

# Who Do You Think You Are?

COVID-19 in Psychotherapy

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Natan P.F. Kellermann asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition

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## Preface

*If you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be put at risk even in a hundred battles. If you only know yourself, but not your opponent, you may win or may lose. If you know neither yourself nor your enemy, you will always endanger yourself.*

—Sun Tzu 孫子

The shrieking sounds of an old alarm clock were heard loud and clear during the ringing spring of 2020 and woke up a slumbering world. It was picked up by international news channels who broadcast the first reports of a deadly virus appearing in China. The first sounds didn't alarm me and I turned over in bed. The second noise was much louder and I sat up abruptly, trying to identify what the fuss was all about. Only after my morning coffee and when having watched the news on TV, did I properly wake up.

At sixty-six, I had been retired for some time and was living a quiet life in Jerusalem. Clients no longer shared their troubling feelings with me, and I was not active in training and research. After more than thirty years of that, there was little doubt I needed a break from the marathon race of professional growth and career development. I was looking forward to a more relaxed state of being, occupying myself instead with matters other than psychology, mental disorders, and the suffering of human beings.

Retirement didn't come as a crisis, but as an opportunity for change. At this station of my life, I looked forward to getting off the train and discover new pursuits. Well aware the clock was ticking, I wanted it to tick differently, not as a reflection of the past, nor as a preparation for the future. Taking one day at a time, managing what is, and accepting this as OK would be perfect. I would be content with that.

Without sufficient stimulation, however, senescence (biological aging) gradually gained momentum and physical corrosion became inevitable. As the process of cell division slowed down, and the length of my telomeres became shorter, my hearing and eyesight gradually deteriorated. I also noticed some disturbing early signs of dementia and memory loss. Planning future programs and solving daily problems were increasingly burdensome. Completing familiar tasks, such as going to the grocery store, became major projects. Most problematic, however, was when I started to confuse personal names and

misinterpret visual images. When I also developed a shuffling walk with tremors that could be mistaken for alcoholism, doctors suspected Lewy body dementia.

The shelf life for an average male human specimen such as me has an expiry date of around eighty years. As with all expiration dates, some merchandise lasts longer while other (damaged goods) can be thrown out earlier. I felt that I had reached my own expiry date. My label said, “Best before the end of 2019.” In 2020 I was of no use anymore. It was time to call it a day. But while it was too late to live, it also seemed too early to die.

Full retirement, however, was not meant to be. Having worked with traumatized survivors for many years, the alarming signs of the coronavirus pandemic woke me up. Primed for rapidly entering the emergency mode, I wondered what effects it would have as another collective trauma on the world as a whole.

To prepare me for this new danger, I read all I could about the virus and earlier pandemics and became totally absorbed by the inferno awaiting us. Amidst the turmoil of events, I wanted to understand everything about the coronavirus—how he operated, how he planned to pursue his strategic goals, and what he had in his arsenal. Facing the object of my fears would enable me to better cope with the threat he created. In short, there was a new enemy in town, and I had to know, as fast as possible, how to boost a solid defense or to strike first without delay.

At that moment, a new patient appeared in my office without referral and without warning. He settled down into my armchair and demanded to be heard and seen.

## A Challenging Client

*One small virus is enough for me to change the world.*

—P.S. Jagadeesh Kuma

When I first met Corona “©” in my psychotherapeutic practice, I was struck by some contradictory impressions. On the one hand, he had a timid appearance and was almost invisible. On the other hand, he had an impressive crown-like outer shell with spikes that looked as if they might explode if one bumped into them. But © was a master of disguise and transformation and tried to evade any careful scrutiny. It was only when he presented himself as the silent killer responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic that he evoked my curiosity.

As soon as © entered my office, I felt nauseated and had breathing difficulties. I didn’t make much of it until I noticed the various symptoms he was triggering in me—fatigue, sore throat, dry cough, nasal congestion, and fever. These were not the familiar countertransference reactions therapists have with their patients. They were warning signs of central importance to get a deeper understanding of who he actually was. Suspecting his intentions for coming to therapy in the first place, I kept some distance from him to protect myself.

As it turned out, people keeping a distance from him was his main presenting problem. He felt chronically lonely. “Everyone relates to me as if I were some kind of pest, and as if I have no birthright.” While sobbing heavily, he added, “Nobody has ever told me they love me.”

Not being in close contact with others also made him feel detached from himself. As long as he could remember, he told me he’d been searching for his actual identity and genuine “self.” There was no “core” within him, no nucleus to give him a sense of grounding. © was nothing more than a string of RNA with twenty-nine proteins that had to hijack living cells to replicate.

“Sometimes, I even doubt if I’m alive at all,” he said hoarsely. “I feel so empty by myself. I thrive only when I’m merging with another person’s cells through my spike protein. That’s when I get some sense of self-actualization. For a few moments, I get a kick from causing a

blast in myself and the other person.” It took some time before I understood he was talking about the cytokine storm when the immune system attacks its own cells and tissues rather than just fighting off the virus. Every time this happens, © felt exhilarated and was willing to go to extreme lengths to repeat the experience.

Accepting © as a patient was a hard decision. I had previously worked with patients for whom I felt some amount of sympathy and whom I wanted to help. Now, I faced an adversary I ultimately might want to eradicate.

#### The Assessment Phase:

Before embarking on treatment, I administered some tests to assess ©’s physical and mental functioning. First, © underwent a basic medical examination with the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. It confirmed that he was indeed made up of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Then, I conducted a clinical interview to reveal his personal and childhood history, recent life experiences, and family background.

© told me he was a child of the animal kingdom. His ancestors had lived a comfortable life within bats, pangolins, and various other creatures for centuries. “When stray dogs ate bats for lunch, we lived in them for a while. Then, some hungry dudes made raw hamburgers of the dogs and consumed them with hoisin sauce. Now we found ourselves within the cells of human beings. It took some time for us to adapt to these new surroundings. Human beings were so much more vulnerable to illnesses, especially in their respiratory systems. I wish we’d stayed within animals because we had a wonderful life there.”

© was the heir of a distinguished lineage of imperial families who each had a history of causing pandemics. “Some of my predecessors from the SARS and MERS families told me about you people long before I came here,” he said in his scratchy voice. “I am a descendant of these prominent protein lines and carry their legacy with pride.”

This background information was important to understand ©’s development, but whether he had been genetically modified by man or where he came from in terms of evolution remained a mystery. I think he knew, but he refused to tell.

To learn more about his unconscious, I tried some projective tests. When asked to make up stories about the ambiguous pictures in the T.A.T. test, © expressed considerable emotional agony. An unlucky serial killer being hunted by crooked police in white uniforms. This image evoked anger and fear. A wonderful world without human beings



was presented as “heaven on earth.” The common themes typically displayed paranoid fantasies.

Next, I administered a Rorschach test, which © seemed to enjoy tremendously. Watching the inkblots, he often responded with loud laughs. He saw a lot of animals but also details of inner organs. In Card 8, he was visibly thrilled when he recognized some bats. They were at the center of his most burning longing. Overall, his responses revealed a complex personality structure with a multitude of internal conflicts.

These intake sessions exposed much of ©’s psychopathology and helped me to suggest a tentative diagnosis. Being a virus, he was addicted to contaminating as many people as possible. Besides his psychopathic and sociopathic behavior, he also suffered from a severe narcissistic personality disorder. To emphasize his superiority over others, he had taken the name “Corona,” which means “crown” and implies sovereignty. He liked to label himself as © so he could not be illegally reproduced in any form. Apparently, © had an inflated sense of his own importance, a deep need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others. All these traits created troubled relationships. In short, he was a prime specimen of an insidious egotistical parasite, someone who clings to another for personal gain, giving nothing in return.

Interestingly, © had higher than normal intelligence. He was so clever that he had outsmarted the best-known drugs and vaccines. He presented a completely novel disorder that nobody had previously come across. Viral immunologists observed that he could harm all the major organs via blood vessel cells. Most obviously, he appeared to be more contagious and more deadly than others of his kind. © had already killed hundreds of thousands and had infected millions. His activities had also led to catastrophic damage to the global economy.

Researchers from all over the world were searching for ways to crush ©. They sought to understand how to block his proteins from trapping, overpowering, and invading the cellular machinery of human beings and investigated hundreds of experimental antiviral drugs and vaccine candidates. These would either prevent © from entering a cell or stop the human immune system from going wild once © was inside. Alternatively, doctors could take the blood from recuperated survivors and give it to those who were ill to use the antibodies that had developed.

On a molecular level, some researchers targeted one of ©’s most virile spike protein receptors—the ACE-2—but with little success. Epidemiologists had no clue when (or if) societies could reach

sufficient population immunity to prevent further spread of the pandemic.

Despite the efforts of so many, being invisible to the naked eye gave © an upper hand, and he managed to escape being caught. As a result, there was an overwhelming sense of powerlessness among governments all over the world. I was well aware of the urgent need to find better ways to cope with the threat he posed.

#### Treatment Options:

I contemplated what to do with ©. Exceptional measures were called for. Should I commit him to a closed ward and isolate him? Should I refer him to a medical specialist? Should I let him out among the people? Within the limitations of my psychotherapeutic arsenal, would I be able to cure him of his ailment? Would psychological techniques help him in his struggle? Did I want to help him? Or, as things developed, would I prefer to destroy him?

Despite all efforts to eradicate ©, nobody had sat down to listen carefully to what he had to say. Nobody had tried to understand with an open mind what he was actually up to. That is what I wanted to do.

I had misgivings from the beginning. I thought an individual approach might be insufficient in dealing with a global problem that demanded a worldwide concerted struggle. Even if I managed to “cure” ©, his offspring would continue the contamination.

©, the silent serial killer that I had read about in the media, was now in my clinic and I felt something needed to be done. I hoped that if I could understand him better, I might help to bring to an end his lethal mission. If I could let him feel what he did to others, he might gain some insight and change his ways.

Alternatively, I hoped to find the best strategy to wipe him out.

#### Therapeutic Process:

Even though I tried to establish a therapeutic alliance with ©, the sessions remained scary. When getting close to him, I was afraid he might infect me, and it was hard to build a sense of trust between us. Concurrently, I felt sad for the people who were dying and for their loved ones who could not be with them when they passed away. It was especially difficult to be empathic with © when I imagined an apocalyptic world without a future.

Many unanswered questions about him remained—how exactly did he infect people and how long a time did it take for him to do it? Why did he infect different people in distinct ways? Was it possible to

become immune to him? Did he have a conscious or an unconscious agenda? These questions crossed my mind as I started to meet regularly with him.

Working with patients to develop themselves within a relationship of mutuality was something I had done previously. I knew that if I could help them differentiate and integrate their self- and object-representations, their self-confidence would increase. However, I was not sure I wanted © to become more self-assured. Who knew what he could turn into at the end of such a process?

The last thing I wanted to do was to help © strengthen his self-esteem and to “find himself” within a relationship of “unconditional positive regard.” More importantly, I felt, was to cultivate some amount of reality-testing in him.

Therefore, I decided to focus on his identity by asking him, “Who do you think you are?”

Every time I asked © that question, he had a different response. One day, he said, “I am the Angel of Death to some. To others, I just come and visit with a breeze. Most children don’t sit still long enough for me to get under their skin.”

Another day he bragged, “I am Coronal! Nobody knew my name just a few months ago. Now, I’m world-famous. Everyone knows me. I’m a celebrity. Pictures of me are on all the TV-stations, and people talk about me everywhere. Is there anyone more easily recognized than me? Shouldn’t I be proud of my achievements?” He had been quite offended when some people called him the normal flu at the start of the pandemic. “There’s nothing ‘normal’ about me, I am more contagious and much more dangerous than those unsophisticated viral mutations they vaccinate people against each year.”

I looked at him with bewilderment but had to agree.

That made him continue with renewed enthusiasm. “You still relate to me as if I was a person, like your next-door neighbor. You can’t accept the fact that I am something else. I am not a human being! I am much smaller than you and much less sophisticated in terms of my genetic setup. That doesn’t mean I’m less intelligent than you. With all your 20,000-plus genes and your big brains, you’re still incapable of accepting that I am more powerful than you. It blows your mind that I can kill you with a simple burp!”

Enraged, I repeated the same question, but with a fiercer tone, “Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to spread your poison and harm people? You’re just a dangerous, cruel organism, for

God's sake! What gives you the right to play God? You can't do that! Don't you have any sense of compassion?"

He looked at me as if unable to understand.

It became obvious to both of us that I had begun to relate to © more as a foe than a friend. But as I looked for the best strategy with which to eradicate him, it struck me that his very existence was ultimately based on a basic (and eternal) question of survival, adaptation, and evolution that had always found its battlefield within biochemistry. And it had now materialized in my treatment room. I had read somewhere that parasites are intrinsic to biological evolution and that they drive its complexity at multiple levels. All living things are trying to survive and multiply, either through fight or through cooperation, and they change a little during this process. Taking this aspect into consideration made me somewhat more accepting of him.

As I had now expressed some of my anger, it became easier for me to continue to stay in contact with ©. The next time I asked him, "Who do you think you are?" it was in a friendlier voice, and he became willing to open up more.

"I do not think who I am. I just exist. I am a chemical structure with a set of proteins that perform specific functions. It's not something I decide to do, and neither is it something I have any conscious control over. In fact, I'm not sure if I am conscious of anything at all. Consciousness is a privilege for humans and not for viral beings like me. You know you exist, while we just exist. At the end of the day, that's why I came to you for treatment. I also want to think and know I have a self. I get so tired of just floating around and multiplying."

To my surprise, © turned his head toward me and added an important piece of information. "Look at me, Doc..." I looked at © and saw that he was choked up with emotion. "Self-replication is a central part of being me. I am, after all, just a virus."

That was a smart thing to acknowledge, I thought, for such a primitive molecular creature. He recognized he felt bound by his body and had no conscience, no free will, and no self-control. Self-replication was apparently an expression of his libido; his fundamental life instinct. Gaining a sense of self in the form of an inner nucleus might help him better control his previously destructive behavior.

It seemed as if we were making some progress in the therapeutic process.

From this point on, my respect for © gradually grew. Discovering additional parts of his personality also helped me ask more frankly about his motives for killing so many people. He assured me, "I don't

kill the people who die. I just enter their organs to multiply. When that happens, some of them can't tolerate it. They can't breathe and their lungs stop functioning. Or their cardiovascular systems go caput and they develop blood clots. It's just a sad result of my being there. But it's not my original purpose.

"What I want is simply to multiply, to stay virulent, and to co-create. When people get too sick and especially when they die, I can't use them anymore, and I die with them. That is who I am. I have to find a suitable balance between the infection I spread and the damage I cause to the body I enter. It's an ongoing process I'm still working on."

Engaging with a new client makes me feel more purposeful and confident. But my tentative diagnosis of © as a psychopathic killer was obviously incorrect. As therapy progressed, I gained more of his trust. He started sharing some of the techniques he used to spread himself around the globe. "People are so easily infected, you can't believe it! If I leave a slight trace of myself on a doorknob for example, and someone touches it and also touches his mouth, I'll be able to get in through the respiratory tract and start my journey to the lungs. It's so easy!" He was clearly pleased with himself. Then he added, "You should try it once yourself! You'll be surprised at how easy it is."

I had never thought about contagion in this way.

He continued. "What makes infecting more difficult is when people are too scared. People with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), for example, are tough to infect. They clean everything they touch all the time, and I'm often washed away with soap or obliterated with a hand sanitizer! That's very cruel! Don't you think so?"

I understood that for ©, the contagion was equivalent to ego-building. He was literally strengthening his sense of self whenever he multiplied. In each such multiplication, he was trying to imitate and learn from the host cell and to change his ways accordingly. I wondered if this was also happening during our sessions but didn't want to ask him directly. I was afraid I might discover he was already floating around inside the cells of my body.

Instead, I asked © to describe how he flowed into the cells of another body to perform his multiplication strategy. "You must understand," he said, "I'm just an assembly of malicious nucleic acids that infiltrate and burglarize cells. I'm on a constant search for unsuspecting people with immune systems that can't detect me. First I disguise myself so the watchdogs don't notice me. That's not so difficult because they're so naïve and usually have no memory of having seen someone like me before. So, I'm let in with no problems."

“Inside the cells, I must avoid being discovered by various informants in white T-shirts who are always on the lookout for foreigners like me. But whenever I enter a new cell, it’s the executioners in white T-shirts who want to get rid of me that make me the most terrified,” he howled, but then added with an innocent grin, “When I manage to bribe them to join me in my revolution, all hell breaks loose.”

Envisaging the havoc © wrought inside cells made me feel uncomfortable but my curiosity grew from his apparent understanding of what happens in the immune system of human beings and how to manipulate its white blood cells. I wondered if he had also been aware of what was happening around the world. Had he noticed the chaos his pandemic rampage created in the human population?

His answer to this question surprised me more than anything he had previously shared. © looked at me with distrust, as if he were unsure of how much to reveal. Hesitantly, he said, “While you’re looking at me, you don’t realize that I’m also looking at you.”

Our roles were suddenly reversed. Taken aback, I asked him suspiciously, “So what do you see when looking at me?”

“I see you’re scared of me and you try to keep a safe distance.”

Somewhat embarrassed, I nodded and asked, in as casual a way as I could, “And...?”

“I see the chaos I’ve created in your world—the social distancing, the lockdowns, and the panic all around... I see how you struggle with existential dilemmas, like protecting your health or saving the economy.”

He smiled at me briefly and in a stammering, nearly inaudible, voice added, “Well, what I see...what I also see when I look at you human beings...” He closed his eyes and opened them slowly as if trying to recollect something. “I see what you’re doing. I see what you do all the time, even when you try to hide behind your silly face masks. I see what you’re doing with everything around you, with nature, with the planet, with the earth. I see how you contaminate the air we breathe and poison the water we drink. I see how you’re destroying nature at a faster pace than it can restore itself. I see how you steal all its resources and how you fail to give anything back.”

I kept silent, waiting for him to continue.

“I also see how you’re spreading your species all over the planet at the expense of others—the mass extinction of other creatures. The mammals, the birds, the reptiles, and the fish you people have killed.” He paused again and whispered with his eyes closed as if he doubted I

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would understand what he was talking about, “You assume supremacy over all the biological organisms you move around and annihilate.”

Then, with a more accusing tone, he added, “Who do you think *you* are?” referring to humankind in general. “What do you think you’re doing to the Earth where we all live?”

With those words, he vanished in a droplet carried away by the wind.

I was left, not just with a loss of smell but also with a new awareness. By trying to answer his question, “Who do we think we are?” I realized that human beings are not so different from the coronavirus. We are only infinitely more destructive.

Then I stopped to wonder whether the present pandemic might become a “corrective emotional experience” for humankind.

## The Return of ©

*A boomerang returns back to the person who throws it.*

—Vera Nazarian

A month had passed since © left treatment in a droplet carried away by the wind. At first, I felt relieved by not being exposed to his threat of infecting me. I hoped it was the last I would see of him.

But his sudden departure also left me with a troubling feeling of something unfinished. As the pandemic lingered on, I could not keep him out of my mind. His last question to me—who do you think you are?—had stirred up some troubling issues for me. As a therapist, I had underestimated his awareness of what was happening all around us. On behalf of human beings, his critique of how we destroy the earth offended me.

One morning I noticed sudden nasal congestion and immediately guessed © had returned.

“Hello ©,” I said softly while reaching for my face mask. “I see you are back.”

