

The Inverted Spectrum

Book Two of the Noumenal Realm Trilogy

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Nullius in verba.

(Take no one's word for it.)

– Horace

A brown envelope is centered on a textured, aged paper background. The envelope is a simple rectangular shape with a triangular flap pointing downwards. The text "PLEASE READ" is printed in a dark, serif font on the front of the envelope. The background paper is light brown and shows signs of wear, including a prominent horizontal crack and various small spots and stains.

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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Same brown paper? Same creepy message? Yep. I got it, too.

Harsh, huh?

Given what I was going through at the time I received it, though, it actually made my day.

I'm Jonah Ziv. I'm flunking middle school.

I'm not sure exactly when things started going downhill for me. Maybe it was when my big sister finally took off. Sometime this past winter, I guess. Nothing really changed after that; it's just that things started to bug me more than usual.

I don't fight with my parents the way she did; I just steer clear of them. They don't really bother me. Sometimes I think they forget I exist. They've always been more focused on Lydia.

But that's fine because I can take care of myself. I always have. That's not what bugs me. It's other stuff.

Like the kids at school. Like just about everything the guys talk about. The Redskins. And the Wizards. And the Orioles. And the Red Sox. Who's going to win the big game, and which players are the best, and how lame you are if you're rooting for the wrong team—as if there's any difference. As if the win of some professional athlete—someone who doesn't even know you—means that you're a “winner” too.

And the girls? Always posing, as if there are mirrors only they can see hanging on every wall. And giggling. Not

because something's funny, but because it's part of posing. And who did what last Friday night with whom and how mad somebody else is going to be when they find out. I swear they'll make stuff up if they run out of true stories, which they usually do. It's so obvious. They are sooo obvious.

I've gotten to where I mostly ignore other kids. But grown-ups bug me too, and it's harder to ignore them. Like teachers—constantly telling us what's important for our future. As if they know. As if my future is going to be anything like what Mrs. Hertzfelt thinks it'll be. And don't even get me started about all the great books they make us read. What's so great about them? Great to somebody, maybe. Not to me.

So I started playing video games a lot more. Video games are boss, don't you think? There's no "blah, blah, blah," and you can do what you want. Grown-ups keep telling us that video games are bad while making more and more of them every year. Typical hypocrisy.

Anyhow, once I decided to stop listening to grown-ups, I started gaming a lot more—and forgetting about homework and skipping school. Which is how I flunked a few subjects.

That was a real wake-up call for me because repeating seventh grade would be a fate worse than death. Summer school at South Middle, where I go, would be just as deadly. So it was lucky that I heard about the New Smithsonian Foundation's summer school program. My parents met with my counselor and my principal. They decided that if I completed the program, I could start eighth grade like normal in the fall. It's basically a week-long stay-away camp at the Smithsonian Castle in Washington, D.C.

The Smithsonian people came to my school several weeks ago to demonstrate their educational simulation technology. That's how I heard about the summer school

camp. That's also the day I got the message—you know, the one on brown paper. I found it in a brown envelope on my doorstep when I got home from school. At first, I dismissed it as some stupid prank. Then I got to thinking how cool it would be if it were true.

What if this whole life is some kind of video game? It kind of makes sense. Maybe the reason we dig video games so much is because we're avatars in a video game made by some higher intelligences who dig video games, and they made us to be like themselves.

Even if that were true, though, it wouldn't really solve any of my problems. Like, I couldn't reset the game and pass seventh grade. I'd still have to take a week of intensive summer school classes at the Smithsonian Castle, staying in a dorm room without my computer.

But at least the camp promised to give me a break from the whole Lydia drama. I guess she's living with some guy in a cabin in the woods. She'll be eighteen in a couple of months. She says she's old enough to decide what she wants, and she isn't coming back.

I probably wouldn't come back either.