his protection.

A man in a slim black suit pressed two fingers to an earpiece sounding off directions, then signaled to the speaker a series of hand codes, ending in a sharp nod, while the eye of the camera prepared to project.

‘Three...two...’ A pointed finger in the air accompanied by a mouthed “one.” On flickered a red light notifying the speaker the time was now, and with a malignant boom, silence hit space.

#

Specimen has completed surveys 1-6 with the following scores: WAIS-IV (FSIQ 152), Cattell A&B (top 1%), SB- V (148), WMS-IV (151), INTJ according to Jungian typology. Subject displays compliance with societal values, displays high-performing logic [unaltered from pre-abduction status], knowledge of cultural affairs with exception of events taken place in the last 5 years, during which he is believed to have gone missing. Subject cannot name current president, but can name all 7 continents.

All survey responses fall in accordance with polygraph test from first examination. No variation in responses from surveys completed prior to abduction. Subject shows no emotional

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instability. No change in heart rate since first examination.

Atheist. Married. No pets.

Functioning appetite.

Special Considerations: None.

Inconclusive results.

Further observation advised.

#

‘What does this look like to you?’

‘Ink.’

The psychologist marked her sheet, unamused. ‘This is a standard test. Your compliance could benefit you in the future.’

‘I know what this is,’ he said, wiping his eyes, ‘and it could equally benefit everyone else but me.’

‘Why do you say that?’ she asked, adding an inquisitive brow bend.

He turned his attention to the wall on his right. It looked unbelievably similar to the wall on his left that he had observed a moment ago. Carbon copies. Looking at each other. He sighed and smiled at her. ‘It’s a bat.’

‘Very good.’ She put the image down and held up a second one, marked with red and black ink in a violent arrangement.

‘Two people touching hands.’

‘Hm.’ She nodded and watched his hands lay motionless on his lap. She switched boards and lifted the third, blotted in varying shades of black. The figure on the panel was looming, towering almost, with a condescending downward glare, surrounded by shadows that faded into

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white innocence. Bigfoot had risen to the top of the mountain and was prepared to smash the city below.

‘A terrier dog, wanting a pat on the head,’ he said.

The psychologist turned the image down on the table and crossed her hands over one another on her lap. ‘Have you taken this test before?’ she asked.

‘No.’ He sat back into the sofa and cleaned the remainders of breakfast from his back teeth with his tongue. ‘Shall we continue?’

‘How have you been sleeping?’

‘Quite well.’ He turned his mouth into a downward shrug and nodded. ‘I even take a mild nap in the afternoons, when I find myself a bit sleepy. There’s not much else to do in here.’

‘Any recurring dreams or nightmares?’

‘No. Not really.’ He thought for a moment, silence pressing into the temples of the room’s two inhabitants. ‘I had a dream the other night about a goldfish.’

‘And what happened with the goldfish?’

‘He was sitting on my lap.’

‘Without any water?’

‘Apparently not, or he wouldn’t have spoken to me.’

‘What did he say?’ She tilted her head to create the effect of listening closely.

‘He looked up at me with these unbelievable amber eyes. They felt so intrusive. So binding. And then he said, “do you believe in true love?”’

‘And what was your response?’

‘I didn’t say anything. I swept him off my lap because his moisture was seeping through my slacks.’

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‘And then what happened?’

‘He splashed into a pond that I was levitating over, and floated away down the current until I couldn’t see him anymore. Then I realized that I was also a goldfish, but I wasn’t swimming, I was just levitating there, proud. Then all of a sudden I knew I was in Madrid. It didn’t look like Madrid, it was the same place, but I was sure I was in Madrid.’

‘You were also a goldfish?’

‘Yes. And the goldfish that floated away somehow looked like me too. But also exactly like a goldfish. Me in goldfish form.’

‘Was there anything else around you aside from the pond?’

‘No. Just blue skies.’

She marked the bottom of the page. ‘Do you have this dream often?’

‘Only one time. The only dream I’ve had recently that I can remember. I wrote it down on my wonder pad.’

‘Your wonder pad?’