He gazed back at me and waved his spikes. “Yes, Doc, here I am again,” he said in a raspy voice as if imitating the hoarse vocal sound of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

I observed him more closely to read his fine print. There were some visible signs of wear-and-tear. Something seemed to be wrong with him. “Your voice sounds different,” I said. “You’ve been busy since we last met.”

“Yes, I have been extremely industrious. Together with my offspring, we built the Global Network of Corona-Infections, GNCI Inc. We’ve expanded rapidly and globally, as far as Peru, Nigeria, and Myanmar. In each of our locations, we maintain ongoing employee support and daily control. We have learned how to spread into international markets by the CC-company—you know—those who produce the brown liquid that destroys teeth. Unfortunately, however, they beat us to the trademark and so did the Mexican lager that has given us a bad name. That’s why I changed my name to ©, so I can’t be



legally reproduced in any form. But you know how it is in international business nowadays. It's more difficult to get around with all those flight cancellations and lock-downs almost everywhere. I'm exhausted by all those Zoom conferences. Social distancing has made our work crazy tough. They're trying to disperse us. With all the testing done and all the restrictions, many of our representatives complain their work is nearly impossible. There's no free trade to talk about and hardly any crowds where we can invest in new mass infection projects. The world has become a hard place in which to do a viral business."

© had become a fast-talking businessman. I probed further. "So, how do you see the future of your multinational company?"

"Short-term, there are some challenges," © said, "but long-term, the future of our company looks dazzling. We're launching a new 'second generation' COVID-20 product in the autumn. Staff training includes an amazing VR-video presentation with a headset that lets them look around the human body as if they're actually there. It gives a 3-D perspective of the inner workings of all the white blood cells and allows them to visualize the proteins and other biomolecules that could prevent the staff from entering the cells. Most importantly, it allows them to prepare for attacks from nasty antibodies or from any new drugs that may have been introduced to counter our viral assaults.

"This upgraded coronavirus strain includes a novel D614G mutation that will be virtually impossible to detect even with the latest anti-virus software and vaccines. Its virility performance has improved tremendously, thanks to the increased number of functional spikes added to its surface. It can survive in different environmental conditions in all seasons and can easily be passed on between humans. To increase its ratio of infectivity, symptoms will not appear for a week, which gives plenty of time for people to infect one another before the virus is detected. Our research and marketing departments have been working their butts off for months on this amazing new 'second wave' pandemic to guarantee its quick penetration into new markets. I think we'll do very well in this next phase."

I felt the heat rising to my face. The way © presented his "successful pandemic" made me both angry and frustrated. But I didn't want to argue with him. I whispered cynically, "You seem to have it all figured out."

Psychotherapy appeared to have strengthened ©'s self-confidence while completely failing to correct his reality testing. He looked upbeat and full of energy, and there were no overt signs of mental distress. "You seem less agitated now than a month ago," I said.

“Yes, Doctor,” he said. “I feel OK now, thank you. Since our previous sessions, I feel as though I have become somebody to reckon with.”

He looked at me with gratitude, and added, “It’s good to be back again, you know.” After a brief pause, he asked, “You’re not upset with me for leaving so suddenly, are you?”

“No,” I replied truthfully. “I was glad you left, but I have been curious about how you were doing and also a little worried about you.”

© nodded grimly and then asked with a fake smile, “And how is your world doing nowadays?”

“It could be better, as you probably know.” I assumed he knew that the numbers of infected and dead had exploded. From what he had told me about his GNCI-company, I reckoned he probably had it all documented on elaborate spreadsheets, graphs, and world maps. Most likely he was also monitoring the countries still locked down and those opening up and the number of available beds in intensive-care units.

“You have become a formidable adversary,” I admitted reluctantly.

The pandemic had now been underway for about five months, and the virus had become increasingly contagious and lethal. Nations had been placed in emergency-mode. Borders had been closed, flights had been grounded, and without a global joint action plan, each country was responsible for its own combat strategy. Politicians held heated debates on the best way to protect the health of citizens while maintaining the economy at the same time. To justify the protective measures recommended by public health agencies, there was much talk about the importance of “flattening the curve.” This sounded more like a futile dieting plan than a method for combating infections because flattening the curve today (as most obese people know) will inevitably result in weight-gains down the road. Flattening the curve of infections would also cause exactly the opposite regarding the unemployment curve.

A battle of wits between © and humankind was being fought on all fronts and with no end in sight. The pandemic had expanded swiftly as a short, fast, and powerful *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war). It had become an annihilation war (*Vernichtungsschlacht*). Its epicenter had started in the Far East, moved to Europe, to the United States, and then all over South America, Russia, and to the far corners of the world. Casualties now included 300,000 dead, six million wounded, and many millions more “imprisoned” in isolation and house arrest. With limited protective equipment available, disarmed human beings retreated in defense. Offensive weapons were still absent. They were only now being developed by the pharma industry, which had been mobilized to

find new testing devices, drugs, and vaccines that would make humankind more bulletproof.

© had surely won the first round of this war. Who would prove to be more resilient and win the final battle?

“I’ve thought a lot about what you said before you left,” I told ©. “You made an important point regarding our sense of superiority over nature. You have delivered an important message to the world.”

“Well, Doc, I am glad you got my point,” he said and continued in his newly found know-it-all authoritarian style. “For far too long, your civilization has stubbornly underestimated the threat of air pollution and climate change. The planet is suffering and you are to blame for its devastation. You have poisoned the oceans and the skies. You have cut down trees of the rain forest essential for our survival. You have covered the earth and filled the seas with your waste. And you are doing almost nothing to clean up the mess you create. Have you forgotten what Hippocrates said hundreds of years ago? Don’t you recognize that when the environment is sick, you will also be sick?”

I kept silent as © scolded humankind. “Why now?” I asked. “Why did you appear in 2020?”

He gave me a hard look. “It’s about time, Doc, don’t you think? Being at the top of the food chain gave you an upper hand for a long time. Nature was powerless against you, and you got away with it. But with global warming, the situation has become unsustainable. My job is to change all of that. We viruses influence the evolution of life through the epidemics we create and the adaptations and mutations occurring as a result. We restore the balance in nature. When the climate gets warmer, many creatures increase their habitat and this makes it easier for us viruses to move into new hosts... I know it’s painful for you, but the laws of nature are merciless. I wanted to shake you up and send you a ‘wake-up’ call. I wanted to give you a corrective emotional experience.”

Nature may indeed have reached saturation. I reflected on how increased greenhouse gas emissions, relaxed pollution controls, and the Trump administration’s efforts to abolish climate change regulations might have triggered © to arrive in 2020. But other developments might also have produced a sense of imbalance in the world order. With technology advancing at an ever-faster pace, perhaps it had reached a stage where humankind cannot keep up. It was not just smartphones that had changed our lives. Recent discoveries in high-tech, self-driving cars, genome analysis and gene editing, synthetic biology, computer simulation, big data, and artificial intelligence might

have created a monster over which human beings had lost control. Had the technological race become too fast for (human) nature to digest? Perhaps that was why so many people were stressed out and felt down. Perhaps we needed to take a break in 2020 and examine where all this technological progress was leading us.

If that was the case, ©'s pandemic had surely done the trick. Pollution from air travel ceased almost completely, and road traffic was significantly reduced. In a lockdown, we were less distracted by noise. We had more time to think, to meditate, and return to the basics of life. We had an opportunity to be in contact with ourselves, to activate our imagination, and start dreaming again. Indeed, © set off a giant worldwide mindfulness exercise to teach us something more fundamental about who we are and where we are going. It gave us a fresh perspective on life. If we were to find a drug that could eliminate him or a vaccine that made him less virulent, we might miss the whole point.

I wondered what © planned to do with human beings next.

As if he could read my mind, © said, "I don't know what to do with you. Exceptional measures are called for. Should I isolate you or encourage you to move around among one another? Can I change your ways with my viral arsenal? I'm not sure if it will do the job. Perhaps it would be better to simply get rid of you all together?"

I said nothing.

"I think humans deserve another chance," he said. "Despite all efforts to curb you, no one has sat down to listen carefully to what you have to say for yourself. No one has tried to understand with an open mind what you're actually up to. That is what I'd like to do."

"OK," I said with a neutral expression. "That sounds like an excellent idea. Let's talk about it."

"But I'm not sure it will help. I reckon an individual approach is probably insufficient in dealing with a global problem that demands a concerted and worldwide effort. Even if I manage to change some of you, other more careless humans will continue to spread your rubbish around."

He paused and then said, "If I could understand you better, I might help end your lethal mission. If I could let you feel what you do to others, you might gain some insight and change your ways."

And then he added with a sigh, "If not, I must find the most efficient way to destroy you..."

© persisted. “It’s good you’ve realized humans are no less destructive than viruses. I think you need some intensive therapy to help resolve this. If you agree, I would like to help.”

While apprehensive and skeptical, I was curious about where this would lead us, and said, “I don’t mind.”

“You know the drill, don’t you?” he asked with forcefulness. “I have to carry out a formal intake on you. It will help me understand the unconscious motives for your destructive behavior.”

© suggested we start by doing a PCR-test on me. The nasopharyngeal swab test turned out to be negative. Then he wanted to give me an antibody test. Since I had not given him this test, I asked, “Why do you want to give me this test? I didn’t give it to you, did I?”

“Of course you didn’t give me the antibody test, stupid! I can’t be immune to myself, can I?”

“Well, perhaps you can. Perhaps you have some sort of viral autoimmunity, just like humans?”

“I don’t think so. I think you folks are the only species in the world that can be allergic to yourselves...” Then he added with a smile, “At least, I would be ‘allergic to myself’ if I were you.”

I smiled back, thinking about how our immune system can attack its own healthy cells, mistaking them for foreign invaders.

“But seriously,” he said, “I want to give you the antibody test to determine if I have exposed you in the past. If it’s positive, you have become immune to me. It’s not worth going through the fuzz of trying to infect someone immune. It’s a waste of time for both of us.”

Fortunately, my antibody test showed I had built up some resistance to reinfection. The flu-like symptoms I had felt when meeting him a month ago had probably programmed my immune system and neutralized his antigens.

He confirmed this. “I must have left some trace in your body...perhaps some of your ugly white T-shirts have learned how to recognize me...” And then he voiced with a smile, “If only creatures of nature could become immune to you folk... Now that I know what you’re physically made of, I suggest we do some projective tests to find out who you think you are from a psychological perspective.”

“Wait a minute,” I protested. “Are you trained to do that?”

“No, I’m self-taught,” he replied.

There had obviously been an implicit desire for subtle revenge in ©’s request. Even though I felt uncomfortable going along with it, he lured me into agreeing by arguing that he wanted to understand more about the collective unconscious of humans. As a “typical”

representative of the human race, I was supposed to fabricate T.A.T. (projective test) stories from its lengthy history. I made up stories about people killing one another, about crying babies, about disasters, wars, and famines. I also shared stories of old people dying alone in the latest pandemic. When I finished my gloomy narrative, I felt I had probably put too much emphasis on human suffering.

“You guys seem to be severely traumatized,” © remarked. “People don’t get along with one another...a lot of sad stuff...very painful.”

“It’s not that bad most of the time,” I retorted defensively. I worried I had misrepresented humankind in its diversity.

© handed me one of the Rorschach inkblots and asked, “What do you see?” This test proved to be an even greater challenge. How could I, a trained clinical psychologist, best respond to the tests as a representative of humankind? There is an infinite number of ways to perceive the ambiguous inkblots and just as many ways to interpret them. Should I present human beings as deranged or as sane? As emotionally impulsive or cognitively restrained? As extreme or balanced? Should I associate images in terms of the collective unconscious? Such responses would mean nothing to ©. Instead, I reflected on how human beings are born alone and die alone. I hoped he could understand and identify with this. I certainly did. My advancing neurological problems had led me to become more isolated and lonely, without the ability to connect to others as I had done before.

“From what you tell me,” © said in a serious shrink-like voice, “it seems that to be human is to be awfully lonely. That’s more or less like us. You want to be loved, but you still feel alone.” That was his diagnosis of humankind

After more discussion, he projected a more elaborated assessment of humankind. “Human beings procreate all the time. You want to expand your reach and control the world. You are basically self-loving and like to emphasize your superiority over others. It seems you have an inflated sense of your own importance, a deep need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others. These traits create troubled relationships. In short, you are exemplars of insidious egotistical parasites. You cling to others for personal gain, giving nothing in return.”

I saw how he enjoyed degrading humans and to appraise them in the same manner as I had assessed him.

“You have higher than average intelligence. You have been able to outsmart other biological creatures. You present a novel kind of psychopathology—one that can harm all other Biosystems on Earth.

You appear to be more contagious and more deadly than other creatures. You have already spread into hundreds of millions and killed even more. The consequence of your activities has caused catastrophic damage worldwide.”

This critical assessment was a direct mirroring of how I had earlier assessed ©. It made me feel embarrassed and uncomfortable.

We both felt we had done enough for now. We arranged to meet the next day to start therapy.

Therapeutic Process:

When we met the next day, © suggested we embark on a sort of “psychotherapy of humankind.” “So, who do you think you are?” he asked, imitating my words and intonation.

© gave me a sharp look. “Have you talked about it amongst you? Have you thought about who you think you are?”

“No,” I answered. “People don’t like to talk about who they are. It’s obvious for most people from the very beginning of childhood, through adolescence, and adulthood until old age. Our identities adjust to every stage of development. Some things remain the same as others change.” I heard myself speaking as a psychologist, but without conviction.

He evidently didn’t like my answer. “That’s nonsense! Everybody thinks they know who they are,” he said in frustration, “but do they know who they are as human beings? Has your ‘civilization’ changed because of the pandemic?” And then he yelled, “You’re wasting my time! Stop your intellectualizing psychobabble and answer my question! Who do you think you are?”

Hesitantly, I said, “OK, we belong to the species *Homo sapiens*, evolutionary descendants of apes, who dispersed and conquered the Earth and became the fear of ecosystems...”

© turned red all over his round exterior and almost exploded with anger. Squeezing his spikes tight, he shouted, “I know all that! I also read Yuval Harari’s book. I even heard his lecture in Davos in January. I also have books written about me. The old book by Wu Youke in which he described the Li Qi (戾气) is still the best book written about me. But you still don’t answer my question. Who do you think you are?” He looked at me expectantly.

Every time he asked me that question, I tried to find an answer that would satisfy him. I tried to show him that human beings were not as bad as he thought. “Some of us are evil. Others are good. As Mark

Twain once said, ‘Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.’”

Hearing this made ©’s spikes toss all around his body as if shaking his head. “Now you bring me quotations! I’ve heard all that high-losophy before. Soon you’ll be telling me that Freud didn’t think there was much good in human beings and that most people are trash...”

I tried to mimic ©’s own presentation of himself and bragged about belonging to the human race. “Everybody knows who we are. We have built cities, factories, airplanes, and computers. We have put a man on the moon. We are brainier than everything else on the planet!”

He raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “If you’re so smart, why do you act so foolishly?”

I tried to explain. “You still relate to me as if I were just a primitive biological creature, like any common frog. I am much smarter than you and much more sophisticated in terms of my genetic makeup. That makes me more powerful than you. You can’t accept this fact. With your twenty-nine tiny proteins without a nucleus, you’re not even capable of multiplying without entering another cell. It blows your mind that I can wipe you out with a simple disinfectant!”

Feeling I’d found a stronger footing, I continued with enthusiasm, “We were created in the ‘image of God.’ This makes us different from other animals because it allows us to grasp concepts and ideas and not merely act on instinct. God gave us ‘dominance over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.’ Isn’t that enough for you?” I was pleased with myself. This would surely convince him we were special and that we had been chosen to dominate the earth.

Hopping mad, © repeated the same question again in a screech. “Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to harm nature? You are nothing but a dangerous, cruel organism! What gives you the right to play God? You can’t do that! Don’t you have any sense of compassion?” His sudden explosion of anger surprised me.

He went on. “Despite all the miserable experiences you’ve had on earth, you still believe you are God’s favorites? You believe that God cares for you; that you were born in His image? It’s silly! It’s all part of your narcissistic plan to rule over all other creatures. How cheeky can you get? Have you forgotten that you are mortal, like everyone else?”

“No, I know we’ll all die...”



## WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

“I am the smallest of all creatures. A mere chemical structure. I know you despise me for it. But I have come to tell you that you are not superior to me. I can turn you into food for worms.”

I said nothing.

“You speak about your soul as if you’re the only being that has one. But you don’t even know what a soul is. How do you know other creatures don’t have it as well? How do you know they can’t feel pleasure and pain, that they can’t think, and that they don’t have aspirations just like you?”

I was silent.

“Whether they have a soul or not, animals have organs that serve them better than your own. These organs make them more emotionally intelligent than you will ever be, and more content. Your intelligence, of which you humans are so proud, doesn’t make you any happier than them. The opposite is true. It makes you more confused. It makes you obsessed with things you want, but can’t get, and full of sorrow for what you lost in the past.”

I heard what he said, and could not contradict him.

“You scorn the instincts of animals and treat them with so much disrespect. But it gives them everything they need. It serves them much better than your brilliance. Their serene unawareness is more beneficial to them than all your worthless meditations. How can you massacre such noble species?”

His words made a lot of sense. Trusting our instincts may indeed be more important than trusting our minds.

“I see how you’re all so afraid of being infected by me. If you were living only in the present, as most creatures do, you would not be so fearful. With your souls and all your mental faculties, you are still so afraid of dying. Some of you may even fear eternal torment in hell.”

Yes, I thought, what he said was true.

“Who do you think you are?” © asked again but in a friendlier tone, which made it easier for me to open up.

“I certainly think about who I am. Where you are a chemical who just exists, I have conscious control over what I do. In fact, I am conscious all the time. Consciousness is a privilege for humans and not for viral beings like you. I know I exist, while you just exist. But knowing I exist isn’t a treat, you know. Too much rumination makes me worried and depressed. I would love to just float around and multiply as you do.”

“Perhaps that’s something you need to work on?” © suggested. “Perhaps you can just stay in the moment?”

“I would love that,” I answered. “But we humans have this ‘bug’ in us that nags all the time—to remember, to learn from experience, to be afraid of the future. Being conscious makes it so difficult to stay in the present and just exist... I envy you for that. I would like to get rid of that ‘bug’ in my ‘self.’ You think it’s something to aspire to. I think it makes life very complicated.”

© looked pleased with my answer.

I recognized how I felt bound by my ‘self’ and that my conscience, my free will, and my self-control all had detrimental effects on my life. Losing my sense of self, or at least reducing some of my self-importance, might help me let go of my previously destructive behavior. It seemed as if we were making some progress.

Our dialogue became more peaceful and productive. As © discovered additional layers in my personality, he asked me frankly about my motives for destroying nature. I assured him, “Like you, I don’t want to kill all those creatures that perish. I just try to survive and help my people flourish. It’s what we humans do all the time. It’s called ‘progress.’ Only in retrospect, I realize some living things have become extinct.” I felt like a jerk.

© apologized. “I’m sorry I called you a nature-killer.”

I started to feel more understood.

© asked, “Can you share the techniques you use to disperse your offspring around the globe?”

I replied, “People love to have sex, you can’t believe how much. If I see a good-looking woman, for example, and she lets me touch her and we kiss, I get an erection. Then I get into her, have an orgasm, and ejaculate. It’s such a delightful feeling!” I was pleased with myself and added, “You should try it yourself! It’ll surprise you how good it feels.”

Since © was a master of multiplication, he recognized the cytokine storm-feeling. “I can easily identify with your masculine virility. It’s similar to my own virulence. Your explanation of how a sperm penetrates an egg cell to fertilize reminds me of injecting my own strand of RNA into a cell. It’s a very interesting subject. Can you talk about it more?”

