

The Cosmic Office of Nighttime Doubts

1:57 a.m.: - Next patient!

2:28 a.m.: - Next patient!

3:10 a.m.: - Next patient!

Mads flipped the switch. A small motor started up. Its hum momentarily drowned out the lingering piano notes of Erik Satie sputtering from their old desk radio. After a few crackles, a white flash burst into the room facing them, below the floor-to-ceiling window. The next patient had just appeared on the single padded chair furnishing the observation room.

1:59 a.m.: - 5'7. 16 years old. Juvenile teenager. Greasy hair. A few pimples. Huge glasses perched on his nose. Warcraft pajamas.

2:30 a.m.: - 5'4. 46 years old. Mature woman. Salt-and-pepper hair. Small earrings. Fairly arched nose. Plain nightgown.

3:12 a.m.: - 5'11. 28 years old. Young man. Shaved head. Dark circles under his eyes. Tattoos on his arms and hands. Pale, almost sickly complexion. Freegun boxers.

Dressed in his nightclothes, eyelids closed, peaceful and asleep, the subject looked so fragile... Milena pressed three buttons. Straps extending from the armrests and legs of the chair secured the patient's limbs. A syringe emerged from the headrest and pierced his neck. Once the liquid was injected, he opened his eyes, now bluish from the serum.

While Mads prepared a new file, Milena grabbed the microphone.

- Last name, first name, professional and personal status, and nature of the dilemma that warrants your summons to the Cosmic Bureau of Nocturnal Doubts.

Deprived of his free will due to the administered substance, the patient began in a mechanical voice.

2:03 a.m.: - Lucchesi, Aurelio, high school student, only child. Yesterday, there was this girl, Bianca, and she asked me to come to her birthday party. The thing is, I had planned a game of Maid RPG with my friends.

- Can you translate that? Milena asked Mads.

He tapped away at the keyboard of his vintage computer.

- According to The Supreme Truth, Maid RPG is a Japanese role-playing game. Players take on the roles of maids in a mansion and compete to attract their master's attention, Mads recited, disillusioned.

- It's been too long since we left Earth, Mads. The world's going to hell.

2:35 a.m.: - Lynge, Kathrine, banker, mother. It's been years since I realized the spark was gone between my husband and me. We don't agree on much anymore. I'd like to get a divorce, but I'm afraid my kids will lose their bearings.

- Is there someone else in your life? Milena asked, like a good gossip.

- Yes... Well, no, nothing's happened between us yet, but I can feel it, I see the way he looks at me, I know something could happen. With his sister.

- A plot straight out of Desperate Housewives... Mads murmured.

3:20 a.m.: - Bickford... Caleb... Unemployed... Soon to be a dad to a little one... We weren't expecting it, with Lauren, my girlfriend... We found out about the pregnancy in the fourth month... We don't even know when we did it... Probably at a festival, in a filthy tent... Too late for an abortion...

- We agree, Mads interjected, he's...

- Completely high, Milena finished, without a doubt. Did you see his eyes? They're so red—with the blue of the serum, it looks purple.

- When I think... Caleb continued, that there's going to be a mini-us... whose survival will depend entirely on us... It's terrifying... We're hesitating to send him to social services...

2:09 a.m.: - How long have you known Bianca? Milena pressed.

- Since middle school, Aurelio continued. She often rides home with me, even though it makes her trip longer.

- He's definitely got a way with her, Mads observed.

- She deserves credit for falling in love with him, Milena couldn't help but blurt out, then into the microphone: and what do you think of her? As a friend... or more?

For a moment, Aurelio was silent. Then his pupils dilated and he parted his lips. Clearly, this was the first time he'd considered her that way. Little by little, he was piecing the puzzle together.

- Do you think... she likes me? he stammered, looking sheepish.

- Adolescence certainly lives up to its nickname, 'the awkward age,' Milena cut in, mercilessly.

- Well, I think the verdict is clear, Mads remarked.

- Of course. Aurelio, forget this role-playing game. If you really want to, you'll have other chances to dress up as a maid. Go see Bianca, and do me a favor and take a shower before the birthday party.

- And bring condoms, Mads added. You never know.

2:51 a.m.: - So, what's wrong with the relationship? Is he cheating on you? Milena guessed.