He pointed at the yellow pad of paper at the end of the table.

‘Why wonder?’

‘Better than not.’

Her eyes formed into small almonds.

‘How did this dream make you feel? You said proud?’

He looked to the top right corner, working his brain. ‘Human.’

‘Interesting,’ she said. ‘You felt human, even though you were a goldfish?’

‘I am human,’ he said, scratching his ear.

‘Do you feel that this could relate to your claim of being abducted?’

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He shrugged one shoulder. ‘It’s doubtful.’

‘Why do you say that?’

He paused, tapping his nail on the table in a slow rhythm. ‘Because nothing is related to my abduction. And if it was related, you wouldn’t have nodded your head in understanding, or marked the notebook on your lap, because there would be nothing to understand or mark. Do you see what I mean?’

‘No, I’m sorry. Can you rephrase?’

‘Not particularly.’

Sweat began to build up along the line of his forehead. A small trickle fell along his spine and his shirt material absorbed little droplets under his arms. The sweat appeared so quickly, he hadn’t noticed the flowery stains forming around his pits.

‘Are you feeling uncomfortable?’ said the psychologist.

‘Do you enjoy your job?’ he asked, clasping his hands in front of him on the table.

‘It’s not my position to discuss personal feelings during a session.’

‘You mean your own personal feelings.’

‘Yes.’

He looked at her chin. The shape of her lips. Her jawline. Sturdy. ‘From where do you originate exactly?’ he said. ‘What accent is that? German? Dutch? Linguistics was never my strong point.’ He leaned in to study the foreign movements of her tongue, pinpoint an inflection or trill that would briefly locate his current enemy on a map.

‘My origin is irrelevant. You’re confused and tired, I understand. But we aren’t here to talk about me. We’re here to see how you’re feeling.’

‘I feel fine. You must be very a very prominent figure, Miss—’ He leaned in further,

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waiting for her to fill the blank with her name.

‘You’ll have to excuse me, I’m not at liberty to tell you my name.’

‘Well, Miss. Missus. Madame. You must be a very celebrated psychologist to be assigned my case,’ he said, nodding his head to her in congratulations. ‘I’m feeling rather top secret.’

‘You’ve generated that feeling on your own. I have the impression that you often form ideas or opinions that may be self-deceiving as a coping mechanism, to ease the discomfort in an unsettling situation. Perhaps to reassure yourself of your identity.’ She cupped her chin with her thumb and forefinger. ‘Do you feel that sometimes you imagine things that are not always accurate representations of reality?’

Her words became hazy as they entered his ears.

‘What exactly are you meant to analyze about me?’ he said, aiming the comment directly between her eyes.

‘I’m simply here to see that you’re still functioning sensibly, and that you don’t pose a threat to yourself, or to others, before you integrate back into society.’

‘Am I doing well?’ he asked, smiling. He was becoming drowsy, but he had an inkling to argue.

‘To be honest, I’m sensing some aggression. Are you feeling tense about something?’

He tapped his nail on the table three times, studying her flat expression. ‘No,’ he said.

She inhaled through her nose, and wrote INS450 at the top right corner. ‘Get some rest,’ she instructed, and looked for blanks on the page. Mark, mark, mark. Dot the I’s, cross the T’s.

Date. Signature.

#

Spotlight:

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‘Good evening citizens of the audience, citizens of America, and citizens who are viewing from across the globe. I address you with compassion on this somber evening. Before I begin, let us assure you that this announcement does not intend to cause any alarm or distress, but instead aims to convey the wonderful emergence of a newfound connection – a union of hearts and minds – as a result of recognizing and accepting the collective fate that awaits us, the values of which we will explore together in the following minutes.

‘As you well know, the field of science has endeavored, without submission, to question, observe, and communicate to you, Earth’s population, discoveries of insurmountable value. Perhaps at its most surface appearance the incentive of such efforts may seem dominated by wealth, fame, or power. But it must be recognized that at the root of all these seemingly base ambitions lies the true incentive to each scientific discipline.