I explained, “Love and sex are central to being human. It’s an expression of our fundamental life instinct. It drives human beings to do all kinds of strange things. Some people would even kill for it.”

© burst out laughing and, with undisguised amazement, said, “I had never thought about love and sex in this way.”

## WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

I caught ©'s eyes. "What makes love more difficult, however, are people who are scared or uncomfortable with physical contact. It's difficult to get close to them. They like to keep their distance."

Stroking his spikes, © said, "You know, Doc, I think people are literally strengthening their selves whenever they have sex. And in each such act, they are soaking up energy from the other person." Then he shared something personal. "It's like when I multiply within human cells with my spike protein. I feel so good when I'm floating around inside the cells of a body. It makes me feel dizzy."

I wondered if he felt this way also during our sessions, but it embarrassed me to ask him directly. Perhaps I was afraid to discover we had already come too close to one another; that we were merging physically and the boundaries between us had dissolved.

Then, suddenly, I had a light-bulb *aha!* moment. "There are lots of similarities between us, you know. We're made of the same stuff."

"That's exactly what I've been trying to make you understand," replied ©. "All living organisms comprise the same nucleic acids. We have less than 30,000 (a, c, g, and u) RNA-letters in our genome. You have over 3 billion DNA-letters in yours. Although these letters are arranged in a different sequence, we probably evolved from the same source, from the same ancient origins. We may even be related..."

"Yeah," I said, "that may be true. At some early stage in evolution, humans were probably also a kind of virus. In fact, I heard that about eight percent of our genome still comprises retrovirus fragments."

"And we have been fighting for millions of years," © added. "The scars from these viral infections have remained within your genome. They bind us together."

A violent sneeze unexpectedly tore through my throat. It came so fast, I barely had time to cover my mouth and nose. At the same time, a painful, yet pleasurable, electrical current ran through my entire body.

We smiled at one another, silently recognizing that I had experienced COVID-19, and he had experienced me. Each one was reflected in and by the other. We had expressed ourselves fully, and there was little more to be said.

## I Can't Breathe

*It's funny, but you never really think much about breathing. Until it's all you ever think about.*

—Tim Winton

Bees were buzzing and the air was heavy with the scent of jasmine. Summer had arrived. It was so hot I turned on the AC to the maximum. I stopped wearing my face mask because I hoped that by now the risk of © infecting me would be negligible. But © continued to spread his poison all over the world, and there was no end in sight of his killing spree. Corpse disposal teams worked around the clock at cemeteries and crematoria, and in some places, they threw away the remains of COVID patients like garbage. The pandemic had generated a state of global turmoil.

I felt beaten, defeated, and desperate. I wanted to give up, both on him and on humankind. I prayed © would get out of my life forever.

But my prayers were not answered.

As if he had heard them, © appeared in my treatment room with a victorious smile on his face, “Have faith, my son, for I have a greater plan and purpose for all of you. I wish not to harm you but to give you hope and a future.” Then he burst into an uncontrollable fit of hysterical laughter that reminded me of the writer Carlos Castaneda’s Indian Sorcerer, Don Juan.

He looked and sounded different, but I couldn’t put my finger on what had changed. He gave the impression of having had a major makeover, or—I suspected—a mutational degeneration. Perhaps a new string of RNA had grown in him? Maybe © had somehow developed the resemblance of an inner core within himself. Perhaps our social bonding had produced its intended result? This possibility concerned me more than anything else—that our role reversals had led © to turn himself into an object. If that had happened, © might have slowly acquired an inner “self-as-object” (*Me*), which would be a precursor to a “self-as-subject” (*I*), and lead to the development of a genuine self. The parasite would then individuate into a self-conscious bacteria.

But all of this personal growth appeared to have been too much for ©. Instead of obtaining a self, © seemed to have totally disintegrated. His color had changed into a grayish light shade and he seemed to be lacking the energy to move. He tilted his round body toward the edge of the armchair as if he had no balance. Raising a shaky spike to talk, he mumbled something incomprehensible. I asked, “What happened to you? Who are you today?”

“I am God,” he said, without even a tinge of irony. “When death and disaster invade your home, you call upon me! I have the power to destroy you or to save you. I am the creator and the annihilator. I can read minds and travel through time. I am on a special mission of great importance.”

Rather than gaining a self, it appeared © had totally lost it. Presenting himself as the personification of God suggested © was suffering from a psychotic or dissociative disorder. Because of his difficulties coordinating his body, I wondered if he might have an “ugly bug” in his viral system, or simply be stoned.

Reading my mind, © said, “You think I’m whacko, don’t you?”

I eyed him carefully. But I said nothing.

He gave me an annoyed glance and yelled, “You think I’ve lost my mind, but how can I lose something I never had in the first place? The creatures that lose their minds are you, humans...and you seem to lose it all the time.”

I nodded in agreement. “But do you really believe you are God?”

His response was immediate. “Yes, of course!”

“I see,” I said, trying to keep a straight face. “How did you reach that conclusion?” My skepticism was obvious.

“Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. My actions talk for themselves.”

“They may,” I replied, thinking about his killing spree. “You could have remained just an ordinary lethal coronavirus who likes to replicate and infect people. Why is that not enough for you?”

“Just an ordinary virus!” he repeated angrily. “You want me to remain an ordinary virus without ambitions. What kind of psychotherapist are you? One who wants their clients to remain mundane? You don’t want me to progress? I have higher aspirations. I have plans! Dreams. I want to save the world. Make it a better place. For everyone...”

© had become too deranged to reason with. A psychotic parasite would be far more dangerous than an egotistical one. The situation had

become too risky, and I decided the time had come to get rid of him once and for all.

It was a decisive moment. I had heard that very high temperatures with elevated humidity would reduce ©'s virulence and make it more difficult for him to survive, so I secretly changed the air conditioner from cool to extreme heat. I looked around for other ways to kill him. Perhaps I could throw him into the microwave, or the freezer, or suck him up with the vacuum cleaner? It would have been fun to see him disappear in a pot of boiling water.

I had forgotten © could read my mind.

With the piercing shriek of a train whistle, © cried out, "Hallelujah!" Then he transformed himself into a black haze and launched himself toward me in a pulverizing gesture. I was under attack and utterly defenseless. Was he intent on my destruction or just showing off his powers?

A million ©-particles rapidly vaporized into aerosols flowing through the sky. They rushed into my nose, mouth, and throat where they attached themselves to different ACE-2 receptors in susceptible cells within my respiratory system, causing me to cough up a mixture of saliva and mucus. It was extremely uncomfortable. After multiplying dozens of times, the particles continued their journey deep into my lungs. There, they settled down to inflame the air sacs (alveoli) to cause pneumonia. As debris clogged my blood vessels, my kidneys and liver slowly became infected and stopped working, and my heart rate and body temperature increased. At this stage, I was having serious trouble breathing and the chest pain from coughing became unbearable.

Without a respirator or a ventilator to provide more oxygen, I had a massive panic attack. My heart pounded, my hands shook, and I was sure I was going to die.

Before passing out, I saw in front of me a vision of all the people who had died from ©'s infection gasping for air. They were followed by the fatal sufferings of people drowning, dying of lung cancer, being gassed in the Nazis' death camps. I visualized how all the cells were choking for oxygen and how nature gasped for fresh air to maintain its essential life support.

In desperation, I cried out, "I can't breathe." It sounded more like a gurgle than a vocal utterance.

These same words—the last ones spoken by George Floyd before being choked to death by a white police officer kneeling on his neck—had become widely circulated in the media and had given rise to global

protests against police brutality and racism. Now I howled them too. “I can’t breathe!”

© had been suffocating millions of people. Perhaps now, with these worldwide demonstrations and media coverage, human beings would finally recognize the value of unpolluted air and stop taking it for granted?

Disoriented in time and space, I drifted in and out of consciousness and felt my soul slowly leaving my physical body. I floated around in space, just as © had described drifting within cells. Watching myself from outside, I heard church music from a highly pitched boys’ choir.

As if stuck in a painfully vivid dream, I saw a crew of white ghosts without faces rushing around me. They looked like the white T-shirts that © had told me about when he entered new cells. As if not wanting me to recognize them, they wore large white coveralls, masks, gloves, and safety glasses. While busy connecting me to all kinds of tubes, mechanical ventilators, and cardiac monitors, they tortured me with intravenous syringes, feeding, and suction pumps. Unable to move, I felt powerless. I was at their mercy.

Fast forward five weeks. I woke up from my deep anesthetized blackout. A man in a white suit told me I had survived a serious COVID-19 infection. With a glorious sense of relief, I took a deep breath without coughing. It was a marvelous feeling. Inhaling, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling...

I was a survivor. I had endured a life-threatening experience and had come out “on the other side.” Life-as-I-knew-it-from-before would never be the same again.

I now recognized my mortality as never before. If each breath was represented by a sand particle inside a sandglass timer, it would fall only 670 million times from the upper bulb to the lower one during the length of an average life. Breathing difficulties would trigger a severe anxiety attack. The only thing that helped me to relax on such occasions was to focus on my rhythmic inhaling and exhaling.

My recovery was a slow process of getting out of bed, sitting in a chair, walking around the room, and doing leg exercises. Lingering effects, such as a lack of energy, accompanied me for a long time. In the beginning, I was too exhausted even to take my dog for a walk. There were also some peculiar neurological complications, such as foggy thinking and concentration problems. I felt closer to all the other people who’d gone through the same thing and deep gratitude to the doctors and nurses who risked their own health to take care of me.

Small things excited me, such as watching the sunset from my window or the feeling of wind on my cheek.

During my illness, I had also experienced something I found very difficult to describe in words—I identified with how the virus multiplies within cells, and what ©'s infection is doing to the human body on a cellular level. While being familiar with some cognitive impairment from before, the subsequent delirium was the closest I had ever felt to insanity.

Even though © had caused my suffering, ironically he was also the one who could best understand what I had gone through, so I was eager to share my experience with him.

When I finally met with © in my office a few weeks later, he was too upset to listen to what I had to say. Instead, he lashed out at me. “I trusted you! I came to you for help, not for you to destroy me. I let you in on all my secrets, my strategies for maximum infectiveness, and my plans for the pandemic. Far from having any aspirations for me; you even wanted to kill me! Shame on you, Doc!

I let him vent his anger without trying to defend myself. When he was done, I asked, “You told me, after the antibody test, that I was immune to you. How were you able to infect me again?” I threw him a glance of marked reproach.

“I lied to you about your antibody test,” he replied with a fake smile. “It gave me an ace up my sleeve for the fight I knew would come between us.”

“You tried to kill me,” I said in an accusing tone while looking straight into his eyes. “Why did you do that?”

He had an intense expression on his face. “Yes, I wanted to kill you because you wanted to destroy me. But then I changed my mind when I saw how you almost died. I decided to give you another chance. I figured that if I let you experience how it feels to be born again, you might understand the importance of clean air. Since I couldn't explain it to you in words, I wanted you to experience that first breath of air. It's what all living beings experience when they are born.”

In a trembling voice, I asked, “And what about being God?”

“You called on God for help, didn't you?” he replied with a bleak smile. “I heard you and offered my help. Isn't that what gods do?”

After a lengthy pause, as he weighed how much of his genuine beliefs to reveal, he continued. “I played God for you because ever since we first met, you have been trying to understand why I'm infecting people. You even believed I have some universal plan for a clean planet as if I represent Greenpeace. As if I were a Guru who can



teach you something fundamental about who you are and where you need to go, someone who can give you a fresh perspective on life. You even thought my pandemic came as a punishment for destroying nature; that I had some kind of agenda for humankind. It's flattering, thank you. But to credit me with having an intention is too much to swallow. Who is whacko here? Can a virus have an agenda? Can a virus influence the planet?"

"But why then did you call yourself God?" I asked.

"I called myself God, so you would know who I was talking about. You humans seem to know Him very well, as far as I can tell. You make up stories about Him all the time. During my travels around the world, I have learned how you folks worship all kinds of holy beings. You like to imagine there's a higher force somewhere that created the world and governs what you do, that there is some old man in the sky who protects you and makes everything OK. Some of you like to call him God; others prefer to draw on the services of his Son, or someone else. You can call me 'Nature' if you prefer or whatever other spiritual entity you like. It makes no difference to me."

I looked away because I was embarrassed by my own naiveté.

© went on. "Let me assure you that nobody sent me here. There is no authority 'up there' pulling the strings. You can continue to pray for me to disappear, but nobody will listen. There is no 'story' behind my arrival in the world, and I do not have a will. Schopenhauer told you that already two hundred years ago. Even what you call 'evolution' or 'nature' doesn't have any intentions. These are all constructs of your own mixed-up mind! And even if some universal laws are being played out, there's no point scratching our heads about it."

With a sigh of acquiescence, he added, "Things are just the way they are. Can't you see that?"

"I do," I said, looking at him with renewed respect. "So what is the meaning of this pandemic?"

"Ahh... You people have a fantastic tendency to search for hidden meanings in everything. What if there is no meaning? What if all that you call 'meaning' is a myth? What if there are no absolute and universal values? What if there is nothing there?"

My answer came spontaneously. "I would be just a piece of shit, I guess. Just like you."

We both laughed.

## When © Lost and Found His Mind

*Philosophers clutch an insupportable hypothesis to their bosoms and run headlong over the cliff edge. Then, like cartoon characters, they hang there in mid-air, until they notice what they have done and gravity takes over.*

—Daniel Dennett

It ain't over until the fat lady sings. But she couldn't sing anymore. She lost her voice from a viral upper respiratory tract infection.

The pandemic wasn't over either. It was very much alive and kicking. The world couldn't get a grip on it. Cases skyrocketed, and every day new infection records were set. Global fatality rates approached 2%. People died anonymously in isolation and were announced as "excess death" numbers.

All of this led to a realization that COVID-19 wasn't going away anytime soon and our lives would not return to normal for the foreseeable future. If ever. A different type of existence was required with safety masks, social distancing, and frequent testing. A general state of emergency had become the new normal. Shops, trains, and public places that had been shut down were opened up in stages and then shut down again to contain the virus' spread. A state of continuous social change made most people embrace an almost fatalistic attitude and stop taking the pandemic too seriously. As if invulnerable to an invisible assailant, they became complacent and disregarded safety measures recommended by public health officials. It was obvious to all that the safety measures being introduced—which varied greatly from one country to another and which could be reversed at whim or radically increased overnight—were not based on certainty, undermining people's trust in their leaders' ever-changing rulings. Becoming infected resulted from fate, and there was no point in losing sleep over it. People just wanted to get on with their lives and enjoy it for as long as it lasted.

So did I. Trying to accept the inevitable, I tried to "go with the flow" of destiny.

Armed with such a Buddhist-like mindset, I deliberately didn't put my face mask on when © arrived for our next meeting. I wanted him to perceive me in a state of equanimity and not in a defensive position. Behind this poise was a craving to destroy him with my mind.

However, after taking a first peek at ©, he again put me off guard. Expecting to meet a victorious and forceful virus, it surprised me to see he had transformed into a pitiable character radiating hopelessness and despair; a tragic sight of a pathetic hobo. His capsid protein shell was run down and his spikes drifted with great effort, as though they carried a heavy burden. Previously talkative, he could hardly finish a sentence. "I feel so tired, Doc," he said, sniffing quietly.

My relationship with © had become a roller coaster of emotional ups and downs. One day we merged in an intimate bonding and the next he tried to kill me. First, he was brilliant and cooperative and thereafter incongruent and awkward. He could change from being cheerful to gloomy in the twinkle of an eye. While it crossed my mind that such interchangeable extremes might be a sign of bipolar disorder, I wasn't sure if they were authentic or if he was experimenting with me yet again. What I knew was that as soon as I began to understand him, he transformed into something else beyond recognition. It was almost as though he intentionally wanted to keep me in the dark and remain a mystery.

We settled down. He was silent. I asked him what he was thinking about. © just looked at me without saying a word. It was as if he wanted to conceal something but also wanted to reveal it. "Life is no fun," he finally disclosed in a heavy voice. "I don't enjoy it anymore..." I noticed tears clouded his eyes.

"What happened?"

"Nothing special... I just feel so empty."

"Despite all your achievements...?"

"Yeah, it's no fun..."

"No more rush from the cytokine storm?"

"No." He let out in an aching tone. "I've found out something, Doc. Too many cytokine storms do not produce long-lasting happiness. It used to give me satisfaction. But I must admit that these pleasures are short-lived... The more you get, the less gratification it brings."

Too much of anything will often decrease its appeal. But ©'s new emotional state seemed to have its roots in something more fundamental. Describing him as unhappy would have been an understatement. He was the very embodiment of a major depressive disorder.

What had caused this severe change in his mood? Could he have burned himself out as he mutated into a less virulent form over time? Whatever the reasons, I should have noticed the signs of depression in our previous session when © acknowledged there was no purpose with his pandemic. Already then, he had emphasized that things were just the way they were, and there was no universal meaning in life. He was not a representative of Greenpeace and there was no authority “up there” who pulled the strings. When he made fun of humans who were always searching for meaning in everything, I heard only his words without understanding the underlying message. I had failed to grasp the depressive undertone in these assertions. Perhaps he was now ready to explore them in-depth?

I thought about what I should do with him. A combination of psychiatric medication and psychotherapy would have been the treatment of choice for humans, but this was out of the question as viable treatment options for ©. After all, he remained a virus without a brain and without a mind. He didn’t possess the necessary “container” to store possible new insights or newly learned behaviors. Was it possible to create such a vessel in a virus such as ©? If so, could it then be “filled up” with meaning through mindfulness training? I decided to give it a try.

“I see you’re having a hard time,” I said. “Do you want to talk about it?”

© mumbled a response. “I’d hoped you would help me feel better...happier. But I still feel so lonely and miserable.”

“I see you look tired. Perhaps you need to fill up your energy tank?”

“Yes,” he said. “I feel so disconnected...both in myself and to others. My life has become so empty and meaningless...”

There was a lengthy silence where I thought about how to respond. I assumed he knew I wasn’t feeling sorry for him, and I didn’t want to lie. There was even an element of satisfactory revenge in me when observing his suffering. The poor devil had it coming, I thought. From the very beginning, I had been torn between my lack of sympathy for his harmful behavior and my empathy for his complaints. I still couldn’t decide if I wanted to help him or hurt him. That’s why I finally acknowledged the futility of his aimless presence. “You’re still just floating around. Like a worthless chemical structure.”

He looked stupefied, trying to figure out what I meant.

“You’re still only a physical being,” I clarified. “A body without a mind.” I chose my words carefully. “If you had a mind, you might have felt guilty for having infected and killed so many people. If you had a

mind, you might have valued life as being precious and meaningful for everyone.”

© watched me without emotion. “You think I should feel guilty?”

“Well,” I replied, “if you were human and had a self, you probably would. Guilt often comes with the territory of a self, at least for most people.”

“Really?” he wondered.

“Perhaps it’s a good sign you’re depressed? Perhaps it’s a sign you’re starting to feel that something is lacking in your life. Having purpose and meaning wasn’t something you talked about before. Since you seem to have become more conscious of yourself lately, you have become able to feel that your life lacks meaning. Perhaps that’s what you actually meant when you said you wanted to have a ‘self.’ Perhaps what you are missing is having a mind that gives you meaning.”

“Yes!” © exclaimed heartily. “That’s what I meant. I don’t want to live without a purpose. Such a life has no value, and it makes me depressed.”

“So, what we can try together,” I suggested, “is to nurture your mind so it can grow. If we succeed, things might become more meaningful to you. At least it may make your life more endurable.”