- I almost wish he were, Kathrine replied in her robotic voice, at least then the reason for the argument would be clear. No, he just ignores me, tinkers in his garage, or watches a game on TV with a beer in his hand, true to the classic stereotype of dripping masculinity.

- A common slump among straight couples, Mads noted. What about couples therapy?

- Believe me, Milena explained, if she's even considered her husband's sister, things are beyond repair. — Then, into the microphone: — How old are your children?

- 10, 13, and 17.

- Well, let's split the difference, Milena decided. Get a divorce when your youngest starts middle school. If you end up with the sister, tell him when he starts high school.

- ... Okay.

Mads felt sorry for her dejected expression. He grabbed the microphone.

- Prioritizing your emotional well-being doesn't mean you're a bad mother.

Milena eyed Mads warily.

- Article 22 of the Code of Supreme Truth: no emotional investment, she quoted.

- No, no, that was... After-Sales Service.

3:29 a.m.: - What's your longest period of abstinence? Milena asked.

- Um... Caleb stammered. I don't know... I'd say... A few months... It was for our wedding, I think...

I wanted to be clean for our wedding night...

- Where do you live?

- In a trailer... on the edge of a park... with cute little squirrels...

- Can you count on your close friends and family if you have a problem?

- Oh... Good question... Um... Let me see... There's Ed... He's the one who supplies me... Oh wait, that's not good for the little one... There's Val... Lauren's best friend... They get manicures together... Oh yeah, but nail polish remover isn't good for the little one... Um... There's Ed...

- Okay, we get it, Milena cut in. As soon as the "little one" is born, send him to social services. Mads, send him back to Earth.

With a mechanical gesture, her partner stamped "Case Closed" on the form. He closed the file and put it on the shelf. Despite his silence, Milena refrained from bringing up Article 22 of the Code of Supreme Truth again. She knew his past and knew when not to press the issue.

A few levers later, a bright flash illuminated the room once more and the patient vanished. Sent back to his bed.

- Come on, said Milena, placing a hand on Mads's shoulder. The workday is over; come have a coffee with the other teams.

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The hot beverage that Mads stirred with his fingertips managed to warm his palate but struggled to thaw his heart. He gazed wistfully at the view from the coffee break corner of the Supreme Truth's cosmic observatory.

The Earth, majestic, welcomed his own doubts with open arms. The immense clouds on its surface undulated lazily, like beads of milk on the surface of his coffee. This magnificent and eternal landscape, this myriad of shifting colors, soothed him. They reminded him of the purpose of his work and gave him the strength to continue his Sisyphean task.

- What's wrong with him? a colleague whispered to Milena.

- Nothing. It was just... a long day at work.

- Don't complain—you could have ended up in the Suicidal Thoughts Unit, or worse, at the Midlife Crisis Counter.

- What do they do there?

- They have to come up with unrealistic projects, come up with stupid, impulsive ideas, suggest reckless purchases—basically, anything to satisfy the patient's ego, ease their fear of aging, and give them a sense of "connection to life". Pff, yeah right... If they transfer me there, I swear I'll quit...

- I'm going to go now, thanks for the coffee, bye Milena!

Mads tossed his empty cup into the trash and sprinted out of the room, under the stunned gaze of the two friends.

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- Come on, come on, come on! Mads grumbled, spinning the scroll wheel on his ancient mouse. Tell me he's still asleep... Yes!

Illuminated only by the computer's light, in the office plunged into complete darkness, he fiddled with a few controls and pulled out the manual serum administration kit. As he drew up a quarter of a normal dose—just enough to keep him in a trance for the duration of his procedure—crackling sounds and a white flash erupted behind the glass. He descended the stairs leading to the observation room and plunged his syringe into Caleb's neck. Finally, he stood facing him.

The junkie opened his eyes slowly.

- You again? he blurted out.

For a moment, Mads was stunned. At the end of each session, the serum was supposed to make the patient forget all memory of his interrogators, leaving only the decision made by the office in his mind. No one had ever recognized him during a session; the Supreme Truth protocol hadn't even covered this scenario. At the same time, the serum had surely never been administered to the same person at such close intervals.

- Yes, it's me. I wanted to talk to you again about your future "little one." You had confided in us your doubts about your ability to care for him. You must have confidence in yourself, and not leave him alone.