‘I too practice this underlying motivation that drives and nourishes budding ideas of the human race into full bloom. This force that motivates our civilization to progress, the force that propels science toward new discoveries, the ultimate goal of every human endeavor, is to gain *connection*.

‘Tonight I have been asked to speak about our need to connect, and the relationship between this need and recent studies of outer space. We are aware that extraterrestrial life has yet to be found, and at this juncture of thorough and relentless examination, the impossibility of extraterrestrial existence, for all intents and purposes, must be solidified. My fellow citizens of Earth, humanity is *alone* in the universe.’

#

The walls kept out noise. They kept out the aroma of salami and coffee drifting from security guard fingers outside the cell. No footsteps could be heard, no gust of air from the upper

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vent could grace the interior. Any form of interference with the specimen was blocked, except for a panoramic view that allowed a flow of light and eyes to continuously sweep the contents inside. In this way, the specimen could be protected. “The cage protects the monkey,” he remembered his father saying. Or was it *the monkey protects the cage*. In fact, the walls, more windows than walls, were so impeccably clear, without even his own fingerprint to be found on them, they must have been self-cleaning. Vertical and invisible rumba bot.

They allowed him a mattress, a table and chair, some blank carbon copy paper, a thick ball-point pen, and a transparent glass of water. With these he was given the liberty to nap, to quench his thirst, and to write down any spontaneous memory that struck, the latter of which he knew would never come.

He stared at his feet. They were white now. Frail. His ankles were bruised from hitting the metal rail of his bed each night; his sleep had become restless, unlike his naps, which had grown comfortably habitual. He counted his toes, and they were all there. If only one had been mutilated! Then he could prove himself. Probing. Some sort of action. Something people would understand, like in an alien blockbuster film where someone gets impregnated or comes back with an iron spine. No one believed words anymore. You had to show. Prove. But with words he could only dig himself deeper into the grave, and with resistance he would only close the opening.

He reached down to grab the pinky toe, but was interrupted when the entrance to the quarantine cubicle slid open. A familiar face, framed in a black bob cut, looked down at him in marvel.

‘Are you busy?’ said Margo with a smile.

He rushed up from his chair and stopped in front of her. She was different. Not a hair on

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her head was misplaced. She still wore eyeglasses, but they were no longer light brown, and in their place a striking black framed her eyes. Her turtleneck was fitted to her figure, a shape he had never witnessed with her clothes on, and while he never remembered her ever wearing any makeup, her lips were now tainted mauve. The librarian variety of dolce vita.

‘How are you?’ she asked, taking a seat in his chair.

He hurriedly brushed his hair back with his palm and straightened his posture.

‘Well, I’ve been hassled a bit...’ he said, clasping his hands behind his back in the fashion of strolling through a garden. ‘...You know how these procedures go.’

She nodded and looked him up and down. ‘I can’t believe you’re here. Back from the dead.’

‘How did you find me?’

She pulled a folded tabloid magazine from her purse and laid it on the table. He took a seat on the edge and read the cover: *ABDUCTED SCIENTIST RETURNS TO EARTH!! Where has he been all these years?* He scanned through the article, spotted with blots of ink and creased down the center: ‘...reported to have been abducted...confirmed by the Center for...night of his broadcast...scientists agree that...proven himself wrong?...kept in quarantine 35 miles from...no further information released...we’ll keep you updated!’

‘So,’ she started, ‘Where have you been?’

He contemplated the picture they used of him from when his hair still had color. ‘It says it all here,’ he said.

Margo laughed and shook the hair out of her eyes, then bent down to rummage through her purse. ‘At first I thought you were on some sort of top secret mission. That’s why you couldn’t say goodbye.’ She took out a cigarette and lit the end with a titanium Zippo. ‘It made

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the idea of you leaving me less painful.’

‘You smoke now?’ he said, watching her exhale a flurry of grey.

‘But the longer you were gone, the more I wondered why you left all your things. Why you didn’t give me any warning. What could you possibly be working on that was so top secret if you had all the underground projects shut down.’ She paused and surveyed the fire at the end of her fingers, radiating a steady current of heat into the room.