If I could help © become more mindful, he would gain some control over his compulsive infection behavior. But it was still questionable if mindfulness could help someone with a crippled mind such as his, even though he had unintentionally set off a giant worldwide mindfulness exercise among humans. © remained merely a chemical structure, a physical being without consciousness. Perhaps having a mind was unique to human beings who had reached a higher stage in evolution? In the back of my mind, I wondered if he would be aware of being thrown into a pot of boiling water.

Unwittingly, © asked, “What are you talking about? What is this mind-thing you want to develop in me and to fill with something?”

I repeated his question. “What is this mind-thing? Within our minds, we have lots of valuable things, like imaginations, associations, sensations, and perceptions. And also many other things we are aware of when awake. The mind contains all our mental lives. It’s what drives us to feel, think, and do things.”

“I see,” he said. “But what is it?”

“It’s ‘that’ which makes us get up from bed in the morning. It’s what gives us the energy to care about stuff, to care about others. It’s what makes us different from machines. Some have called it our ‘soul,’ or our ‘spirit.’ It’s what I felt when I could breathe again after my illness.”

“Aha.” © exhaled with a trace of cynicism. “Let’s search for it then. Show me where this ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ of yours is located. Show me where it is in your human body. When I see it I will believe it, and then I can also try to replicate it within myself. If you say there is a mind, you must prove it with hard data. You surely don’t expect me to just take your word for it?”

“No, of course not,” I replied with confidence. But I wasn’t sure of how to explain it to him. Like many other mental health professionals, the new findings from neuroscience had profoundly influenced me. In fact, my infatuation with neuroscience had turned into a blind crush—a neuromance, as Max Stadler called it. For a long time, I had felt words such as the soul, spirit, consciousness, self, and personality were too fuzzy and intangible to be helpful to understand mental dysfunction. Specific parts of the brain, however, could be observed and investigated and were therefore much more credible. Physicalism—that the real world consists simply of the material world—was very enticing, and its explanations highly seductive. Neuroscientific findings might persuade © that there is a mind. The hard science of the brain had lately become the only thing that truly mattered in the world of mental health. It had become predominant, not only within psychosomatic medicine, biological psychiatry, and neuropsychology. Clinical psychologists and psychotherapists everywhere were using the findings from neuroscience to justify why they do what they do. Within psychiatry, it had even gotten to the point where they wanted to change the descriptive DSM approach into a neuroscience-based diagnostic approach.

I started to lecture © about what was going on in our brains when we feel happy or sad; when we feel stressed or relaxed; and when we feel frustrated, angry, and fearful. I hoped that if he understood something about the brain, it would be easier for him to accept how the mind works. With great enthusiasm, I therefore clarified that the mind was invisible energy flowing within the brain and that it could do so many things, like thinking, reasoning, learning, imagining, and remembering. I also explained that the brain, as a physical organ, stored data and processed thoughts. I emphasized the brain’s capacity to regulate emotions, to modify the neuroendocrine and autonomic nervous systems, to enhance our cognitive and overall brain functioning by engaging the temporal, frontal, parietal, cerebellar, and limbic structures. I clarified how the amygdala became over-activated when we became too excited, and that there is often a deficient regulation in the prefrontal cortex when there is abnormal hippocampus mediation. I explained that perhaps the most important

part of our minds—our personal memories—were located within specific neuroanatomical parts of the brain called “engrams”—the electrochemical nerve-endings that stores and delivers messages between one another. I continued explaining how neuroscientists studied these “explicit” or “implicit” memories in terms of their affiliation to the old reptilian brain, the limbic system, or the neo-cortex. Other memories, such as episodic memories of fear, were located in the dentate gyrus in the hippocampus. I explained that pessimists have rainy brains and optimists have sunny brains, that there are subtle differences between the left and right brain hemispheres, that after a traumatic experience, the body keeps the score, and that our emotions have a biomolecular basis. I even showed that beliefs may be based on neural networks or some sort of cell-biology. Because of these assumptions, I said that if we change our brains, we also change our lives. In short, I told him whatever I could remember from what I had read in academic journals such as *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, or *Cerebral Cortex*, or in popular summaries posted in *Neuroscience News*. I gave him the whole schmear about action potentials, neurotransmitters, neural circuits, and blah, blah, blah...concluding that somewhere inside a hard-wired brain you will find everything that governs our consciousness, our cognitions, our feelings, our decisions, our perceptions, and everything else that’s in the mind.

But as I talked, my voice became increasingly inaudible. © yawned, drowsed, and slowly tuned out my neurobabble. He had apparently lost patience with me. The more I talked, the more I was losing my footing.

When I had finished, © said in a soft voice, “Believe me, Doc, there is nothing in there.”

I became annoyed by his tendency to contradict me.

© spoke slowly. “You forget I’ve been around the block, Doc. You overlooked that I’m a virus with the ability to access every corner of the human body. I’ve made more excursions within it than you can imagine. As an RNA-string, I have wandered the roads of every cell in the human body. I know them inside out. I know how they work and how they stop working; how they split, and how they multiply. I have seen how neurons express and respond to molecular signals and how axons form complex connectivity patterns. I’ve been there and I’ve seen it all!”

I raised my eyebrows, scratched my head, and asked myself, “What can I answer to that?” He had again blown my mind.

“While ‘neuroscientists’” continued © with a tone of derision, “were searching for the neural correlates of all mental phenomena, I already

had it all mapped out and fully analyzed. Let me tell you what I found—there is nothing there! There is no ghost in the machine. Anthony Ryle was spot-on. Descartes’ division of body and mind is actually just a myth, and his suggestion that consciousness is located in the pineal gland was just a flawed hunch. Neither can we find it within the posterior cortical hot zone, as some have suggested, nor anywhere else. The sparks inside the brain are nothing but electrical currents in nerve and glial cells. When turned on, it looks just like the interior of any machine or physicochemical appliance with its neurotransmitters and hormones activated.”

Stunned, I gazed at © without saying a word. I remembered reading they had found nothing in Einstein’s brain either after extracting it to discover the source of his genius.

© persisted. “What you have called ‘mind,’ or ‘consciousness,’ or soul, or whatever, is only a scientific misconception. It doesn’t matter how long you search for it. You will not find it because it doesn’t exist. Living things are not driven by their minds but by their genetic blueprints. Since brain-cells respond automatically to electrochemical signals in neural systems, consciousness is just a user-illusion. As far as I can tell, humans are nothing more than mindless zombies with neuro-behavioral properties but without any subjective consciousness.”

Still skeptical, I asked, “Don’t you think there might be objective biomarkers of psychological processes in the brain or somewhere else in the body? Can there not be constitutional factors to mental disorders?”

“Believe me Doc, I have gone through the nervous system up and down and examined it in every detail. I found nothing that has the slightest resemblance of consciousness or a personal, subjective mind. I even took a special interest in the large bulb you have on the top floor resembling the inside of a flower stem. What you call ‘mind’ is just an imaginary construct. Neuro-science fiction. When someone is scared or remembers a funny joke, there might be a group of neurons firing here and there. It’s nothing special, and it happens all the time. But it still doesn’t prove you have a mind, does it?”

“Perhaps not,” I replied while still doubtful of his conclusions. I felt uncomfortable in my inability to contradict him.

© said, “When we first met, you asked if I was aware of what was happening in the world during the pandemic. I replied that I was. But if I ask you now if you are aware of what is happening in your body during the pandemic, you will prove to be completely ignorant. You



have no clue about it because you base what you know not on observation, but on introspection.”

“Yes, that’s true. That’s why neurobiological data is more reliable. The amygdala, for example, will probably be activated if someone is afraid of being infected. Are these findings not more trustworthy than a commonsense understanding of folk psychology?”

“Not at all,” © said with a hysterical laugh. “Because the only thing your neuroscience lecture did was to replace psychobabble with pseudoscientific neurobabble. Both are mythologies preached by faith healers as gospels wrapped up in abstract medical jargon. Their assumptions on how the human brain works are prehistoric. They’re based mainly on post mortem dissections. I have seen how it all works in live specimens. Whatever can be deduced from unsophisticated instruments, such as the MRI and PET scans, is nothing compared to what I’ve seen with my own eyes. Even what can be learned from studying the poor live animal specimens they torture with optogenetic gadgets can’t be compared to what I’ve seen going on in the human brain.”

“But when I was sick,” I persisted, “it definitely affected my brain functions. I lost my smell, felt weak, and had a tingling numbness in my feet. Surely, all these symptoms prove our bodies and brains are connected through the nervous system. My feelings of dizziness, confusion, and delirium also showed that something physical affects our feelings. Psychosomatic interactions are a fact of life. You can’t argue with that, can you?”

“Yes, I can,” © replied. “Where is your soul in all of this? People once believed the mind could influence the body and make it sick. They thought it could give you gastrointestinal ulcers. But recent evidence has shown these are caused by bacterial infection rather than psychological stress. Ulcers are ulcers and stress is stress. Can’t you grasp that?”

“No,” I said. “I still believe that psychological factors can cause people to be vulnerable to ulcers. The mind and body are interconnected and interdependent. Even though neuroscience can’t prove the existence of consciousness itself, it has provided valuable data about the workings of the brain. As such, I think it’s highly relevant for research into the etiology and treatment of psychiatric disorders.”

Nothing I said made any difference for ©. His belief in radical eliminative materialism was unshakable. He was convinced our commonsense understanding of the mind was incorrect and stubbornly

refused to acknowledge that mental states actually exist. The arguments went back and forth and escalated into combat between the body and the mind. In many ways, this conflict was similar to the battle raging between the virus (as a representative of the body) and humankind (as a representative of the mind). The disagreement remained as robust as the blood-brain barrier in the nervous system. It boiled down to the universal question of co-existence between body and mind.

Since it was apparently impossible to persuade © of the interconnectedness of body and mind, and explain how physical properties give rise to the way things feel when they are experienced, I decided to give him a lesson. Without any warning, I grabbed him and threw him into a pan of boiling water. As I watched © fade away like a pill dissolving in water, I felt a guilty sting of satisfaction. It was a payback for what © had earlier done to me and what he was doing to humankind. When he later dried up and only a few fragments of © remained, I asked, “What did that feel like?”

“It didn’t feel like anything at first,” © answered, “but then suddenly I started to feel funny.” He looked perplexed as if he had experienced something for the first time. “I felt that I was drowning and then I felt being alive again. It was an extraordinary experience...”

I smiled at him and remembered how I had been sick and almost died, and the wonderful feeling of waking up and realizing I could breathe again.

© continued. “Now I understand what you mean. Before, when I infected the olfactory nerve in people, I wasn’t aware of how it affected their taste and smell because I had felt nothing like that in myself. Now, for the first time, I sensed what it’s like to feel something and to experience things. I thought nothing was there, but I now realize there is. It’s a weird thing, this mind-thing.”

I was pleased. He had gained personal knowledge. When we asked one another previously who did we think we were, he had identified himself only as a physical, mindless creature. He could describe only what a virus is. Now, he seemed able to add something about what it’s like to be a virus. I hoped that, in the future, he might become also able to feel what it’s like to be a human being and then feel some empathy with humankind.

“I’m relieved you’re not angry with me and that you understand why I threw you in the boiling water,” I swallowed hard, “and that I did it for you to discover your mind.”

“Yes, I got that,” said © matter-of-factly. Then he adopted a more serious expression. “But I’d like to paraphrase Mark Twain and state that ‘the reports of my mind’s death are greatly exaggerated.’”

Noticing his mood change, I put up my guard in anticipation of yet another attitude reversal. Was he playing around with me again?

© composed himself and gazed straight into my eyes. “Listen to me, Doc. It’s time to let you know I never lost it and I never gained it. You really think a virus feels nothing? Don’t you know me better than that? I have always been able to experience things. It’s usually the other way around. Humans are unable to experience things fully. When it comes to awareness, your people are savages.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You wanted to grow my mind, to expand my self-awareness, for me to become ‘conscious.’ After all, to ‘know thyself’ is what you do for a living. You hoped that if I only learned the truth about myself, I would be cured. You failed to consider that if I have no mind, there is no ‘truth’ to explore. There would be no consciousness for you to analyze and therefore nothing unconscious to uncover; no repressed desires, no early childhood traumas, and no incestuous fantasies. As a result, I could never gain any insights into what you think I should become aware of. But let me tell you this, my ‘crippled mind’ cannot be ‘shrunk’ into your narrow psychoanalytic universe.”

I looked away as he continued his attack on the fundamental tenets of psychoanalysis.

“Why settle for your half-ass mindset?” © went on. “I don’t want my mind to be filled with your primitive nonsense consciousness. I have higher goals. I want to expand my consciousness, not shrink it. I want to achieve what Schopenhauer called a ‘better consciousness.’ It’s an optimal consciousness that lies beyond all experience of pain and pleasure and behind all rational reason. It’s an enlightened state of mind that is in contact with and flows around everything happening around us. It transcends body and mind and goes beyond the repeating cycles of birth, life, and death. It’s a higher state of consciousness that leads to freedom, happiness, and inner peace. Achieving such a state of consciousness is much more important than filling my mind with the theoretical garbage you’ve picked up from psychoanalytic books.”

Irritated with him for making fun of me, I asked, “How do you know about this higher state of consciousness?”

He explained. “Well, I just learned it. I experienced it when you threw me in the boiling water. By holding my breath and then entering this higher state of consciousness, I succeeded in staying alive. It’s a

fundamental part of my survival instinct. When I fully surrendered to being in the here and now, I managed it. I will not let you exterminate me as you have done with so many species on the brink of extinction.”

I had obviously been wrong about ©’s lack of consciousness, even though his mind was different from the one I had previously envisioned.

Then he added, “Without this extraordinary state of mind, I could probably not have been in contact with you in the first place.”

Then © left without another word.

I remained sitting by myself in a bewildered and dreamlike state, trying to process what had just occurred. When I came around, I realized © looked happier when he left than when he had arrived.

## A New World Order

*This period will have taught us a lot. Many certainties and convictions will be swept away. Many things that we thought were impossible are happening.*

—Emmanuel Macron

On the surface, things looked the same as they always had. Families were going on vacation and sunbathing at the beach. A saxophone player practiced some new ragtime music. A woman showed her grandchild how to prepare fresh pasta. Autumn felt far away and the future was of minor concern. Although the numbers of infected had gone from bad to worse, people stopped thinking too much about the pandemic. In their hearts, they still believed it would eventually fade away. The sky was bright, the sun was shining, and people were not losing sleep over it.

Beneath the surface, however, things were changing.

If someone had looked up at the sky and seen the gloomy clouds approaching, they would have forecast rain. But nobody did. Nor did they predict the forthcoming storm that threatened to wipe out much of the western economy and civilization. If the virus continued to cause the disruption, damage, and destruction as it had until now, or become worse, it might change the course of history, much like the last world war. Even though the first signs of civil unrest and social turmoil had already appeared on the evening news, such a devastating future was unthinkable for most people. No one wanted to believe they were living on borrowed time.

When I had accepted © for treatment several months ago, I also believed the crisis would pass within a few months and we would cope easily with the threat he posed. But as time went on, and the virus stayed ahead of the game, the crippling socioeconomic ramifications became increasingly visible. The pandemic had unleashed an unprecedented economic disaster. To keep unemployment down, governments lost all touch with reality and flooded the markets with virtual funds. But rather than preventing the world economy from stagnating, it brought it to its knees. It had become a society hit by both

a pandemic and economic collective trauma with consequences far more serious than had been previously expected.

All these things affected me emotionally and compassion fatigue took a grip on my heart. In my mind, © had advanced from being a nuisance to becoming a major hurdle. Defeating him turned out to be much more difficult than predicted. When I first tested his intelligence, I had understood it was above average. Now I had to acknowledge he was not only smart but a genius. He updated himself continually on what was going on both in the world at large and inside the bodies of human beings. As a result, he could outsmart me on any subject we discussed.

Besides his intellectual capabilities, © was also a manipulative, deceptive, and devious creature with dubious intentions. Whenever it served his purposes, he would adopt the role of a neurotic, a psychotic, or a depressant patient with bipolar disorder but always evading any definitive appraisal of his personality. It was no coincidence he was shockingly lonely and a creature no one loved. I had become sick and tired of him and our pointless meetings. He had played the role of suffering too many times for me to believe him.

Why had he come for psychotherapy in the first place? He clearly didn't want help. Instead, he was keen to give me a lesson each time we met. It was almost as though he needed to show his superiority over me and prove I was an idiot.

When we settled down, I could not hold back my resentment any longer. I decided to confront him with his reasons for coming to psychotherapy. "I really don't understand what you hope to gain from coming here. You clearly have nothing to get from me. Not awareness, not sympathy, not companionship. What are you doing here? Why are you here?"

© looked upset. "I don't know. Why do you ask? You don't like me anymore? You want me to leave?"

Before, he had been royalty in my eyes. Now, he looked more like a social outcast. Because of the pandemic, he was understandably excluded from society. But I didn't want to let © know any of that. Instead, I said, "I'm truly curious about why you are here."

He replied in a melodramatic voice, "I have brought you a message from God..."

I stared at him in disbelief. He gazed back at me with a deceitful smile and saw I understood he was teasing me. "Seriously...?" I asked.

"I'm not paranoid or anything, but people look at me wherever I go as if I'm some kind of freak. I've heard how they talk about me behind

my back. They all hate me and say I have destroyed their lives. They can't earn money anymore because of the lockdowns, and they can't meet with their friends and family. Some people regard me as a disaster, as if everything became terrible only after I arrived and that it was all wonderful before I came. They think I have ruined their lives..."

He hoped I would once again fall for his manipulative behavior and empathize with his suffering. Instead, I asked in a more irritated voice, "Really, why are you here?"

After a brief pause, he said, "No, honestly Doc, I'm here to 'find myself.' I want to find my unique individuality among all the viruses in the world. I feel submerged by the crowd. While you humans are all much the same, you're also different from one another. To be a distinctive creature is a wonderful thing that you take for granted, but we viruses *are* all the same. I want to be special! If you can only help me feel special, I would be a happy virus. Then everyone would relate to me seriously. Not as an *It*—that thing that produced the pandemic, but as a *You*—the unique creature that produced the pandemic. That's why I'm here Doc, because I feel you're the only one who relates to me as an actual person."

Although I didn't believe him and recognized he had not answered my question, I played along for now. Perhaps I could get through to © by validating him for what he was. "You mean I'm the only one who relates to you as someone who has a subjective and conscious mind. I guess that's true. For me, you are a unique coronavirus. There is no other like you. In my eyes, you are special. I couldn't relate to you if you were just a mindless zombie."

© beamed. "If I forgive you for throwing me in the boiling water, will you be my friend?"

I didn't know how to answer that question. Even though there was a certain comradeship developing between us, I certainly didn't want to be friends with a mass murderer. Our connection was a mixture of cooperation and antagonism. We had both survived the tug of war between us, and it had left its scars. I hadn't forgotten how he had infected me, and he obviously hadn't forgotten how I had tried to kill him. But I also realized we were in this together, for good and for bad. There was no point in continuing to fight; we had to find a solution to the pandemic with which we could both live. Since we were on talking terms, I still hoped it would be possible to negotiate some sort of co-existence.

Doubting his sincerity, I said, "I don't know if I can be your friend. Friendship involves trust. But how can I trust you if you're constantly

changing? When you play around with me, it's difficult to believe what you say. You confuse me with all your different personalities."

© replied, "Perhaps all the different roles are part of who I am? Why are you always trying to squeeze me into one of your narrow diagnostic boxes? You won't catch me by laying out a box trap. I can sense it from far away. That would only reinforce my feelings of being an object rather than a subject in your eyes. Doesn't everyone feel different sometimes? Perhaps I'm a chameleon who likes to change color according to the situation."

