

The Divided Line

Book One of the Noumenal Realm Trilogy

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Cogito ergo sum.

(I think; therefore, I am.)

– René Descartes



PLEASE READ

Thank you for taking the time to read this message. Please continue reading to the end, no matter what. It is urgent.

Is this message really meant for you? Yes, it is.

Please let us assure you that this message could not have been delivered to anyone else. We very carefully arranged for you to receive it at this moment. You will come to understand just how and why at the end of the mission you volunteered for.

Did you volunteer for a mission? Yes, you did.

The most important thing we need to convey to you is that you will not remember volunteering for the mission. This is because the mission involves memory transplant.

Does this mean that we have replaced your old memories with new memories? Yes, it does.

“But how is that possible?” you may be asking yourself. You are probably used to thinking of your memories as a permanent part of you—something that could never be taken away.

But if you think about it more carefully, you will see how inaccurate this understanding is. Over the course of your life, millions of new memories replace old memories each day. Can a fifteen-year-old remember what he or she did on New Year’s Day at the age of three? Absolutely not.

The mind is like a computer chip that stores data. We have simply replaced old data with new data.

The first step in your orientation for this mission is for you to get used to the fact that you don’t know your true past.

Does this mean that at least some of the people and events that your memories are about don't really exist? Yes, it does.

The second step in your orientation is for you to get used to the fact that you are currently experiencing a virtual reality. Take a moment to notice everything around you—the light, the room, the floor, your own body, and the very paper on which this message is printed.

Are these things real? No, they are not.

It should not surprise you that we have the technology to create this illusion. Think of virtual reality as an intensive video game that creates not just sights and sounds but tastes, smells, and textures. By textures, we mean that we can create the illusion of the smooth, brown surface of the paper on which this message is printed, even though the paper is not really here.

Take a moment to examine this paper. All your senses tell you that it has physical existence. Yet we assure you that it does not. If you have trouble believing this, think about how your senses work. When you touch the paper, nerves in your fingers send information to your mind. Our technology can send information to your mind just as easily as your senses do.

At this point you may be checking your head for the hidden electrodes we must have attached to it for sending sensory information to your mind. If so, you have the right idea. But you won't find any electrodes.

Recall that everything you are currently experiencing is only virtual. This includes your own body. Go ahead and give your body a poke. It feels just as real as the paper, right? Of course it does. We can send sensory information about

your body directly to your mind, even if your body doesn't really exist.

Is everything you are perceiving right now an illusion? Yes, it is.

At least, insofar as you think that your perception concerns a physical world, it is completely false. Insofar as you understand that it concerns a virtual world, however, it is completely true.

Think of it this way: everything you are experiencing is virtually real, but it is not physically real in any way.

Let's review what we have established so far.

- You have been supplied with an artificial set of memories.
- You are being supplied with artificial experiences.

These two steps add up to the third and final step in this orientation: You need to get used to the fact that you do not know who you really are.

Is there anything you can know for certain about yourself or the real world during the mission? No, there is not.

Now that you fully understand your situation, you may feel the need to know who we are and what the mission is all about. Why would you volunteer for it? How long will it go on?

We cannot answer any of these questions without compromising the integrity of the mission. Suffice it to say that we have good reasons, and everything will turn out for the best in the end.

Can you trust us? Yes, you can.

We will reveal as much about your mission as we can as soon as possible. In the meantime, try to act naturally—as naturally as you can, knowing what you now know.

We strongly recommend against telling anyone about this message. No one is likely to believe you anyway.

Thank you again, and best wishes.

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So. You've been messaged, too.

The message in the brown envelope is not something I would wish on anyone. But there are more of us now. At least we have one another.

For me, the whole thing seemed to start with the Smithsonian demo. It sounded like such a cool idea—and a great way to get out of gym class. But there was also something a little bit disturbing about it from the very beginning—kind of like when you bite into hunk of cheese, and you notice a little mold on the end, but you're so hungry that you eat half of it anyway.

The school secretary's voice came over the intercom in my social studies classroom just before the bell for second period.

“Roslyn Hart, please report to the office.”

I didn't even hear it. I was thinking about a story I wanted to write. It was about a kid who starts to wonder whether the physical world really exists. Something clicked in my mind the way it always does when I know I've hit upon a good idea—

“Roslyn!” my teacher barked. “Are you daydreaming again? Didn't you hear? You've been called to the office!”

I froze, trying to remember if I had an orthodontist appointment or something. Allie McGlintock, who sits in front of me, turned around and raised her eyebrows at me, as though maybe I was in trouble. I just shrugged and left.

Brent Bentley, a tall bear of a boy with blond hair, was waiting in the office. I can recognize him from a distance by the way he stands—sort of like he thinks the floor is unstable and might buckle under his feet at any moment. I knew Brent because our families belonged to the same swimming pool, where we would hang out with lots of other kids on long, hot summer afternoons.

“Rozy baby!” he sang, folding me into a giant hug. “I’ve been missing you.”

I shrugged politely, never knowing quite what to do with all his affection. He wasn’t that way with everyone. Why me?

I’d heard his name over the loudspeaker last week. It was an announcement about him winning some kind of prize for a computer program he wrote. I knew I should congratulate him, but I couldn’t quite summon the enthusiasm.

Another boy I didn’t recognize was sitting in one of the yellow plastic chairs, thumbing through a *Smithsonian Kids* magazine from the table. His hair was long and a little on the stringy side. He had his legs crossed so tightly that they twisted around each other, making me wonder whether he needed to pee. Brent saw me eyeing him.