‘Then I thought, maybe you were just unhappy. Maybe there was someone else. After a few years, I gave in to the simplest explanation and decided you were dead. Eventually, that’s what everyone believed—neighbors, co-workers, newspapers—there was no other explanation, no trace. You had to be dead. Murder, or suicide, or an accident somewhere remote and untraceable. Something tragic to remember you by.’

He followed the curves of her face with his eyes, ‘What did you do with your hair?’

‘Do you like it?’ She cupped the bottom of the bob with her fingers. ‘I did it after you left. In case you came back. I’m not really sure why. Maybe to show you that I didn’t need your approval. Or maybe just to start over as someone new.’

‘It’s different.’

‘Everything’s different,’ she said, inhaling. ‘Thanks to you. You really changed the world, you know. Things that used to feel so heavy feel so blissful now, so weightless. I feel younger, can you believe that? Because when you don’t wonder about the unknown, there’s nothing to really worry you anymore. Sure, there’s smaller things, money, children, things that wrinkle your skin. But infinity and the unknown, those things wrinkle your soul.’

Grey fled from her lips, spiraling upward toward the glass ceiling.

‘Now, I even feel lighter. And not just me, everyone. People are so happy now. No one

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stares at the sky anymore, wondering about impossible things. We stick to what's possible. We look at each other.'

She tapped a long build-up of ash into his glass of water, which let out a fleeting sizzle before settling at the bottom. 'Remember that neighbor we hated so much? The one who kept vacuuming at night?'

He nodded quietly and rubbed the back of his neck. 'Always at midnight.'

'I talked to him finally, before I moved out. Turns out he was divorced and just kept cleaning to improve all the things he did wrong, to show her he could be the man she wanted. And there we were, downstairs complaining, while he was just trying to cope and be a better person.'

She looked through the walls into the darkness, coils of smoke enveloping her frame. His eyes began to sting, forming a small cradle of liquid on the lower lid.

'You really made the world a better place,' she said, tilting her head, and keeping her gaze on the emptiness of the outside. 'It sounds ridiculous, but you did.'

She asked again, marring the transparency of his water with a lifeless snow of debris.

'I don't know where you went, or why you left, but I'm still proud to say that you were my husband. Things wouldn't be so good without what you did. I mean, even the economy--'

'I was wrong, Margo,' he said quietly. She jerked her head back, blowing out a mass of smoke. Then a smirk formed on her face. 'Well, you can't come back to me now. How do you think—'

'No, I was wrong about the aliens. They exist. Everything exists.' He put his head in his hands and shook it wildly, then lurched at her shoulders and grabbed them. 'We think it's impossible because communication is so difficult with these unknown planets and civilizations,

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but don't you see, that doesn't mean they aren't real.' He released her and began to pace around his cell, his breaths moving at quicker intervals. 'Just because we can't prove it, or, or, or rationalize the inconsistencies in the universe, doesn't mean that these things aren't true.'

'What are you saying?' she said, stamping out the cigarette butt repeatedly, and clenching her face. 'Do you hear yourself right now? You were the one who pointed out the logic—'

'Logic doesn't equal reality! Just because it makes sense one way, doesn't mean there aren't a million other possibilities. We just don't understand them! We can't understand!' He let out a set of heavy breaths, and slouched into himself, wiping the sweat from his forehead. 'We're only human...' he whimpered.

'What kind of insane drugs do they have you on here?' Margo stood up from her seat and slammed the table with her palm. 'You were a fucking genius. You were so fucking smart I could never understand a goddamn word you said, but you made the world a good place to live in. Now look at you, you're like every other pathetic moron out there rambling about outer space!'

She bent down and shoved her cigarettes into her purse. 'Negative comments left and right, no determination to integrate, always 'we're not alone,' 'we're tiny in the universe,' blah blah blah.' She shoved her finger in his face. 'You should be wiped from our species! You've become the problem!'