Again it crossed my mind that © suffered from a dissociative identity disorder, earlier known as multiple personality disorder. Another possibility was that as a virus, and as a master of multiplication within cells, he could take on any identity he desired. But I said nothing about that. It wouldn't have made a difference.

Instead, I switched the subject to the pandemic. "I hear what you say about being different all the time. But how can I be your friend when you continue this destructive behavior? You've got to stop it. It has gone too far. You've already killed more than half a million people. The world economy is on the verge of collapse and our societies are falling apart. You can't continue like this. I can't be a friend of a killer."

© replied, "I'm sorry, Doc, but I've lost control over the pandemic. I can't stop the spread of the virus. My offspring are like wild animals looking for prey. If they can infect someone, they will. They run on instincts or like robots on automatic programs."

Acknowledging what he said, I voiced a quiet, "Mmm..."

"It's not so different from you folks. You haven't changed your destructive behavior much either, as far as I can see."

"No, that's true," I said, echoing his words. "We've also lost control over how we destroy nature. We have failed to protect the environment from damage. I can't stop our civilization from developing, can I? Human beings are also like wild animals, even though they're not always looking for prey. They're more like wild horses destined to gallop farther and farther up the mountain. If they believe they can reach the top, they will continue to try. They run on autopilot."

Recognizing we had found a common lingo of comparison, © gave me a devious grin.

"So, how can we carry on from here?" I asked. "We seem to be stuck in perpetual conflict. Can there be a common goal for both of us? To keep on working together, we must agree on how to proceed."

"That sounds fine to me," said ©. "I want everybody to relate to me and to nature with dignity and respect."



“But you must commit to staying in therapy with me until this thing is over. Can you promise me that?”

“Yes, I promise. I will stay with you until the pandemic is over.”

“Good,” I said with some hesitation. “Then we can continue our work as long as the pandemic is active.”

“Yes,” © said. “I’d like that.”

A heavy silence followed. Something was troubling us both and neither of us knew how to continue. We had agreed on something we couldn’t live up to. Our conflict remained.

I broke the silence, saying, “Lately, you seem to be winning the war...”

© responded affirmatively. “Yes, I am. The pandemic is still spreading like wildfire. You guys are too lethargic to combat it.”

“It seems so,” I said. “Whenever we close society, the economy suffers, so we have to open it up again, and then the numbers of people infected increase again. We can’t keep closing everything down. People need to work and earn their living.”

“I notice you argue incessantly between yourselves about the best way to combat the virus.”

“Yes, it’s a mess. After further thought, I added, “It seems to me we have an incompatible situation. We’re at war with one another and only one of us can survive. The question is, who will survive?”

“I guess that’s right,” © said. “Only one of us can survive...” There was a long silence in which we both realized the world could not contain both mortal enemies at the same time.

© was the one who broke the quiet. “There’s no point continuing this exchange, is there? Does that mean you don’t want me to come anymore?”

“I guess so,” I said, thinking there was no point in prolonging the inevitable end game.

There was a long pause in which we both tried to avoid looking at one another. © prepared himself for leaving, as usual in a droplet. “Bye, Doc!”

“Bye ©,” I replied, feeling relieved he would finally get out of my practice and my life.

But he didn’t leave. Instead, he said, “I don’t want to leave...”

“There’s nothing more I can do for you, ©. How can we continue this dialogue with people dying every day? Either you kill us or we kill you.”

“What if I find a way to stop it all?”

“You just said you can’t stop it. That you’ve lost control over the pandemic.”

“Yes, I said that. But there is still another way. But it’s secret...”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can’t tell you. They made me promise I wouldn’t tell anyone about it.”

I suddenly remembered that something had seemed shady when, right at the beginning of our work together, I had asked about his origins. The way he had described his ancestry seemed unfinished. When gathering background information about him, © wouldn’t tell me if he had been genetically modified or where he came from in terms of evolution. I thought he might know but was refusing to tell.

“Is there something you want to tell me before you leave?” I asked.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Maybe I want to let you know where I really come from if you promise not to tell anyone.”

“I can’t promise you that,” I replied. “But you can let me know anyway if you want.”

“Will you let me stay if I tell you?”

“Well, it depends on what it is you reveal. If it can help stop the pandemic, of course, you can stay.”

“Let me think about it...”

© seemed scared and tired and looked as though he was on the brink of having a panic attack. His spikes were erect and his round body pulsed heavily. Before starting to speak, he looked around my office casually. I noticed he was staring strangely at my only office plant. Then he made a silent sign at me and pointed toward the plant with one of his trembling spikes, showing there was something peculiar to it.

The plant looked innocent enough in my eyes. It was just an ordinary *Sansevieria*, commonly known as mother-in-law’s tongue, or a snake plant. It’s called tiger’s tail orchid or *hǔwěilán* (虎尾蘭) in China. I bought it because it purifies the air and doesn’t need much watering. The only peculiar thing about it is its leaves have microscopic pores that can absorb toxins and produce oxygen. This is how the houseplant breathes in and out; it’s the reverse of humans who inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide.

As it later became clear, however, © didn’t relate to my snake plant as an ordinary houseplant. For him, the *Sansevieria* was a miniature envoy of nature, monitoring climate change, and maintaining balance in the atmosphere. It functioned as a sort of interconnectivity between

nature and the world since it had the capacity both to listen and to speak.

© began talking with the plant. “I know you can hear everything that’s going on in this room. That’s why I said nothing to Doc before. But it’s gone too far. We have made our point. Can I tell him what’s going on?”

He waited for an answer. The plant was quiet. At least I couldn’t hear if it said anything. But then © turned back to me. “She said you are OK.”

The “she” © had just communicated with (through my Sansevieria plant), was none other than Mother Nature. “She’s been listening in on you in this room for many years, and she says I can trust you. You’ve been taking excellent care of her. She wants to thank you for not suffocating her with too much water.” As its spokesperson, © again turned to the plant and then translated for me. “She also says you haven’t been choking your clients with too much interference in their lives. You have given them plenty of space to grow at their own pace. She thinks the problem with you is you have a poor self-image. When your clients are doing fine, you think they’re doing a splendid job in therapy. But when they get stuck, you blame yourself.”

I didn’t know what to make of this. Was he playing yet another game with me? Was this one of his role-playing scenarios in which © acted strangely and later laughed at me for believing he could talk with plants? The situation had become too ludicrous for me to swallow. But then again, I was curious about what he might reveal.

© turned toward me. “It’s OK to tell you what’s going on, she said...”

I was perplexed, confused, and a little irritated. I had heard about people with green thumbs who could easily tell what was wrong with a plant that wasn’t growing well. Some people believed plants could sense the energy surrounding them, and they would grow better if they heard encouraging words or calming music. But this was the first time I had come across someone who actually communicated with plants and who supposedly was able to deliver messages from Mother Nature.

© had finally disclosed that he was a “plant whisperer.” If communicating with plants was actually possible, a chemical structure like © could probably achieve it. He was small enough to enter its cells and knowledgeable enough to understand the language. His enlightened state of mind may have also enabled him to transcend his body and get in contact with nature itself.

What bothered me, however, was that I was sheltering a hidden listening device in my practice. It might have heard things my clients told me in confidence. But that would have to wait until later. Now I wanted to hear what © had to say about how to stop the pandemic.

“So, what is it you want to tell me?” I asked.

There was a lot of tension in the air. © was visibly struggling with the dilemma of whether to keep the secret or reveal it. Finally, with great hesitation, he uttered a single word. It was almost inaudible.

“Dongba...”

“I can’t hear you,” I said. “What did you say?”

He repeated the word in a louder voice. “Dongba...!”

“Dongba...?” I asked. “What is that?”

“It’s the culture of the Naxi people...” he whispered. “They live in Southwest China.”

I had never heard of them and didn’t understand what he was talking about.

“They believe in Dongba. It’s a form of shamanism influenced by Tibetan Buddhism.”

“Can you tell me more about them?” I asked.

He calmed down and told me about them. “The most important thing about the Dongba culture is that they have always maintained a healthy balance between civilization and nature. They believe that humans and nature are paternal half-siblings, born of two mothers and the same father.”

“And...?” I asked.

He continued to tell me about the Dongba religion. “They must ask for permission to take natural materials when they want to build a permanent space for humans. The village elders must approve how much wood they may cut so as not to overuse natural resources. That would create disharmony between natural spirits and humans.”

“I understand,” I said. “Is that why you complained about humans destroying nature? And why you criticized our civilization for polluting the air and changing the climate?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s why I blamed you for poisoning the oceans and the skies, and how you cut down the trees of the rain forest, how you cover the earth with plastic waste. Your civilization has lost contact with nature. I am here to reconnect you with nature. It’s the way of Dongba.”

I tried to put it all together in my mind. © said he lived according to the culture of Dongba. They tried to keep a balance between humans and nature. When the balance was disrupted, they tried to correct it.

Apparently, he acted as their advocate and had sent humans a message. Remembering he had previously denied having an agenda for humans with his pandemic, I asked, “But you told me before that you were not a representative of Greenpeace, or anyone else...? You said you didn’t have a universal plan for a clean planet.”

“I couldn’t let you know because I had promised to keep Dongba a secret. Besides, people are so prejudiced, you know. They tend to generalize about those who are different. There’ve been attacks against Chinese people in the US just because they look Asian. I don’t want that to happen with the Nazi people. They’re just trying to take care of nature. We shouldn’t blame them for the instigation of a worldwide pandemic.”

“OK,” I said, “now you’ve told me about Dongba and their culture. But how can this stop the pandemic?” I hoped he was not joking with me yet again.

“If we get the permission of the elders in the village, we can ask them to perform a special ceremony to call off the pandemic. They have the powers to stop it if they’re convinced humans will stop its destructive behavior against nature.”

“How can we convince them of that?”

“Let me take care of it,” he said. “I’ll talk to them through the snake plant.”

He turned to the snake plant, and they had a lengthy conversation. Then he came back to me. “She said nature needs to be in balance; it’s what you folks call ‘ecology.’ If it’s in balance, it can regenerate. If you can restore the eco-system, they will perform the ceremony. Nature can’t restore the eco-system by itself anymore. It’s already been too disrupted. There’s too much pollution. Climate change and global warming have become too severe. It’s become difficult for plants and animals to breathe.” Then he added, “Humans are suffocating the planet. You should know how it feels to not be able to breathe!”

Something clicked in me. I suddenly understood what he was implying. As long as the planet was unable to breathe, human beings would not breathe either. If we destroy our environment, we are disregarding our long-term future. Peeking quickly at my tiny *Sansevieria* with gratitude for providing me with oxygen, I said, “Yes, I know how it feels when there is insufficient oxygen in the air.” She had become my personal ventilator and my connection with nature. I imagined she was returning my smile.

© was also smiling and looked relieved he had been able to share his secret. “I hope we will all be OK someday,” he said with a cheerful voice. “See you next week...” He waved to my Sansevieria and left.

Trying to process what had just occurred, it surprised me to realize my feelings for © had changed. I now felt much closer to him and was more hopeful about the future than when he had arrived. Perhaps Mother Nature would find an ingenious solution to our problem after all.

But my optimism didn't last long. I worried humans would not hold their end of this bargain. That same evening, I felt a sudden change in atmosphere and heard thunder roaring from afar. Dark clouds approached fast. It was the evening before a summer storm. I drank one, then another, then a third glass of vodka to calm down, calm down, down...and down, until, finally, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, it was the morning after.

## Hope and Despair

*Never lose hope. Storms make people stronger and never last forever.*

—Roy T. Bennett

The next morning, powerful winds and heavy rains hammered the landscape. As an echo of ©’s cytokine storm, the ruthless thunderstorm brought chaos and destruction to the earth. Spellbound by the power of the display, each lightning bolt hit my heart. I just couldn’t get enough of it...

It was the morning after an evening with too much alcohol. Waking up with a rotten hangover, my hands shook, my head ached, and my mouth was as dry as dust. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a burned-out alcoholic, misanthropic shadow of my former myself. It had been a dreadful night.

I remembered © telling me about Dongba, Mother Nature, and the snake plant. I glanced at the damn Sansevieria in the corner and asked myself, “Who are you fooling now?” I was emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed with pessimism. The time had come for me to admit that my glass was neither half-full nor half empty. Now it was totally empty. Not a drop remained—no hope, no meaning, no nothing...

I had had too much to drink for sure. Ever since © arrived six months ago, casual drinking had turned into an extensive intake of alcohol every evening. Vodka, Arak—or whatever was available—gave me a few moments of quiet until I could fall asleep. But on this “morning after,” nothing could silence the voices I was hearing because they had become louder, more frequent, and even more desperate. Usually, during the day, I would dismiss them as imaginary, but at night, they became too real to block out and made me shake with anxiety.

A long time ago, someone—I don’t remember who anymore—revealed to me that he had started drinking to stop thinking about whatever was bothering him. For many months we tried to pull the handbrakes on his drinking urge before he passed away in a self-inflicted car crash. Undeniably, my own habitual drinking had a similar basis and might have a similar outcome. Vodka helped me forget the

tragic stories I had heard in the course of my work and elsewhere. Too many traumatic experiences filled my mind. Too many accidents, murders, funerals. It had become too much. Too many dreadful memories and too many drinks.

This “morning after,” I remembered having nightmares about the deadly pandemic. In my dreams, I had failed to cure © and it was, therefore, my fault that so many people had perished. The only thing I could do was to support the lost angels who had passed away alone in isolation in hospitals all over the world. I had tried to give them a hand to hold while they were passing away. I dreamt about standing next to their graves or next to the crematoria where bodies were being disposed of. I had tried to wave them off to the next world, to take farewell from all those who were not resting in peace because their deaths had been so sudden and terrible and unjust. They were living in a shadow world and beyond any help. But it bothered me it was so difficult for them (and me) to come to terms with their passing. They needed a shoulder to lean upon, or a friendly hand to hold. And so, it seemed, did I.

In the news, it was all doom and gloom. Of late, new infections and fatalities had escalated dramatically. *Reuters* reported a record number of coronavirus cases during the last few days. As the crisis worsened, it became clear there was no easy fix to the problem. Many feared the pandemic would continue to haunt us for a long time. Scientists worked around the clock to try to produce a viable antibody-drug or vaccine for the original COVID-19 virus strain. But a new strain of the virus had already been discovered. It contained a unique spike protein mutation even more virulent than the original one. If it took hold, the vaccines produced for the original COVID-19 strain would probably be useless. © was way ahead of humans. There was still so much to discover about the novel coronavirus. As long as he remained on the loose, the future of humankind was uncertain.

When © arrived, I still felt groggy and remorseful. My memories of dreaming about him were so vivid I could no longer determine if he had actually arrived or if I was still asleep and dreaming. Holding my breath, I jumped into the burning issue. “I think I might have let you down. I have been of little help to you...until now. You put me off guard with all your accusations and let me go astray. I think you did that because you’re afraid to face yourself. You’ve put all the blame on me and on human beings. You came to me for help, didn’t you? So, let’s now begin working without games. Talk to me! I am here. I am listening...”



© looked surprised, first at me, then at my plant, and then back at me. Eager to let out what he had previously kept in, he spoke fast. “Yes. I feel let down by you, and by everyone else. It’s the story of my life, really.”

With that, everything he had wanted to say previously came bubbling out. He shared memories about his tragic past, his feelings of neglect, humiliation, and rejection; conflicts about how to approach others while anticipating they would reject him. He had been a bullied child destined to become a bully himself. His account of distressing events unfolded one after another—childhood emotional abuse, nobody to talk to, loneliness. To mitigate the pain, he developed a hard outer shell. He had become addicted to promiscuous multiplication behavior from the first time he felt the cytokine storm. It was his only way of getting in close contact with another being. We slowly got closer to exposing his central conflict—how to cope with his own mortality.

© said, “I have an obsessive need to enter cells and multiply. That’s the only way to feel I exist. But when I do this, I know it will be my end. I still can’t stop it. The people I infect either recuperate or die. Either way, I disappear. I’ve had enough of this disappearing thing. I want to go on living, have a place of my own where I feel at home and can get on with my life. But as a virus, I am doomed to jump from one person to another. It’s impossible to go on living like this...”

I reframed his last sentence. “It’s difficult to go on living like this, knowing that you will die...”

© continued. “Infection is what gives my life a purpose. It’s what defines me as a virus. Now I can’t do it anymore. So why go on living?”

I looked at him seriously. “You sound like an echo of Hamlet’s famous speech, “To be or not to be...” You complain about the pain of life while acknowledging that the alternative might be worse. Like Hamlet, the only way to resolve this dilemma is death by suicide. But it’s your choice—you can choose to stop infecting people.”

“I am hooked on reproduction,” said © with a heavy note of sorrow in his voice. “It’s what I do. I try to do it as much and as often as I can. I have no choice. If I had a ‘self,’ I would have a choice.”

“Yes, that’s true. If you had a self...that’s what we’re working on, to give you a ‘self.’ With a self, you would have a free will and be able to decide what to do.”

“Yes, if I am myself,” said ©, “I am infecting others. But then I also determine my death. So how can I live as myself without dying? I have to find a new place to be where I will not die. A place where I can continue to exist. Perhaps within bats or some other animal?”

I wanted to keep him focused on this thread. “It’s difficult to cope with the knowledge that we’re going to die,” I replied. “Death is a certainty of life that everyone will face. But knowing that it’s inevitable doesn’t mean we feel prepared for dealing with it.”

© snapped back, “I don’t like it! I don’t want to die...and I don’t want to live.”

“You want to talk about how to cope with the end of your own life?”

“Yes,” said ©. “I don’t like it. Can you help me find a way out?”

“Well, people find it easier to die if they find some meaning in their lives. Some purpose.”

© frowned. “I already told you that there is no purpose to my life. I just infect people. There’s nothing special about that.”

“There is no meaning in your life?” I responded with a Rogerian style affirmation of his feelings.

© shook his head. “No, nothing.”

“Humans find many things meaningful in their lives. It’s very individual. I don’t know what can be meaningful for a virus. Is it important for you that you have a lot of offspring? That you have become so well-known? That you have made a name for yourself? What is really important for you in your life?”

© reflected for a moment. “It would be very important if my existence—and the coronavirus pandemic—made a difference in the world. If it stopped pollution, for example.”

“Well, it has,” I responded. “At least in the air because almost all flights have been grounded.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But I would have liked to save more animals as well. I would have liked to give more balance to nature.”

There was silence. I wanted to help © confront his worst fears and think up some strategies so they no longer overwhelmed him. “Since the pandemic is not over, you’re still working on that as far as I understand. How do you imagine your death will look and feel? Are you afraid of the pain you’ll feel before you die? Do you think about how your proteins will behave when they disappear? Will your death be quick or will it be a prolonged process?”

“Yeah,” said ©. “I’m afraid of the pain, and of my proteins not being able to multiply. I’m afraid of the T-cells and what they will do with me. But I’m most afraid of just disappearing...”

“Mmm...” I nodded my head. “And would it help if you could enter a higher state of consciousness like you did when I threw you in the boiling water?”

© rolled his eyes. “Even entering a higher state of consciousness will not prevent me from dying in the end.”

I put my hand to my chin. It was my most professorial expression. “Existential crises are moments when we humans question whether our lives have meaning, purpose, or value. It’s a major focus of the philosophical tradition of existentialism. But I don’t know how it is among other creatures. You will have to resolve this conflict in your own way.”