The lights in the office came on suddenly. Milena stood behind the control desk, outraged.

- MADS! How dare you?

- Milena... What a surprise!

- Do you have any idea how many rules of the Supreme Truth Code you've broken?

- But I don't give a damn about your fucking code!

- Article 30: No case shall be heard in the absence of one of the board members! Article 11: No closed case shall be reopened!

- You know where you can shove your articles?

- Article 1: The controllers' past shall never influence the assessment of those being evaluated! Besides, you know a thing or two about dealing with abusive parents! Why advise her to keep the child?

- You have no idea what it's like to live without a parental figure, shuffled from foster home to foster home like a dirty old sock...

- I'm sending this patient straight home.

- Stop it!

- That's not cool, guys, said Caleb.

Milena and Mads stopped abruptly and turned toward the soon-to-be father. All traces of the serum had vanished from his irises. Mads remembered the small dose he'd given him. Given the substances the guy was shooting into his veins, he must have built up a tolerance.

- Caleb, Milena said as calmly as possible through the microphone. This is a dream. We are imaginary characters created by the drug.

- You know, Caleb smiled, with a speech more fluid than before, usually, my hallucinations during my trips don't explain to me that they're hallucinations... And stop changing the subject... That's not cool, guys.

- What's not cool, Caleb? Mads asked in a trembling voice.

- It's not cool to decide for me... I've been listening to you guys for quite a while now; I haven't caught all your Supreme Truth talk, but if I understand correctly, you were on Earth before you started working here, right?

- That's right, agreed Milena, who felt they'd gone too far to bother maintaining the confidentiality

required by the Supreme Truth code anymore.

- So how can you make such important decisions for us? ... I mean, you've had doubts before, in your own lives. You know how personal that is. It's even more than that. In those moments, humans truly demonstrate courage. Real courage—not the kind from Schwarzenegger movies, but the kind that keeps us up all night, making us question our existence and its implications. The courage to dare to set our sights on something, to put ourselves in difficult situations, to expose ourselves to mistakes, judgments, and criticism. By choosing for us, you're robbing us of our courage. You take away that sublimation of our human imperfections, that acceptance of our condition, that communion with our deepest flaws. Have you ever thought about that?

A heavy silence fell. Milena and Mads looked at each other. Caleb was right.

- Caleb... Mads began. What would you do... in our place?

- First of all, take a greater interest in your patients, Caleb suggested. By asking them more personal and relevant questions... Well, I was high, but you didn't even think to ask me why I started using drugs. Go ahead, you, behind the glass, ask me.

- Um... Milena hesitated, why did you start using drugs?

- Because my mom died right in front of me in a car accident the day I got my license. — Seeing their stunned expressions — Ah! That hits you hard, huh? You weren't expecting that! At 19, I had to drop out of my literature program and take care of my little brothers on my own. My dad had left a long time ago. No wonder I needed a little boost to cheer myself up! My girlfriend Lauren was the one who supported me through the worst times; she's always been there by my side. As soon as she found out she was pregnant, she quit weed, alcohol—everything—all at once... and I'd like to follow her example. See, you have a different view of me now that you've made me spill my guts, right? Here's what you should do: talk to the patients, understand the reasons behind their doubts, and work with them to figure out what's best. Got it?

- Are you going to keep the baby, Caleb? Mads dared to ask.

- I'd rather keep that discussion with Lauren. But after this night of counseling, I have a pretty good idea.

He smiled.

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- I can't believe we're actually going to do this, Milena lamented. Is there really no turning back?

- No, Mads affirmed, pulling some levers. I've destroyed all the serum reserves. *Alea jacta est!*

He went down the stairs and pulled his chair up next to his colleague's. As the crackling and lightning echoed, he took her hand.

- Don't worry. If the Supreme Truth chose us for this job, there must be a reason.

She smiled at him. Mads turned to the new patient.

- Welcome to the Cosmic Bureau of Nighttime Doubts! If you've been summoned here in the middle of your sleep, it's because a dilemma is troubling you and hesitation is gnawing at you. But rest assured, you're not alone! Let's examine this together, weigh every possibility, explore every outcome... until you find the strength within yourself to choose. Because here, we don't decide for you: we help you see things more clearly.