She moved toward the exit. He sprung his arms out, and moved his body to block her. 'What's gotten into you? Margo, you were the one who said we shouldn't stop believing! That this could end in isolation or obsession--'

'*You* got into me.' She squinted her eyes, throwing daggers at his pitiful expression. 'The outside world doesn't matter. The human race matters. You taught me that. We can do anything

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we want, we can save our planet, *we* can make it perfect. We are the masters now, we decide what's useless, and all the crap you shut down was wasting our energy. You led us here. This is the rise of humanity.'

'This is a dictatorship!' He exploded. 'We're committing suicide! I didn't teach you anything, lead you anywhere, I *convinced* you. I convinced you of my miserable theory, and then I convinced everyone else. I convinced myself! I thought it had to be this way. Forget possibilities, forget the universe, ban the outside...'

Sweat was trickling now from his brow to his chin, dripping to the rhythm of his heavy breaths.

'But if it is,' he continued, looking at her, pleading, 'if things have become the way I convinced the world they should, we will remain small, lonely, and vicious. Deeply and invisibly vicious.'

Margo looked at him in awe.

'I hope they keep you here, you insane son of a bitch.'

She pushed him aside, and in moments she was gone. Behind the glass. Swallowed by the void of the outside.

He smashed his fist into the wall, and a small droplet of blood spat onto the glass beneath his pressed hand, his mind rambling with no destination. Then suddenly, with the speed that a forgotten memory strikes, an overwhelming sensation of pressure grabbed his limbs, his chest gave way to a wild shake, flitting his eyelids like shutters, and the force pulled him to his knees where jolts took hold of his conscience.

Before his head hit concrete, two men rushed into the cell, and pricked a loaded syringe into the side of his neck. There he collapsed and laid in peace. Fallen long after the blood had

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been wiped clean from the window. On the table, the tabloid fluttered to a close from the gust of Margo's exit.

#

'The results of this pursuit must now be illuminated and weighed with great caution. Every project within the field of astronomical research has persistently rendered no conclusive evidence of extraterrestrial life. Radiophysics and Radioastronomy, too narrow in their scope and fallible in design, have been exhausted.

'From an economic standpoint, the excessive expenses of projects like Case Terra, Project Space Reform, and C.O.N. pose a threat to worldwide financial stability. The security of nations worldwide will be at risk of suffering invasion, or worse, exploitation by unknown and potentially dangerous alien civilizations. Moreover, extensive and relentless, if not even abusive, exploration of foreign and alien resources or habitable landscapes displays neglect toward the damage we have caused to this planet we have inherited, and weakness in our responsibility to revive and nurture what we fondly call "our home."

'If technology used for extraterrestrial study continues to advance, and if ideas of a false and deceiving nature continue to fester, there is no anticipating what irreversible damage may occur as a result. Outer space investigation in this way has become an escape route from guilt. A route of economic and social disquiet. This is not the human race I have been so proud to be born into. This is not the perfectable Man we each seek to attain. For these reasons, energy must no longer be wasted on this futile endeavor, and for purposes of efficiency, all projects in this field, including all underground projects, will now be discontinued.

'Our attention must be directed toward ourselves, the human race, from this moment forward. Let us turn our focus and prioritize. Let us recognize our roots. Let us make amends.

Specimen Zero

Who else can we depend on in times of turmoil? Who understands us better than our own kind?

#

Every four minutes. Beep.

He could often catch the faint sound of some sort of release. Every four minutes. Beep.

But now there was silence. Nothing but empty sound condensed in Plexiglas.

Time, like the habitual tendencies of daily life, had become irrelevant, since there was no way of keeping it, and this freedom had lifted the chains of responsibility from his joints; he slept when he felt tired or faint, and ate when food was given to him. At the beginning of his stay, he thought of tallying the walls as heroic prisoners of war have done, but the walls were indestructible. His cell was superhuman. Eyes without lids. Impenetrable eyes. Sight without the mercy of darkness.

His wonder pad had also become useless. He could no longer remember the moments around the occurrence; they were patches on a quilt, loosening at the seams and unmatched to their neighbor. There was nothing left to document. At some point he had considered doodling, but he had never been skilled in this field, and as far as documenting his experiences, he found novel writing to be reserved for the lonely, which he was not. He had security guards. Instead, he had resigned himself to drawing numbers, 1-12, in variation.