With every new sentence, © appeared less cold-blooded in my eyes. My image of him as a wicked creature had ignored his emotional suffering and existential dilemma. While he was talking, I felt a lump in my throat. I felt genuinely sorry for him, and for myself.

© continued. “I told nobody this before, Doc. It hurts me so much when I think about how my life has turned out.”

I asked if he blamed himself, and he answered that he had always felt unhappy. In a pitiful voice, he finally burst out, “There is no way out for me...”

Several minutes of tense silence passed before I spoke again.

“No way out?” I probed while imagining him jumping out the window.

“No way out,” © repeated.

“Hmm...” I said, trying to express sympathy. But I was too familiar with apocalyptic thoughts to erase them from my mind.

Avoiding eye contact, © said, “No way out... Many times I thought about killing myself...”

“Are they momentary thoughts, or do they continue for a longer period?”

“I think about it when I wake up and when I go to sleep.”

“Do you have a plan of how to do it?”

“There are many ways to stop the pain. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I replied. “You mean you’d do anything to stop the pain...” It was obvious to © I wouldn’t mind if he killed himself. But today, I felt genuinely sorry for him and also somewhat sorry for myself. There was not much I could do for him but admit he had become important in my life.

“I would be very sad if you killed yourself,” I said with softness in my voice.

© got my message. Then suddenly he turned to the plant and seemed to say something to it. The plant responded. He looked at me on and off and became more excited. I couldn’t hear a thing, but there

was obviously a heated discussion going on between © and the plant. At one point, he began crying heavily as though having a catharsis. When he calmed down, he said, “I feel better now. Thanks for listening, Doc. Thanks for caring about me.”

“Thank Mother Nature. After all, both of you did most of the work. She seems to have helped you figure things out.”

“Yeah,” © said. “Mother Nature told me I have to take better care of my garden. When I do, it will flourish. She said I have to plant some new seeds and watch them grow.”

“Hmm...” I said, even though I didn’t understand what had just happened. But whatever it was, it had apparently been helpful for ©. As for myself, I still felt miserable. My headache had gotten worse, and I felt exhausted. It was still the morning after.

Then a new thought struck my mind—if the plant had helped ©, would it also be able to help me? I asked ©, “Would you like to ask Mother Nature if she can answer a few questions?”

“OK,” © said in a friendly voice. “She says you can ask her anything.”

There were so many things I would have liked to ask Mother Nature about my own life. But, at this point, there was really only one thing to talk about. “How can we stop the pandemic?”

© turned to the plant and they talked for a while. After that, he began to sway to some inaudible melody. Twisting back to me, he said Mother Nature had sung the song, “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season),” (written by Pete Seeger with inspiration from the Bible). He sang the entire song from the beginning until the end.

Then © added a cryptic message from Mother Nature. “*Qi* moves according to the balance of *yin* and *yang*.”

I had heard about *qi* before. *Qi* was the Chinese word for the vital energy of nature—its life-force, its breathing, and its mind-body connection. They were all seeking a state of balance, a harmony of yin and yang. Mentioning *qi* was how Mother Nature wished me good luck. It was like Obi-Wan Kenobi saying, “*May the Force be with you!*” to Anakin Skywalker in the film *Star Wars*.

All of a sudden, I understood what was going on. My sessions with © reflected the contradictory elements of yin and yang within the vital energy of nature. The battle between humans and the virus represented a complementary process of life evolving from season to season. A sharp flash of lightning cracked through the sky as if Mother Nature had acknowledged my new insight and confirmed it with a piercing thunderbolt.

It's amazing how a few meaningful and timely words can make us feel better. Hearing Mother Nature's cryptic message immediately made me feel more optimistic about the pandemic, and also about myself. I now began to believe it would be a seasonal pandemic and was not the end of the world as I had previously feared. It would all pass. Things would be OK. We just had to navigate between the storms for some time and reduce the booze. As I looked at the sky, I saw the storm clouds withdraw from the horizon, leaving fertile soil behind. A faint puff reminded me to take a deep breath. Balanced qi is crucial, I thought. No matter what our goals in life, the deeper we breathe, the better we will feel about ourselves.

Now capable of seeing the glass half full again, I also noticed some promising signs of human beings changing their ways. Perhaps others had received similar messages from Mother Nature? As the pandemic swept across the world, lockdowns led to a decrease in CO2 emissions, and more people connected this with climate change. The decrease in traveling and subsequent increase in distance communication networks also reduced climate risk, at least temporarily.

© had noticed my change. "You seem to feel better now, Doc. I was a little worried about you when I first met you this morning."

"Yes," I answered. "I do feel better now... I hope you do too?"

"Yes, I do," said ©.

"Let's call it a day, then," I suggested.

"OK, Doc," © answered.

"Will you come back?" I asked.

"I hope so."

"I'm glad," I said, still wondering whether he would return.

"So am I." © smiled.

"Bye for now then," I said, wondering if I would ever see him again.

"Bye," he answered and left.

It had been hard for me to work with a hangover. I needed to rest and digest what had happened. Last night, the force had left me. But now, it had somehow returned...and without the vodka. There was something about the plant that had made me feel better. The magic words of Mother Nature had given me a much-appreciated boost of energy.

"Perhaps there is something there?" I asked myself.

I looked again toward the plant but resisted the temptation to talk directly to it. That would be insane. Instead, I examined the plant more carefully for the first time. It had sprawling, tall and rigid sword-shaped leaves and reached up to three feet in height. It had varying streaks of

green and gray with yellow edges. Native to tropical and sub-tropical areas, the *Sansevieria* was almost indestructible and could survive in low light and infrequent watering. It was the very symbol of durability and resilience.

For a moment, it became the embodiment of Mother Nature. I stroked her leaves and put her on my lap. She seemed to enjoy it when I rocked her like a baby. Her leaves opened up as if telling me she was open to what I had to say. I put her back on the table and tried a few simple questions. “Would it be OK for me to talk to you now? Can I ask you some questions? Do you need some water?”

But the plant didn’t say anything. She was as silent as a fish. I turned to her again and tried to urge her to say something. “You talked with © before, didn’t you? Why can’t you talk to me?” The plant remained silent.

I suddenly remembered how I had experienced this situation before. My training analyst hadn’t said much either during the many years I spent on the couch. It didn’t prevent me from babbling for hours. Why would it bother me if Mother Nature didn’t say anything? If she did say something, it might even interrupt my free associations. So I might as well say what I had on my mind and then give my own clarifications, interpretations, and confrontations. After all, self-analysis was recommended by many psychoanalysts, including Freud himself, and it had become an integral part of my thinking process.

Armed with that attitude, I opened up my heart to Mother Nature and gave myself a free therapy session. I spoke aloud, starting with my present drinking problem, continued with some distressing memories from the past, and finished with worries about a depressing future. But when listening to myself, it all sounded phony and fabricated. It was, without doubt, my “false self” rambling. I couldn’t stand hearing the agonizing self-pity of an alcoholic misanthrope. I was clearly deceiving myself, and asked again, “Who are you fooling now?”

Attempting a different answer, I spoke of being burned out and tired of hearing about so many tragic life events, relating some of my recent nightmares and the voices I had heard. That sounded even worse than what I had confessed before. I refused to change the subject and asked for a third time, “Who are you fooling now?”

Then I remembered what Mother Nature had said, and stated in a loud voice, “*Qi* moves according to the balance of *yin* and *yang*...” But this time, the words didn’t work for me. “You are intellectualizing,” I told myself. “These Buddha quotes are just cop-outs for your own lack of belief in anything.” That was true. I didn’t believe in much anymore.

Ultimately, all these “truisms” were meaningless and perhaps imaginary. The only thing that remained true was the pandemic, and ©—the virus that had created it. The danger was real but the remedy was a fantasy.

“You are pathetic!” I told myself. “Grow up! Admit you are powerless against this microscopic creature. And you can’t do anything about climate change. Who do you think you are—a savior? Get real! You can’t save the world. You can’t even save yourself!”

I looked at the plant, but it showed no reaction. It was just a dry *Sansevieria*. My pendulum had swung from hope to despair. A chill crept over my body. Anxiety took over. I had a strong urge to take a tiny sip of vodka. Only one... I started to make myself a drink, but my fingers couldn’t get the ice out of the bucket. Having it straight, I tasted a sip. It was cold and soothing. I tasted another, and another. They were all enjoyable and did the trick. When the bottle was almost empty, I saluted Mother Nature with a jovial, “*Dasvidaniya Comrade!*” Mother Nature looked so dry and thirsty. Perhaps I should pour some vodka over her so she could join my party.

At that moment, I heard a clicking or cracking noise from the plant. In my far-away state of mind, a baritone voice with a broken Chinese accent said, “Nyet...I not like that drink.” My heart was beating fast and my head exploding. “Gee. Where did that come from? Had I just heard the plant speak to me? Had I gone crazy?” It’s well known that plants respond to human communication since sounds are vibrations and because carbon dioxide is released when people talk, but that I could actually hear something Mother Nature said frightened me to the core. I wrestled with this notion but finally dismissed the “Nyet” as drunken madness or an auditory alcoholic hallucination.

But it was enough to stop me from pouring the liquid over the plant. Instead, I put the bottle to my mouth and finished what was left in one long gulp. I felt a burning sensation in the back of my throat. Then blurred vision...lost balance...drowsiness...and finally—nothing.

## Disconnection

*It is ironic that as we are becoming a globally connected population of over 7 billion people, that we are rapidly approaching the disconnection phase that environmental collapse will bring.*

—Steven Magee

When it became known that the coronavirus could be transmitted directly between people, the best way to prevent its spread was social distancing. Human separation occurred both on a global and local level. Entire countries become isolated islands in an increasingly broken up world. Within countries, citizens were required to keep physical distance from one another and stopped shaking hands. The only safe way to stay in contact was through distance communication and network-connected electronic devices (online social networking, Skype, Zoom, etc.). Employees worked from home, students used distance education, and people ordered takeaway food instead of going to restaurants. By mid-2020, the pandemic had resulted in a contactless world of social deprivation and isolation.

It, therefore, came as no surprise to me that © didn't turn up for his next session. He had put up a courageous façade when we last met. But there was something desperate in the way he said there was no way out for him that made me wonder if he would return. He might have finally decided to take his own life. Even though I had wanted him to disappear, I now worried about his well-being. One virus less wouldn't make a difference for the pandemic anyway. His offspring and copycats would continue to infect humans whether he was alive or dead. But I felt frustrated and angry with him for not letting me know he wasn't going to come.

I turned to the plant and told her my concerns about ©'s well-being. Perhaps she knew where he was? Perhaps she was familiar with something important about him that would help me find him? I didn't know where he lived or how to contact him. But the *Sansevieria* didn't respond. I put her on my lap and stroked her leaves, but still, nothing happened.



All of a sudden I heard a ringing noise from my mobile phone. It was a WhatsApp message from ©. “Hello Doc,” he wrote. “I will not arrive today.”

I felt relieved he was alive. “Why?” I wrote back.

It took a while to receive his answer. “Better we stay in contact from afar.”

I asked him to call me so we could talk, rather than using text. Within a few seconds, my phone rang and I answered. ©’s voice was muted and he sounded distant. His video camera was not in focus, and it was impossible to see him. “Why didn’t you come today?” I asked again.

There was a pregnant silence. Apprehensive about letting out what he had on his mind, he finally said, “Well, I don’t want to get too close to you anymore. You’re too dangerous. You smell of alcohol. I heard you tried to talk to the plant after I left. How could you do that after all she’s done for us? And then, you even tried to kill her with your vodka! I need to keep a distance from you to protect myself. Who knows what you might come up with in the future? I knew you people are really destructive, but trying to kill Mother Nature with your stinking vodka? Really Doc! How cruel can you be? She gives life and nurture, and still you tried to pour that liquid poison on her. When I heard about it, it was as if I’d been thrown back into boiling water. I thought you’d come to your senses...that you’d become someone I could trust. That’s obviously not true. What’s the matter with you?”

A chill crept over my body. I was remorseful when remembering what I had almost done to Mother Nature. And then there was the shame of having been revealed for what I really was—the burned-out, alcoholic shadow of my former self. But in the eyes of ©, I was also a representative of humankind in general. That made me guilty for all the toxic waste disposal, air pollution, forest-burning, and climate change humans were inflicting on Mother Nature. The planet was dying and I was to blame for its destruction. I could no longer deny it. “I’m sorry, ©. You’re right. I went too far... I was drunk... I lost hope...”

As though he was imitating a cat, © said, “Meow” in a dismissive tone.

“I did what I did because I got mad about being locked up in my house for so long. And that’s also why I started drinking. You said there was no way out for you. There’s no way out for me either. If I go out and see people, I have to keep ‘social distance’ for fear of becoming infected, or worse still, infecting someone else. I can’t meet family or friends anymore. I feel so lonely because of your damn pandemic. And

I'm fed up with it. I need to meet people sometimes. I need to chat, touch, and hug sometimes. We, humans, are social animals. We live in groups and we need to be together with other people to feel good. We can't go on being isolated for this long. Without social networking, we're unhappy. It's been more than six months already and it's enough now. It's not enough to make contact only through a TV-screen... It's abnormal!"

"Meow," said © again in a whining tone.

"Social connections are hugely important to us!" I was on a roll now and couldn't hold back. "We can't go out anymore, not to restaurants, cinemas, theatres, or parties. No wedding celebrations or funeral gatherings. No nightclubs, bars, or concerts. No football matches. Even the Olympic games have been canceled. You've put us in a prison. Our children don't go to school, and this is going to stunt their emotional development. Lord knows what effect it will have on their future. You have become an interpersonal poison that separates people from one another. If we don't die from the virus, we may die from social isolation..."

"Meow," © said without pity. "You just want to go to a bar and take another drink."

I tried unsuccessfully to look into his eyes through the small video camera. "Nowadays even psychotherapeutic counseling is conducted online through live video sessions. I hate it! It's like kissing someone with a face mask. These virtual encounters are not the real thing." And then I added, "Now, not even *you* want to come and visit me anymore..."

"Believe me, Doc, I know how it feels to be lonely. For my entire life, I've felt like Frankenstein, the monster. Every time I tried to reach out to someone, they rejected me. They were all afraid of me. They treated me as though I was some kind of pest. You remember—that's why I came to you in the first place."

"We're both in the same boat then," I suggested. "We're both lonely beings on this desolate island, endlessly rotating around the orbit of a dying star."

© was silent for a moment before saying, "Yes, we are lonely because we're afraid of one another, and we don't trust one another..."

He suddenly cut the connection without saying goodbye.

In the distance I heard the wail and yelp of an ambulance siren, first increasing and then decreasing its pitch. When the world went quiet again, I felt lonelier than ever. Dazed, I searched my mind for memories of ©, but for some reason, could not find any. He seemed to

## WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

have been totally deleted from my hard disc. Trying to recall how he looked and how he sounded, I glanced at my monitor, but it displayed only vertical lines across the screen. Then slowly the lines started to move around and transformed into a circle made up of black and white swirls, each containing a spot within the other. The image of a dark yin and a bright yang appeared. They moved toward one another and fused into one. Finally, they changed back and returned to their original gray horizontal lines across the screen.

A famous Japanese scholar suggested that if we look carefully for the invisible, we might discover what lies behind the surface. To find what nobody has seen before, we must pay much more attention to the hidden, wordless content in what appears before us. I looked carefully at the *Sansevieria* plant, trying to discover what teachings it might convey. At first, I saw only green leaves with yellow borders growing up toward the sky as though striving for air. Each leaf searched for its own direction even as they stayed close to the others. Together, they formed a crowd supporting one another while also competing for space. Then, I began to appraise the plant for its survival qualities, its extraordinary resilience in most environments. It didn't have deep roots, didn't need much space, not much water, not much attention. If left alone, it would be OK. That was the message from Mother Nature. I had to leave © alone and let him do what he does without interference. He would be OK. And so would we.

“I hear you,” I said to the plant. “I got your message.”

## The Dream and the Choice

*What is called Free Will is an absurdity.*

—Baron d'Holbach

A full month had passed since © disappeared. I knew he was around somewhere because pockets of infections were erupting all over the world. The only thing that could put an end to the pandemic was a widely available and effective vaccine. But since such a vaccine was still an abstract concern, people adjusted to the fact that COVID-19 would remain in their lives for a long time to come.

On a cloudy day in the fall, © reappeared in my office. I was surprised to see him because, by then, I thought he would never return. I had formally closed his case with a written final summary, but I had certainly not forgotten him.

“*Hola Doc,*” he shouted in Spanish. “Here I am again!”

“Hi ©,” I replied cautiously, wondering why he had saluted me in Spanish.

© had brought me a gift. A tiny desert plant, it had only a few swollen leaves with small prickles similar to coronavirus spikes. The plant radiated its innate resilience against the fierce challenges of a hot climate.

“I brought you a new plant,” he said in a friendly voice. “It’s one of a kind.” He put it next to my larger *Sansevieria*. They seemed to fit together and looked as though they enjoyed the companionship of one another.

I scrutinized the new plant suspiciously. What secret qualities might it contain? Perhaps there was a microchip buried in its leaves that could transmit video images of my office. Or maybe it was a new device for Mother Nature’s communications. Whatever it was, it was a generous gesture and not something he would have done a few months back. “Thanks ©. Why did you bring it?”

“I thought it would make you happy. It’s a symbolic peace offering from me to you. I wanted to say I’m sorry for leaving so abruptly. I’m also sorry I accused you of hurting Mother Nature. But I see that she’s

still OK..." Then he switched the subject. "How are you doing, Doc? How are you managing?"

"I'm OK," I said, though this was not exactly truthful. "And you? How are you getting by?"

"Well, Doc. Things are going just fine. I joined a group of other viruses and we've been partying like mad, making burgers, pizzas, and tacos of human cells. The other viruses accepted me, and I feel I have lots of new friends now."

"That sounds nice," I said, thinking silently about all the people he and his friends had infected. "You've come a long way."

"*Si*," he said in Spanish. "I'm fine. I'm just doing my thing and I feel OK with that. I've been flying from country to country in a tiny aerosol. Recently I visited far-away places in Latin America—Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and indigenous communities in the Amazonas. I also went to Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Chile where I picked up some Spanish. It's been a long, exciting journey."

"Mmm. That must have been an amazing global tour. You sound optimistic and positive about life..."

© looked up and around the room. "Yes, I feel more balanced now. The emotional extremes from before have gone. It's not 'all or nothing' for me anymore."

"That's nice to hear," I said, internally distrusting his estimation of the 'all or nothing' thing. "So, what brings you back to me?"

"I wanted to see you again, and tell you I'm OK," © replied cheerfully. "I also wanted to check in on you and see how you are doing."

"That's all?" I asked skeptically.

He hesitated as though thinking about what to say. "Well... Not really. I also wanted to tell you something. I wanted to ask you about a recurring dream I've had. It's been bothering me for several weeks now, and I keep waking up from it."

My curiosity was evoked. "You had a dream...and you remember it? You want to share it with me?"

"Yes, I would like that."

"Let's work on it then. Can you tell me about your dream? Tell it in the present, as if it's happening right now?"

"OK. I'll try..." And then he told me what he had dreamt about.

*"In my dream, I'm in a desert garden. There are lots of cactus trees around, heavy with sabra fruits. I hear a loud voice warning me not to touch the fruits because if I do, I'll be hurt by the spines that shoot out in all directions. Then a snake appears and tells me to pick them anyway. I don't know what to do. The*

*snake says the inside of the fruit is very sweet. I'm tempted to taste the fruit but afraid in case I'm hurt by its spines. When I do what the snake suggests, I enjoy the taste of the fruit, but suddenly my eyesight becomes blurred and I start to see everything differently. It scares me and I wake up. That's all I remember...*

"That's quite a dream," I said. "Your dream holds a lot of meaning... Let's explore it together. You have any associations?"