“That’s Hugh Winters,” Brent said. “He won the science fair.”

Hugh nodded at us, hardly looking up.

Hmm, I thought to myself. *Two school superstars and me*. What was going on here?

Then two other kids—a boy with a Roman nose and a girl wearing a miniskirt—came in with the middle school principal, Dr. Kim.

Hugh got up and shook the boy's hand. "Hey, Michelangelo, how's it going?"

"What's with the lefty handshake?" Brent observed. "You guys Boy Scouts or something?"

"Not Scouts, just geniuses," Hugh shot back, only half kidding. "The latest in a long line of great left-handed artists and scientists throughout history."

Brent rolled his eyes.

Dr. Kim cleared her throat to get our attention. "Students, thank you for coming." She waited, as only a principal can, until she had our full attention.

"As you may know, the Smithsonian Institution is the world's largest museum complex." She consulted her clipboard. "It was established in 1846, when an English scientist named James Smithson left his fortune to the United States government 'for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.' Most of the buildings are located in Washington, D.C., where they are a repository for American treasures of all kinds, from space shuttles to rare books to dinosaur bones."

I shifted on my feet, wondering what this had to do with us, the strange crew she had assembled.

Dr. Kim continued: "Dr. Mace Smithson, a descendant of James Smithson, has created a new branch of the Smithsonian Institution devoted to educating the youth of America. Called the New Smithsonian Foundation, it is housed in the basement of the Smithsonian Castle, on the National Mall in downtown Washington, D.C. To draw attention to its recent opening, it will visit ten schools around Maryland and Virginia throughout this month. We have been selected for this honor, and because of a family connection with the New Foundation, we are first."

Dr. Kim paused and pointed past the office staff through the window at a white semi-truck in the parking lot. “Smithsonian” was printed across the side, with a picture of a really cool-looking reddish-brown castle.



It was the same picture I recognized from the cover of *Smithsonian Kids* magazine.

“Inside the truck is a new technology, invented by Dr. Smithson, for educational simulations,” Dr. Kim explained. “They want to do a demo for us, and they only have room for five kids. The five of you were selected as a reward for your recent achievements.”

Dr. Kim introduced us to one another. The girl in the miniskirt was Olivia Meyers, captain of our school’s dance team, which won a national championship this year. “Michelangelo,” the boy with the Roman nose, was Jonah Ziv, whose painting won the Scholastic Art Award.

“And this is Roslyn Hart,” Dr. Kim concluded. “She doesn’t know yet why she’s here. Roslyn, do you remember when Mrs. Palmer submitted your story to *Smithsonian Kids* magazine?”

I nodded, scowling with embarrassment. Mrs. Palmer is my creative writing teacher. She's the kind of teacher who tells all her students that they can be the next president of the United States. I didn't take her interest in my work seriously. On the other hand, I knew the story was good. It was based on one of the ideas I catch a glimpse of sometimes, the ones that send a shiver down my spine....

"Well, it's my great pleasure to announce that your story was accepted for publication, Roslyn. Congratulations!" Dr. Kim gave me a quick side-hug. I felt as stiff as a totem pole.

"So you see," Dr. Kim explained, "each of you has been selected for this privilege because of the special honors you have brought to our school through your unique talents." She smiled triumphantly. Then she beckoned us to follow her out to the truck.

"Wait," Jonah called to Dr. Kim. She turned on her heels.

"Is this...um, required?" Jonah asked. "I mean, do I have to do it?"

Dr. Kim's patient expression froze on her face. "Well, Jonah, why would you ask such a thing?" She blinked at him. He didn't answer.

"No, it's not required," she stammered. "But all the arrangements have been made...." She looked at him imploringly.

He bunched up his lips and pushed them to the side, aware that everyone was watching him. Then he looked out at the truck uncertainly.

"Come on," Hugh called. He was already halfway out the door. "We're wasting time."

"Okay," Jonah sighed.

Olivia fell into step with Dr. Kim, chattering about her part as the female lead in the upcoming performance of the musical *Grease*. I hung back, hoping to walk with Jonah. I wanted to ask him why he didn't want to do the demo. But Brent laid his hand on my back and started steering me along, telling me about a book he was reading.

“It's about Beethoven,” he enthused. “Did you know he was deaf? But he would get these ideas for compositions that blew everyone away. People said it was like he could hear a different world. His music showed them a different world. Isn't that cool?”

There was a door on the side of the truck. A set of collapsible steps had been attached to it. As we approached, a bald man in a white lab coat threw open the door and trotted down the steps. The second most striking feature about him was his black-framed glasses. Dr. Kim introduced him as Aaron Ronbon, Assistant Director of the New Smithsonian Foundation. She handed him a packet of paper from her clipboard. I heard her say that it contained all the relevant information about us and that all the authorizations were signed.

This was the first moment when my heart gave a warning thud. Why did this demo need authorization? Who authorized it? I didn't remember my mom signing anything....

“Have a great time, students,” Dr. Kim chirped. And then she was gone.

Inside the truck it was dark by comparison with the daylight. There were five chairs lined up along one wall. The chairs looked like roller coaster seats—with straps. In front of each chair was a helmet on a stand that emitted a bluish-green glow. Attached to the stand with two long cords was a pair of metallic gloves.

As we filed into the narrow corridor, I turned to look at the opposite wall. My jaw dropped, and I gasped in amazement. Covering the entire wall was a screen showing the most beautiful painting I had ever seen.