Ah. There was a man sitting in front of him. Suited. He was looking at him, as if waiting for a response, but he couldn't remember a question being posed.

'I'm sorry, I didn't see you there,' he said to the suited man.

'We've been having a very important conversation.'

'Have we?'

'Please put down the paper while we're speaking.'

Specimen Zero

Indeed, he was holding the tabloid open in front of him. *ABDUCTED SCIENTIST RETURNS TO EARTH!!* he read. ‘Excuse me, how rude of me.’ He folded it at the crease and set it next to him.

‘I’ve spoken to the psychologist in depth,’ said the man, brushing something off his cuff and lacing his hands together. ‘We’ve decided to include a different type of therapy to your treatment. Once a week.’

‘Why do I need therapy?’

‘You’re very sick.’

He considered this for a moment. He had been breaking into hot sweats more increasingly, and his thirst had gotten difficult to quench. He supposed he felt quite sick.

‘How long have I been here?’ he asked.

‘A little over nine months, sir.’

Months? He considered this too. Hadn’t it only been a few days ago that he spoke with the psychologist? Or had it been longer? No, he supposed it felt longer. Weeks, even. Months? Yes, maybe. The suited man shook his head solemnly, and ruffled through various papers on the table.

‘Unfortunately, the insulin therapy hasn’t improved your condition. We think it will be helpful to add a more intensive form of therapy, on the day that you don’t receive insulin.’

‘Yes, whatever you think is best.’ He nodded, gathering the information in his head, and looked at his glass of water. It sat still, like an animal waiting to pounce. Invisible. Watching. There seemed to be some blank spots, very important, and rather gaping black holes in his present circumstances, but he couldn’t quite pin what was fact and what was misplaced. The two blended into one another. A conflated cocktail of everything sounded familiar, and yet, reality.

Specimen Zero

How to separate, now. He blinked to clear the thoughts that were jumbling.

‘Excuse me, I feel as though I’m missing something,’ he said. ‘What is the insulin for?’

‘For your schizophrenia.’

He paused. ‘I don’t think I have schizophrenia.’

‘Our reports have shown otherwise. We feel it’s best that you be supervised.’ He tilted his head sympathetically. ‘You’ve also asked us to treat you. You entered our treatment facility yourself.’

The subject shot his brows toward his nose. He didn’t remember giving consent for insulin shock therapy, or ever injecting insulin for that matter. In fact, now that he thought of it, he had never heard voices in his life. He wouldn’t have submit himself into a facility, between these walls, infallible walls, impenetrable walls, see-through, silent, seeping into his mind. He blinked again.

‘That’s impossible,’ he said, holding his eyes closed to straighten his memory. ‘I don’t know how I got here, but I didn’t submit myself. I wouldn’t have done that.’

‘You drove here, sir. Your car is parked in our garage.’

He shook his head at the man, his eyes grown wide with disbelief.

‘But the tabloid...’ he desperately looked around the table for the folded paper, but the table was now empty, except for his shining glass of water. ‘The tabloid I was reading, the article about me, the facility it lists isn’t for mental illness...’ He looked under the table. Only the man’s briefcase sat on the ground. Still. The man leaned back into his chair, watching the subject search aimlessly.

‘Tabloids are misleading,’ the man said. ‘They’ve all gone out of business. The article you read was from the last issue of *Mars Daily*. You can’t trust what they say, sir. It’s only

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science fiction. Science fiction is illegal.'

'No.' He shook his head, blinking harder. 'This isn't right. I would know if I had schizophrenia. I would hear things, see things, imagine things.' He leaned in toward the man, waiting for validation of his point, pointvalidation, waitingforhispoint. His thoughts began to reverse, condense, ache. Blink.

'You do imagine things.' The man paused, and looked gently at the subject. 'Don't you remember the alien incident?'

The subject stood, jolting his chair backward, and pointed his finger between the man's eyes. 'The alien incident was real.'

'It wasn't,' the man pronounced calmly. 'You imagined it.'