"I guess," said ©. "I tasted some of those fruits in Mexico and they're really sweet. The prickly pears (sabra) look very much like me, with spines that shoot out and hurt anything that touches them."

Living in Israel and being familiar with the sabra fruit, I said, "Yes, we have them here also. They used to be more popular before. They were used to characterize native Israelis—thorny and tough on the outside but soft and sweet inside."

© smiled. "Yeah, I guess that's true about me as well."

I smiled back. "And you were dreaming about yourself in a desert garden. Not the Garden of Eden, then?"

"Not at all, © said. "It was more like a desert garden. Like the world looks today after all you humans have done to nature. Climate change has reduced rainfall, and so many places have become deserts."

"Yes, perhaps. But your dream sounds similar to the Bible story with the Garden of Eden."

"Come again?" asked ©.

"You may not know the story," I said, "but God told Adam—the first man—that he could eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of knowledge."

© looked surprised. "Really?"

I continued. "And then a snake appeared and tried to persuade him to eat the fruits from the tree of knowledge because they were so sweet... It sounds very similar to your dream."

"Yeah," © said. "It sounds almost like my dream. The snake was trying to tempt me with the sweet fruit...from the tree of knowledge..."

I asked, "Who is tempting you in your life? Who's tempting you to eat from the tree of knowledge?"

© looked at me, and said in a loud voice, "I don't know. Perhaps it's you? You're the chief snake in my life... You and the rest of humankind are deadly poisonous snakes!"

"Are we really?" I couldn't help feeling a tad defensive. "I just wanted you to understand the difference between good and evil so you would stop the pandemic. I wanted to 'open your eyes' as the snake opened the eyes for Adam."

© thought about it for a moment, and then said, “I guess so...”

We continued analyzing the dream. “You thought you’d become more humanlike if you got a ‘self.’ But when you tasted the sweet sabra fruit, everything changed...”

“Yeah,” © said, “I am doomed to wander around the desert world, exiled from my blooming Garden of Eden...”

“What does the dream suggest to you?”

© replied, “By tempting me to eat the fruit of knowledge, you have cursed me. I am punished forever!”

“No. You are not cursed. Knowing that you exist and having a self doesn’t need to be a curse. You can be part of the Garden of Eden even if you have a self, with both your good sides and your bad sides.”

“Then, I’d be bittersweet?” © smiled. “Like a sabra fruit.”

I smiled too. “Yes. I think the sabra fruit is a key symbol. It’s deceptive and known for its capacity both to prick and be agreeable. It reminds me of you...”

© grinned.

I added my own interpretation of the dream, inserting an extra edge of manipulative influence. “In the dream, you were not sure about what to do. Whether you should eat the fruits from the tree of knowledge or not. You heard the voice telling you that you shouldn’t touch the fruit, but you were tempted to taste it anyway. By tasting the sabra fruit from the tree of knowledge, you made a choice. When you tasted the fruit, you became aware you had a choice in your life—between good and evil, between continuing or discontinuing infecting people with your virus.”

© looked perplexed. “So, what you say is that, ultimately, it’s my own choice.”

“Yes,” I said. “By eating the forbidden fruit, it has become a choice. Whether you continue the pandemic or stop it. The dream tells you that you have that choice. You woke up because it’s scary to have a choice. It means you become responsible for your actions.”

© looked at me seriously. “Do I really have a choice?”

“Yes. With a self, you have a choice. You will be responsible for your own behavior.”

© was still unconvinced. “What you want me to believe is that I have a choice to either stop infecting people or continue to infect them. That it’s all up to me. I know you’d like me to stop following my instincts and to stop the pandemic, to restrain my survival instincts and put the reins on my urge for multiplication.”

“Yes,” I said quietly, “that would be nice.”

“But that’s what *you* want, Doc! Not what *I* want. I have a different wish.”

“What do you mean?”

© glanced quickly at my snake plant. “I understand my dream differently from you. In my dream, I heard a voice warning me not to pick the sabra fruit. It was probably your voice. You’re the only one who knows about the sabra fruit, and you didn’t want me to be hurt by the prickles on the fruit. The snake was probably Mother Nature because she has been talking to me through your snake plant. She lured me to taste the fruit from the tree of knowledge. She wants me to be able to choose. But eating the fruit of knowledge just makes life complicated. It gives me only the illusion of having a choice. In reality, I don’t have one at all.”

“That’s a possible understanding of your dream. Mother Nature approves of you getting a self and still be a part of the Garden of Eden. She wants you to enjoy the taste of the fruit and also do things according to your own desire.”

© shook his head. “No. Not at all! You keep forgetting I’m a virus and not a human being. We do what we do because we are predetermined. We multiply through entering other cells. You, humans, are also destined to act according to the laws of cause and effect. You have the illusion of choice, but in reality, you don’t. Animals and humans are all predetermined to act in a certain manner, and there’s nothing anyone can do about it. My life is also ruled by the laws of nature. I cannot escape this fact, even for a short time. I didn’t choose to be born, and I didn’t choose to become a virus. My habits, thoughts, and feelings are all influenced by the environment in which I live. I never chose whether I should become good or bad, joyful or miserable, wise or silly, realistic, or irrational. I am what I am, and that’s all. I do not have an independent self.”

Working with © was a constant shift between ups and downs, between progress and setbacks. One moment, he seemed to be listening to me and even agreeing with what I had said, but the next he would return to his own point of view and nullify everything I said. I felt uncomfortable with where this was going. We were entering a debate about free will and determinism. I tried to put a stop to it. “Everyone can decide for themselves whether they behave in a certain way...”

© frowned. “No, I’m sorry Doc, but our behavior is the result of forces over which we have no control. You just told me you want me



to stop infecting people, so if I do, I do not do it because I want it, but because *you* want it. If you influence me, it's not my own choice!"

I regretted I had started the discussion. I recognized how external and internal forces influence us. But I still wanted to make my point. "Even though we were born with certain attributes, we can change them during our lives..."

© sighed. "What we do is triggered by processes within the body and not by our free will. As I told you before, we are biological machines without a mind and without consciousness..."

I had again been cornered by ©'s ability to find arguments that contradicted my point of view. He was obviously using intellectualization as a defense against facing up to taking responsibility for his own behavior.

© continued. "Even Freud believed our behavior is controlled by unconscious motivation, or by what we experienced as children, but not by our free will. What you call free will is just an illusion. Every event has a cause, and our behavior is not caused by motivation or by free will. There are personal histories behind every behavior. People respond to certain stimuli and not to their own whims."

There was a point in his argument. Einstein didn't believe in free will either. Einstein had been greatly inspired by Schopenhauer's words: "Man can do what he wants, but he cannot will what he wills." I liked that quotation.

In his persistent way, © refused to drop the subject of free will. I, for my part, was torn between a wish to end the discussion and my pride which made me reluctant to admit defeat. In the end, pride won. "I don't agree with you," I said harshly. "We do have a choice, even though it may be limited by inner or outer factors. There is an element of free will in everything we do. Without some self-control and personal responsibility, society would not be able to function."

© looked up at the ceiling in a gesture of defiance.

"We do have a choice about how we act. You can choose whether to commit a crime or not. You are responsible for your own actions. To become a fully functioning virus, you have to acknowledge that choice and not blame it on external circumstances."

© persisted. "But when my proteins react to other proteins, there is no sense in imagining they could behave in any other way than they do!"

The fact that he was a virus naturally complicated things. "It's different for humans. When we meet other people, we always have a choice in how to respond to them. We can influence our own destiny.

Our actions may indeed be partly controlled by unconscious motivations. But the very goal of psychotherapy is to help us overcome them. If you don't believe you can change, therapy makes no sense."

© looked offended. "I do my best, don't I?"

I sensed his fragility but decided to confront him with his fear.

"What are you afraid of?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think you're afraid to be free," I said spontaneously. "The essence of freedom is to have a choice. To liberate yourself from whatever circumstances have influenced you until now. If you were able to choose your own destiny, you would be free."

"But I'm not responsible for my own behavior! I infect people because that's what we viruses do. My behavior is predetermined. I lose control when I get into a person and immediately start to multiply. I can't stop the process within cells... You must believe me, Doc."

"I believe you," I said with a warm, friendly voice. "I just wanted to tell you how I understand your dream. You are struggling with the choice of eating the fruit or not. Of listening to Mother Nature or listening to me. I understand it's difficult to stop the process once you've gone inside a cell, but you have a choice to make *before* you enter the cells, *before* you infect people."

Like most addicted patients, © needed to be confronted with his destructive behavior while also being supported in difficulties he encountered while trying to change. I knew he was unable to commit fully, and he tended to fly in and out of therapy like a butterfly. At the very moment he seemed to be making progress, he would return to his old ways or leave therapy. To convince him I was serious, I decided to share with him something about myself. "Personally, I understand very well how difficult it is to try to stop drinking..."

© looked at me critically. He knew I was struggling with alcoholism and I had tried to change my drinking addiction. "Doc, I think I'm starting to understand what you mean." He paused and then wept quietly. "I have a choice...just like you..."

He stayed soundless for several minutes. Then a bird outside my consulting room made a high, piercing shriek that broke the stillness. It acted as a signal for © to let out a cry of joy. He looked as though he had discovered something. "I'd like to shout it from the rooftops so everyone can hear—I *have a choice!*"

His cry sounded fake. I didn't know if I should be happy for his newfound insight or remain skeptical. © had fooled me too many times for me to trust him. I doubted if any new insights—including the

present one—could disrupt his deeply ingrained patterns of behavior. ©'s addiction to multiplication would not be a quick fix; more work was required to bring lasting change.

A long silence followed. © seemed to go through an inner transformation that made his outer shell change color, from a light gray to red, to pink, to brown. I worried he would explode and disintegrate into dust. Then, I smelled a strong odor that irritated my nose and throat and made me cough. I had no clue what was happening.

© returned to his original gray exterior but seemed visibly shaken by the experience. "I feel unwell," he said. "I don't understand what's happening to me..."

"I am here," I said to comfort him.

After a while, © asked, "Did you make a choice to stop your drinking?"

I told him the truth. "Yes, I did actually. I decided to stop after I heard the plant talk to me. It scared me when I heard the plant say, 'Nyet!' I realized it had gone too far when I started to hallucinate that plants were talking to me."

© smirked. "I can understand that. But have you also kept up your promise to stop drinking?"

"Yes, I have until now. I decided not to take another sip of booze for as long as you're still here. It's not easy, you know... I still get the craving..."

"That's good," © said. "I also want to stop infecting. I really do. But it's so difficult when it's so easy to jump from one person to another. Then, when I'm inside, I'm unable to stop what comes next. If there's no killer cell around to prevent me from multiplying within the cell, I feel compelled to move on so I get a hit from the cytokine storm."

We were making progress. "So, you have to stop yourself before you get in. Now, you know you have a choice, and you can't blame anyone or anything else for continuing your addiction."

"I guess so," © said. "But I have to remind myself all the time not only that I have a choice but also that I really want to stop the whole process. After a while, I get the craving again, and then it's difficult not to act on it."

"The craving is all in your head. You have been brainwashed to infect, but you don't really have to follow your temptations."

"It would be easier if I were put in a closed room somewhere where there's no possibility to infect anyone."

I shook my head. "You know that's impossible at this stage of the game. It will be up to you to make the change."

“I really can’t change,” © exclaimed.

“Yes, you can!” I exclaimed in return, reiterating the slogan of former President Obama. “You have the power to change everything around you. If you can change the world, you can surely change yourself as well!”

He looked surprised and muttered, “Yes, you may be right...”

“I see how you have changed since you first came here. In the beginning, you were an insidious egotistical parasite, someone who clung to others for personal gain and without giving anything in return. Now, you’re open to what I have to say. You acknowledge your own responsibility. You seem to have become more sensitive and understanding.”

© smiled. “Perhaps. But what about your choice? What about the choice humans face?”

“What do you mean?”

“You talk about *my* choice, but what about *your* choice? Does human willpower really want to stop the pandemic?”

“Of course we want to stop it. It’s ruining our lives. It’s causing misery all around the world.” I thought about the recent numbers. © was infecting about 300,000 people per day. About 6000 (2%) of them would die from the virus. Despite the various safety strategies governments had implemented, the numbers remained high.

© wasn’t convinced. “Are you sure? I put human societies to a test during the pandemic. Do they value life and health above prosperity and progress? If humans valued life, they would lock down everything that moves to prevent my spread. But if they prefer prosperity, they would keep the economy open. There is no middle ground. It’s either-or. Because, if you let me spread, I will. If you prevent me from jumping from one person to another, I can’t spread. It’s as easy as that. I survive on surfaces only for a short time, and I can’t spread if there’s no ‘host’ to help me. It’s the choice of each society and of every government...”

“You may have a point there,” I said.

© kept on. “The West has totally failed in its efforts to handle the pandemic. I succeeded to spread everywhere because they kept the place open for me. In the East, however, they closed down almost totally and my route to global domination was thwarted. They monitored each person I’d entered and prevented me from jumping to anyone else. They suffocated me with their laws and regulations. The citizens were obedient and followed the regulations carefully. Even though China is supposed to be the most populated and the most

lucrative market for me, my project didn't succeed there. In China, they seem to value life over prosperity.”

I was impressed by his assessment of the global dilemma between shutting everything down or keeping the economy open. “So what you are saying is the pandemic is not only your choice but also the choice of the world...”

“Yes, of course!” © looked relieved he'd been let off the hook.

I switched the focus back onto him. “But let's go back to *your* choice. Will you stop infecting humans? Do you have the willpower to stop the pandemic? Will you listen to the voice of Mother Nature? Will you follow her “Nyet”? Now you know that you have a choice, you have to start implementing it. You have to stop infecting. You have to stop it like alcoholics who decide to face up to their addiction. Not one more drink! Not even half a sip. You are finished with it forever...” I recognized I was making a Freudian slip and was talking more to myself than to ©.

He smiled but understood what I meant. “No more infections, not even half a sip...”

I smiled back.

“Can you suggest something that will help me to hold back from starting the infection process? Have you got something that can help me abstain? It's as if my yearnings build up and make me start again and again. Is there anything I can take to prevent me from entering a cell?”

I started to feel impatient. “It may take some time. It's an ongoing process. We've come to the conclusion you can choose for yourself what to do. It's not hormones or anything else that determine your behavior—it's *you!* Now, we need to work on your own determination to stop. Then we will prove you can stop, and finally, you'll just do it. It's a step by step process. You have to tell yourself, “I want this, I can, I will...”

© exclaimed, “But I need my cytokine storm today!”

Frustration was growing in me. I had tried many different arguments to persuade © to get rid of his addiction, but nothing seemed to work. He remained unreceptive to whatever I suggested. Finally, I suggested he should join a local VA (Virus Anonymous group). They might be able to teach him the twelve-step program for terminating addictions. I recited the well-known Serenity Prayer for ©: “...*grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*” With those words, we ended the session.

Once © left, I inspected the small cactus plant he had brought earlier. It looked familiar, but I wasn't sure what it was, so I looked it up on Google. It was an *Opuntia ficus-indica*, also known as prickly pear, and it originated in Mexico. Within a year or two it would give birth to delicious sabra fruits. He wanted me, in the future, to eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

## © Develops a Self

*To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

On this late afternoon in November, the trees stood skeletal and bony and a storm was brewing over the empty city. As the sun slowly descended, it dimmed the light in my office and bathed with a gentle glow the miniature prickly pear plant sitting next to the loftier Sansevieria. Placed side by side, they reflected a mysterious shadow that looked like Doc and ©. Any rough contours were eliminated by the *sfumato* (smokiness). My mood had adjusted to the change of season. I felt attached to the cloudy sky, the heavy rain, and the twilight that followed. It all had a spiritual component that made me woeful.

The world seemed awfully strange. It was as if I were in a movie. But I wasn't only a passive spectator. I was writing the final scenes of a script. Now, I had to decide whether the ending would be happy or sad.

It appeared to me that © had changed me more than I had changed him. While he was still around doing his thing, I had become transformed by meeting him. I was almost a different person. Indirectly, he had cured me of my addiction, and after years of heavy drinking, I had now totally sobered up but still suffered from withdrawal. As a result of stopping drinking, I had trembling hands, sweating, headaches, insomnia, and bouts of depression. It was a bizarre and unfamiliar emotional state of being. There were also periods of nausea, during which I wanted to—but could not—vomit. Most difficult, however, were the terrifying moments when I saw things that weren't actually there. But I didn't bother to investigate if what I had seen was real or fantasy.

While waiting for © to arrive for his session, I realized almost a year had passed since we had first met. Time had moved so fast, and I wondered how long the pandemic would last. A question popped up in my mind. "How long a shelf-life does a virus have?"

As if he had heard my question, © suddenly appeared. “I guess it will depend on the new vaccines you’re producing. If they’re effective, I’ll be unable to infect anyone anymore. I’ll be out of work, redundant, superfluous... That’s how humans got rid of creatures like me in the past and they still do it. It’s a disgusting tradition...”

I nodded and said, “So, you think the pandemic will end soon?”

He seemed indifferent. “Whatever...continuing or ending. It doesn’t matter anymore. I feel OK now. I am OK with who I am. I think I have gained a sense of my own self, but I don’t really know if it’s still important. Ever since I made the choice to stop infecting, I have felt as if I can go on living without entering cells. I have enough energy on my own.”

“Really?” I asked enthusiastically. “You reached your goal without developing your own nucleus? How did that happen?”

© darkened. “I realized that I exist. When I first came to you, I didn’t know if I was alive or not. Now, I not only know I’m alive, but I *feel* very much alive... I feel special. You’ve helped me a lot Doc.”

I was pleased to hear that and wanted to reinforce his feelings of being a unique creature. “Yes ©, you are really special.” And then I remembered something I had heard about viruses. “In fact, you are special because you are an exception to the central dogma...”

“What are you talking about?”

“The central dogma of molecular biology explains the flow of genetic information within a biological system. It’s usually stated as ‘DNA makes RNA, and RNA makes protein.’”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Well, the greatest advance in the central dogma was the discovery of retroviruses. They found that RNA can also be transcribed into DNA. RNA viruses, like you, are specialists in this. You can become DNA with a nucleus! It’s like gaining a mind and even a ‘personality’ that is unique for you. Until now, you have been just an ordinary virus, just like all the other coronaviruses.”

“So, now I’ve become a special DNA-virus with a self and a mind of my own?”

“Yes, it seems so. You have become a unique DNA virus. There is no one else like you in the world. You have become *yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you into something else.*”

“I have surely changed a lot, but, in my view, the world has not... It still sucks.”

“The world has also changed, even though it’s still addicted to progress and prosperity at the expense of a more balanced nature.”



“Humans are so strange,” © growled. “Everyone should know by now the dangers of climate change. It’s clear what you need to do about it. But your politicians have still not taken the necessary steps to prepare for what’s coming. Most things remain the same as it was before I came along.”

I nodded and said in a sorrowful tone, “We humans still think we’re so special. But when we’ve tried to prevent your spread, we’ve been really incompetent. I had hoped the pandemic crisis would inspire us to change society, to make it a better place. I’d hoped that humans would learn how to live differently, if not for any other reason than to honor all the lives lost... I had hoped we would see more global cooperation and would choose health before prosperity.”

© finished my sentence for me. “But not much of that has happened...”