'I didn't imagine anything!' he shouted. His sudden rage made his legs weak, and he grabbed the side of the table for support. 'There was nothing to imagine. It was a sensation. A feeling of eternal consciousness without the existence of reason, a complete absence of rationale or logic. I can't explain it. You would never understand it, it's a sensation. It's a sensation that isn't human.'

'You're saying that you can feel extra-terrestrial feelings?'

'No,' he said, raising his voice. 'I'm saying...'. He clenched his face and ran his fingers through his hair. 'This isn't...'. His knees began to shake, droplets of sweat forming at their backs. He pulled the chair underneath him and collapsed in it, grasping for his water glass.

'You're getting weak,' said the man. 'Your insulin needs to be injected, I'll have to leave in a moment.' He placed his papers in a suitcase, and checked his watch.

'But I've never taken insulin,' he said catching his breath. 'I know I haven't. I would've remembered, I'm afraid of needles. It couldn't be.'

Specimen Zero

‘No needles are necessary,’ said the man, standing from his seat and turning toward the exit. ‘We’ve reserved the most technologically advanced form of insulin injection for you, sir. We’re taking care of you.’

He stumbled from his seat and made his way to a mat on the floor, trying to keep his vision clear until he could lie flat. ‘What form?’ he stuttered.

‘This room,’ the man replied.

The exit fastened shut, leaving the specimen alone again, enclosed in his glass cube. *The monkey protects the cage.* Beep. Release.

#

He drove. There were mountains in the distance keeping the source of light hidden behind its peaks. The open fields surrounding his vehicle contained the whispering buzz of his Honda, and the dull hum kept the wandering itinerary of his thoughts sheltered. He thought of his speech, his wife asleep in bed, curled up next to empty space, snuggling nothing. Grocery lists accumulated, remember to visit Lowe’s for a hammer, should diet be regulated to prevent prostate cancer, call the dentist for an appointment Tuesday, vacation to Italy in the spring, what does it mean to be financially stable?

Ravel faintly competed against a submissive radio static.

He gazed at the mountain peaks, radiating an ever-dimming purple. The wilderness of the universe gazed back with a questioning expression of abandonment. A parent watching their child load the car for college, forgetting to look back and wave.

#

Citizens, if you now have nothing else to believe in, believe this...there is your neighbor. You can believe in the human.

Specimen Zero

He smiled, relaying his mind back to himself, and observed the concrete walls. This was a very different room, equally invincible, he decided, but less lonely. A man with a paper mask covering his mouth wrapped him in white cloth, tying a tidy bow on his side.

‘How are you feeling, sir?’ said the muffled voice.

Turn our focus and prioritize, let us make amends, recognize our roots.

‘I feel fine.’

‘You look well rested.’ A generous smile behind the mask.

He nodded, and eyed the tools resting on a metallic table with wheels. The lights reflected off the surface of handles and pointed tips, forming a glittery facade. He flashed back into himself. *Humanity is alone in the universe.*

‘Lie down here, and make yourself comfortable. Head flat.’

He rested his head and closed his eyes as the masked man positioned a small machine next to his head, and placed a rounded piece of rubber in his between his teeth. A distant Ravel composition traveled from a stereo in the corner, across the tile, and into his ears.

What a soft bed, he thought.

‘Now take a deep breath, and relax. This will only hurt for a moment.’

Support hotlines, free of charge, will be available to you shortly after this broadcast.

III.

‘Mr. Drone?’

Bright lights shone through his lids, flashing stars in the darkness of his sockets.

‘Mr. Drone, can you hear me?’

His hands tingled beneath the blanket, and his head pounded as if it had been drummed

Specimen Zero

on for centuries. He parted his eyelids to a blurred figure gazing down over him. A looming female tower.

‘How are you feeling, Richard?’ she said.

‘My head hurts.’

‘That’s normal. We’ll be sure to give you more medication for the pain.’

‘Where am I?’

‘Do you remember your name?’ She moistened a towel and dabbed cool water onto his forehead.

‘Drone...’

‘Good,’ she said, her mauve lips forming a circle. ‘And first name?’

‘...Richard.’

‘Very good.’ She looked behind her and nodded to a figure through the doorway.

‘Where am I?’

‘You’re in the hospital, Richard. You’ve been in a car accident.’

He wiped his eyes and look around at the walls. Off-white. Identical.

‘When can I go home?’

‘It’ll be a few days. I’ll be your nurse during the rest of your stay here, and when you’re ready to go home I’ll be your in-house nurse as well. Does that sound alright to you?’ The black bob of hair bounced with a reassuring nod.

He nodded back and looked at the cleft on her chin, widening with her smile, and the perfect V that formed at her neckline.

‘Would you like a glass of water?’ she said, lifting a light green jug on the side table.

He nodded again and pulled the blanket off his feet and wiggled his toes to check if his

Specimen Zero

legs were functioning. ‘What happened?’

‘You were driving and steered into a ravine. You've been under our care for a little while now.’

‘How long?’

‘Oh, a few weeks.’ She set the glass next to him and turned to cover him with the blanket. ‘We're going to get you back on your feet as soon as we can, and I'll be helping you with all your daily needs. I'll bring you a copy of *The Daily Globe* in a little bit, so you can take a look at the classifieds for an apartment and available jobs. How does that sound?’

‘Didn't I have a house?’

‘Don't you remember? Your house was taken by the state when you were released from your job at the factory and transferred to our ward.’

‘Why was I released?’

She smiled at him and rested her hand on his arm. ‘You suffered a panic attack and injured your head.’ She took his hand and placed it on his temples. ‘Right here, see? Your head got wedged between two boiling pipes. The state assigned me to look after you and keep your condition stable, but you drove off one night without me noticing.’

He felt the round marks sting under his fingers tips and winced. ‘Shouldn't they have healed by now?’

She looked toward the door a moment and turned back with a sigh. ‘It's the ointment we use to prevent scarring. Sometimes it takes a little longer.’

His fingers circled the outlines of the burn and felt the penetration of the wound that seemed to extend deep into his skull.

‘It looks like the accident really affected your memory, Richard. But don't worry, it'll

Specimen Zero

come back in time. I'll help you remember.' She removed his hands from the sides of his face and gently placed them under the sheet next to him, patting them in their spot. 'Close your eyes and get some more rest.'

The door creaked open and an arm extended inward holding a folded newspaper. She stood and removed the paper from its grasp, scanning the headline as the hand disappeared behind the door. He watched her fingers swivel as she separated the sections.

'Wait, what's your name?' he asked, lifting his head from the pillow in a brisk motion.

She studied his face and tilted her head with a smile. 'Margo.'

He paused.

'Right,' he said. 'Of course.'

She finished fingering the pages, and pulled them apart. 'You can also call me Nurse Gram,' she said, laying a portion of the paper on his lap. 'But I prefer if we stick to our first names as usual.'

'But I've seen you before, haven't I?' he said, watching the curves of her features move across the room. 'You look familiar.'

'I've been your nurse for a while, Richard.'

'No, I mean before that...'

She paused and glanced toward the doorway. 'It may just be the medication you're on. Déjà-vu is a common side effect, along with mild memory loss, nausea, the usual. But don't worry yourself with that.' She adjusted the angle of his bed, and tucked the covers under his legs.

'I'll be back with lunch. In the meantime...' she smiled and pointed to the newspaper on his lap, '...you can have a look at those classifieds, or just close your eyes and rest. I'll wake you

Specimen Zero

when it's time to eat.'

He glanced at the listings that were already circled for him in red ink. *Walden Elementary Night Custodian.*

'Let me know if you need anything,' she said, and in a few swift motions she folded the remaining pages under her arm and wafted out the door, letting a breeze gust inward as the exit shut.

The headline *6th Annual Earth Independence Day* gleamed from the muted television set. A muffled voice in the hallway echoed, '*Good. File it,*' followed by the squeaking rubber of sneakers as they parted from the spot in front of his door.

'Margo,' Richard repeated, and closed his eyes to rest, drowning out the noise of the outside.