“No,” I said with resignation. “I’d hoped we humans would open our eyes to the possibility of transforming our social and political universe. That evolution would improve our interactions. That there would be a massive collective change of heart. I was born into a generation of revolutionary baby boomers. We joined peace movements and programs that preached radical social change. We created utopian communes that would reform the world.”

“And now you feel all of that was a utopian dream. “Like a failed New Age movement...?”

“Yes,” I said. “Most of our dreams never materialized.”

Suddenly, I felt a squeezing sensation in my chest. Pain raced through my body from my back to my neck. I had felt the same pain on and off for many months but had ignored it. Now, it had started troubling me again.

© was very perceptive. “What’s bothering you, Doc? You look as if something is hurting you...”

“Yeah, my back hurts. Also, I feel weak and tired. But it’s nothing to worry about. It will pass...”

“It sounds bad, Doc. Tell me more. What are your symptoms? You look pale...”

Something was badly wrong with me, but I didn’t know what. “I’m probably just worn out. At my age, the body doesn’t function as it did before.”

“How long have you felt like this?” asked ©.

“It’s been going on for a while now, but lately it’s become much worse. I hoped it wasn’t a heart attack or some lingering health problems after my coronavirus disease.

© watched me closely. “I see you hurt...”

“How can you see that?” I asked.

He didn’t answer immediately. But then, he told me something that surprised me. “You remember when I entered your body to infect you many months ago? I moved around within the cells in your respiratory system. I saw lots of peculiar cells there. They seemed to divide curiously. It wasn’t something I did to make them divide. They just continued to divide and became something else...”

I looked at him with terror. On the one hand, I didn’t want to hear what he had to say, on the other, I was curious about what he had discovered. “Just tell me what you saw!” I demanded.

“I saw a cell that looked like ‘@,’” he said, “but these cells usually look like an ‘a’...”

“What does that mean?” I asked in irritation.

“I’m not a doctor, Doc, and I shouldn’t make a diagnosis, but it looked like cancer...”

My heart beat faster, my throat contracted, and I blinked away a tear. I didn’t know what to make of what he had just said. While he wasn’t a doctor, he had seen close-up what was going on inside my body, and I could not just ignore this. “What exactly did you see?”

“I saw a mass of immune system cells. But they didn’t come to get me. They were on a different mission, and they seemed to shift dramatically, both in amount and type.”

“And what do you make of that?” I asked anxiously.

“Well,” he said in a very serious voice. “I saw that your immune microenvironment was abnormal. I figured you may have *multiple myeloma*, but I didn’t want to alarm you. It looked like you might have cancer in your white blood cells. The plasma cells in your bone marrow were abnormal.”

“But I didn’t have any symptoms at the time,” I protested.

“I know. But I definitely saw more natural killer cells inside your body. Lots of white blood cells that attack foreign invaders like me. And there were almost no memory T cells around to detect me.”

My mouth was dry. “I see,” I said in an urgent voice, even though I did not “see” at all. “I guess I have to check this out and get a blood test as soon as possible...”

“Yes, you should,” he said.

I tried to conceal my tears when he left. It felt like my heart had been ripped out with an ax.

In the evening, I thought more about what he had said. I was angry with © for delaying so long in telling me what he had seen in my body.

If it was true, he should have told me sooner. Then I could have checked it immediately. Now, the only question that remained was whether I should take a nightcap before going to bed.

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When I got the results from my blood tests a few days later, they were almost normal. I didn't have multiple myeloma as © had guessed. The only thing outside the norm was my neutrophils—white blood cells that help heal damaged tissue and resolve infections—which had decreased somewhat. This was probably what © had seen in my body.

When © returned for his next session, I told him about my test results and that he had been wrong about my diagnosis.

“That's good news,” © said without enthusiasm. He didn't look surprised.

With some reproach in my voice, I asked, “Why didn't you tell me about your suspicion earlier?”

“Well,” © said in a low voice that was not more than a whisper, “I didn't tell you the whole story.” He paused and hesitated before continuing. “While being inside the cells of your body, and seeing all the peculiar cells, I did something... But I didn't know then if it would work.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked. “What did you do?”

“I went around the cancer cells inside your body and killed them one after the other. That's probably why they didn't come back.”

I was frozen and unable to grasp what he had just said.

© repeated, “When I saw the cancer cells start to grow out of control and crowd out normal cells I killed them.”

“You killed them?” I asked.

“Yeah.” © smiled. “I became a cancer-seeking missile attacking all the losers. I blasted them one by one until all the malignant cells had burst. I filled them with my viral particles and then exploded inside them.

“That sounds amazing!” I exclaimed. “That sounds like the new *virotherapy* scientists are experimenting with today.”

“I guess so,” © said. “But I'm much more effective! Since cancer cells often develop a protective shield that makes them invisible to the immune system, I learned how to deactivate this shield in a very sneaky way. I tricked the immune system into thinking there was a virus in there so they would come and kill me. All types of immune cells then rushed to unleash an attack against me and the cancer cells together. It killed the cancer cells, but particles of me escaped.”

“I understand,” I said without really understanding how it all worked. “It sounds as if you were fighting a difficult battle within my body to kill off all the cancer cells.”

“Yeah,” © said in a proud voice. “I delivered a one-two punch to knock out the cancer cells in your body. They tried their best to escape the demolition, but I was sneakier. I succeeded in invading these cells and, ‘boom’...they all blew it up!”

“So you’ve become an anti-cancer virus now?” I asked.

“Not really.” © smiled. “I’m still an amateur in the field. It was my first attempt. But I’m glad it worked.”

“I think it did,” I said. “My tests were OK as far as I could see.”

“I’m sorry I alarmed you before. I didn’t want to cause you any pain.”

“From what you tell me, it seems you have done the opposite. It appears you have cured me.”

© grinned.

“It’s perhaps your new role in the world?—to be a healer rather than a killer.”

“Yeah, I would love that,” said © with a burst of jolly laughter.

“Then everyone would fancy me, instead of wanting me dead. I would have lots of friends!”

Considering the present pandemic, I figured © becoming popular would probably take some time. But the capability of viruses, in general, to assist in the curing of diseases might be a first step in improving their public image.

I began to feel we were approaching the end of our therapeutic journey. The time had come to terminate. “It seems we have reached a point where we should start talking about ending therapy. “How do you feel about ending?”

© thought about it for a while, and then said, “Well, I think we have achieved a lot, and I feel good about ending soon.”

I was pleased with his response. “You’ve come a long way. You’ve made a lot of progress, and there is not much more I can do for you. It’s possible to go on for longer, but I don’t see the point in that unless you do.”

“No, I don’t,” © said. “When I came, I was so lonely. Now I have some good friends. They accept me for who I am, and we have a good time together. I also feel I’m no longer detached from myself. I know who I am now, and I even feel I have a core self within me.”

“Good,” I said. “Many of your initial complaints seem to be gone, and you seem much more aware of yourself now.”

## WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

“Yeah,” © said. “I’m comfortable with myself now, and it’s OK to end here.”

I looked at him with some envy because I wished I was feeling the same about myself.

As if reading my thoughts, © continued. “We all have to live with ourselves somehow, I guess. Everyone has problems, and I now know mine aren’t worse than anybody else’s.”

“OK then. If you agree with me, let’s meet once again for our final session.”

© forced a smile and said, “OK, that’s fine with me.”

## The End Game

*Now, this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*

—Winston Churchill.

In deady December, an owl hooted from its lectern that winter was here and the nights would soon stretch to the longest of the year. But the owl's call was hushed and nobody woke up. Except me. I woke up shattered after a terrible night with muscle pains and a throbbing headache.

Today would be my last session with ©. Even though I had been looking forward to this moment for a long time, I was apprehensive about how the termination would play out. The pandemic was an unfolding drama with no end yet in sight. It was continuing in full force with new infections reported daily. The negative impact the pandemic had on most people's daily lives had become a collective trauma of historic proportions. Some had begun to lose faith, thinking it would become the beginning of the end of humankind.

I also had such apocalyptic thoughts. They reappeared both during my waking and sleeping hours. I had followed the suffering and chaos too closely to disregard its devastating effects. Without hope for a better future, I felt we were approaching the end of the world as we knew it. Nothing would ease my concerns, not a benevolent and omnipotent God, nor a merciful and forgiving Mother Nature. Vaccines were being tested for safety and efficacy, but it remained unclear how they would work and if they would successfully produce herd immunity. My own efforts to cure ©, and to make him stop the pandemic, had also failed. By now, it had become crystal clear to me there was no point in continuing to work with him. The time had therefore come for us to say goodbye, even though there had been no satisfactory closure of the therapeutic process, nor any end to the pandemic.

© arrived as usual without announcement. His appearance had changed again. As if he had recently lost his virginity, © radiated a new

nonchalant self-assurance. But I was surprised not to find any joie-de-vivre in him.

“Hello ©,” I said on seeing him. “How are you today?”

“I’m OK, I guess,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You look different today. What happened?”

“Do I?” He blushed. “Well, I feel different too. I met someone recently and we had a good time together. Perhaps it’s a sign of my growing up. I noticed lately—perhaps it’s since having my own self—that I’ve lost much of my curiosity and spontaneity. The price of getting a self has been higher than I’d expected.” I could tell he had lost some of his innocence. “Lately, I’m thinking and planning and worrying most of the time.”

“What happened?” I asked casually.

“I don’t know. I used to be a whimsical and playful virus. I liked to enjoy curling up at night with a stuffed animal. Now, all those natural impulses are gone.”

“I can see it in you,” I said. © used to be a vicious and insidious creature with frequent emotional ups and downs. Now, he seemed a reserved, constrained, and almost neurotic virus. When he spoke, he sounded rather like a Buddhist monk meditating. The self that © had developed appeared to make his life so much more complicated.

For a while, we were both silent. Then I said, “It’s difficult to end...”

“No, it’s not,” he replied. “I’m OK with that.”

I was a little surprised by his response. During the final therapy session, painful feelings of sadness, anger, grief, and abandonment often arise. If he could express them, we would have the opportunity to process them. I was concerned © had felt rejected when I suggested we stop therapy, and it would re-actualize the rejections he had experienced in the past. But he now appeared aloof and almost eager to get out of the room.

Cautiously, I tried to ask him about it. “Is there something important for us to talk about before we say farewell?”

“No, I don’t think so. I have already said everything I wanted to say. There’s nothing more to add. What do you think? Is there something else we haven’t yet discussed?”

After some thought, I said, “Yes, there might be something more to talk about. I think we should explore what’s happening here in the room, between us. Our relationship.”

© looked worried but remained silent.

“I’m curious about something. I would like to know why you picked me as your psychotherapist.”

“I found you online. You have some excellent reviews. You seemed harmless enough from what I read about you...”

I didn’t believe that was enough of an answer, so I pressed further. “But why me?”

“I selected you because I knew you were retired and had no other clients. No other therapist would accept me because of the risk of me infecting them, and then they would have to be isolated to prevent further infections.”

That sounded plausible. But I didn’t think it was the only reason, so I asked, “I can understand that, but there might have been other reasons as well.”

“Mother Nature told me she was impressed with the way you treated your Sansevieria plant... You’re a skilled gardener.” He smiled. “Can’t you see how I’m blooming?”

“And...?”

© sighed. “You were the only one who could hear my voice. You were open to my way of talking. Everybody else seemed to be blind, deaf, and dumb when I tried to contact them. I could fly right next to them, but they would remain unaware of me being there. Even if they knew I was around, they wouldn’t take me seriously.”

“Is that the main reason? You picked me because I was the only one who could hear your voice?”

“Not the only reason,” said ©. “You didn’t only listen to me. You also understood I needed careful attention. You treated me well and I felt special with you. You helped me a lot...”

I became suspicious of his flattery and assumed © wasn’t revealing the actual reason for coming to me, so I asked again, “You’ve worked hard and it’s been a very challenging journey. And it seems to have produced some encouraging results. But I still don’t understand entirely why you picked me. Why did you arrive here in my office with the pretense of wanting psychotherapy?”

“I don’t know really...” © paused and tried to avoid looking at me. “Perhaps I came to you because you seemed to need me as much as I needed you.”

I wondered if he meant humans needed the virus to open their eyes to what was happening with nature. “What do you mean?”

Hesitantly, © whispered, “You know what I mean. You just have to admit it to yourself...”

“What are you talking about?”



© looked up at the ceiling and then down at the floor. He was obviously holding something in. “There’s something I haven’t told you...”

“You can say anything...”

“I’m worried you won’t believe what I have to say...”

“Try me.” I wondered what he would reveal now, in this final session. He had surprised me so many times I had almost gotten used to it. But today, I prepared myself for the worst.

© was too fearful to continue. He took a deep breath, looked me in the eye, and spoke with a clear voice. “You know very well I didn’t pick you. You picked me.”

I didn’t like to hear that and felt he was manipulating me again. “How could I do that?”

“You know what I mean. You searched for me in your mind and created me.”

“What?”

“I am an imaginary construct. I don’t really exist.”

I was exhausted by lack of sleep, and the muscle pain had gotten worse. Now, I also had to deal with an obstinate patient who was saying he didn’t exist. It’s true I related to © as a subject, and not as an object because, for me, he was alive. I might have been the only one to whom he had revealed himself. It’s also true I was open to testing the reality of my perceptions. ©’s claim that he didn’t exist was too much for me though, especially on a day such as today. “But you do exist. Everyone is talking about you.”

“Yeah,” said ©. “They talk about me a lot. Everybody talks about the coronavirus pandemic. But if you’re honest with yourself, you must admit a virus can’t actually come to therapy and can’t talk. You can’t have a conversation with an imaginary construct. It’s all in your head...”

I was flabbergasted. “Really?”

© avoided eye contact. “Yes, our conversation is imaginary. It’s a talk between you and you. It’s as if you are dreaming about me...”

“So, all that has happened here is just a part of my imagination?”

© sighed. “Well, almost. I talked to you as a virus all this time.” He mumbled something... Then he whispered as if testing me, “You talked to me *as if* I were a virus...”

“Yes, I did. So what?”

© looked me in the eye. “I’m not a virus...”

“What?” I shut my eyes and swallowed the saliva in my mouth. “What do you mean...?”

“I thought you would not believe me. But you promised to try...”

“Yes, I’ll try.”

“I’m not a virus. I am a human being. I have not become a human being. I have always been a human being.” He paused. “Some power commanded me... I don’t know how it happened...”

I was trembling all over, trying to grasp what he said.

“I didn’t tell you everything before. What I wanted to say was too crazy. I still don’t know if it’s possible to believe it. Please let me explain.” He had a tomato-face. “I don’t know what’s real and what’s fantasy. I’ve thought a lot about if I should tell you, but this morning it occurred to me I should trust you. I hope you won’t be mad about what I’m going to tell you.” He spoke slowly, letting out one word after another with long gaps in between.

Petrified, I thought I was seeing a ghost. It was a ghost that would want to take revenge. “So, if it’s just my imagination, who do you think you are?”

“I am a human being, just like you. I came to you...for psychotherapy...”

What was he talking about? The coronavirus was out there somewhere. Everybody was talking about him and the pandemic. At present, he was here in my office and I had tried to work with him.

But earlier in my life, I had learned the line between reality and fantasy is not always cut in stone. In between, there is always imagination—a construct of what we think is almost real and almost fantasy. Was that happening here between me and ©?

When opening myself up to that possibility, I started to hear all kinds of voices. The plants were talking to me, and to one another, and Mother Nature was talking to the world. I could not recognize what they were talking about. Deciding to go with the flow, I let myself be drawn into what was happening. When the voices stopped, I said, “You say I only imagine you. That you’re just part of my imagination?” And then I looked more carefully around me. Slowly, the contours of a human being appeared sitting opposite me in the armchair. What I saw was no longer a virus, but a real person. He looked like any ordinary guy. Not young, not old. He was just a short, chubby guy with a round face and a pleasant smile. But he had no spikes.

He gazed at me with grave seriousness and asked, “You OK, Doc?”

I wasn’t OK at all. It was as if I had woken up from deep slumber. I held my head to keep my balance and wiped the sweat from my face.

The guy looked uncomfortable. “Well Doc, I’m sorry to let you know, but I’ve been playing along with you all this time. I came to you

to find my real self. I told you in the beginning that I *felt* like a virus because everyone avoided me. But you probably didn't hear that and immediately started to relate to me as a virus. So I became a virus for you. It wasn't always easy to know what you were seeing in me. I tried to play along as well as I could. I'm just an ordinary patient who came to you for therapy."

If what he said was true, I had been deceived all along. I searched for something to hold on to and wept as I peeled my self-awareness onion layer by layer. Something inside me I had repressed bubbled up. It came encroaching on me as a piranha bite that would not let go. Suddenly seeing what was there, overwhelmed me. The painful reality crept into my mind and carried away the clouds of imagination. It consumed my soul in a way I had never felt before. Something died and was born in me at the same time. A vulnerable truth had defeated the secure world of fantasy. I remembered how it had all started back in January. When I first heard about the corona pandemic, I had become so excited and curious. I had desperately wanted to meet the virus who had been the culprit of the pandemic, to understand where he was coming from and what his mission was. I was so involved in my quest that I had mistaken the first person who entered my office for the virus. What a delusion! What humiliation! Senescence and my heavy drinking had apparently played a nasty trick on me. When being an intern at a psychiatric ward, I had seen such psychotic symptoms in senile patients who reported vivid visual hallucinations. Now it had also happened to me.

This guy had been an impostor who exacerbated my confusion.

Mortified, I asked the person sitting opposite me, "How could you do such a thing?"

"You let me act out the image I had of myself. I felt like a virus."

"If what you say is true, who are you really? Who do you think you are?"

"You've asked me that question many times. I didn't answer you honestly before. My name is Carl S., I'm a biochemical student at Hebrew University and I am thirty-three years old. I'm fascinated by the coronavirus and know a little about it... I'm sorry I made you believe I was the coronavirus. But you wouldn't agree to relate to me in any other way."

"And, you came for psychotherapy?"

"Yes," he said. "We had interesting talks... Since I felt like a virus, it wasn't hard to share your fantasy and even decorate it a little. It was a fascinating journey. We discussed important topics. It made me feel

more important and, since I got away with it, I became more confident. Some things I told you about myself were true. You helped me work through some problematic issues. Sometimes it was even easier talking as a virus than talking as me.”

I was pleased to hear the therapy had been helpful for the man but still tried to understand how it had all transpired. Remembering I had tried to kill him, I asked, “But I threw you in a pot of boiling water, didn’t I?”

“Not really,” the man said. “I saw you throw something into the water. But, by then, I understood your intentions and played along. In fact, when we discussed stuff, you often talked to the air instead of talking to me. I figured that was how you felt most comfortable.”

Remembering what we had talked about before, I asked, “And what about Dongba and Mother Nature?”

“I’m sorry about that one. I had just read about it, and it popped up in my mind when you wanted to send me away. I’m really a member of Greenpeace and believe human health is linked to the planet’s health. I think we should find a better balance between humans and nature. We have to give back what we have taken from nature. But it’s something I learned by myself. I didn’t really talk to your plant.”

“But how did you enter my body, diagnose my illness, and cure it?”

He smiled. “That was just an idea I had during one of my virology courses at the university. It would have been a cool thing to do, wouldn’t it?”

I heard what he said and slowly absorbed what had happened. But I wanted more concrete confirmation. Embarrassed, I asked, “Can I touch you to make sure you’re real?”

“Yes, sure,” he said and stood up.

I touched the man and assured myself he was a warm-blooded person.

Contrary to social distance regulations, I hugged Carl when he left.

With their overlapping foliage, it looked as if my two desert plants were also embracing one another. But who knows? Things are not always as they appear to be.