

Chapter Four

Taking a closer look at my friend, Gary, it might be worthwhile to ask: Why is this poor guy such a cantankerous fellow? I had dozens of theories at the time; I hadn't yet given up my faith in God, but Gary certainly had, and I imagined that this was probably the major cause of his constant ill mood. Where I was assured of a place in heaven after my death, Gary was assured of nothing more than an existential grave, and I imagined that to be a pretty horrifying position. There was also the issue of Gary's apparent fanaticism about the concept of solipsism; I could never wrangle out of him why the unattractive notion that "I, Gary, am the only true autonomous being in the universe, and everyone else is just a figment of my overworked imagination" could be so compelling for him, especially as an alternative to the mysteries of religion.

As it turned out, despite the large amount of time we spent together, Gary was keeping a great many of his thoughts and experiences a secret from me. We've already seen his reluctance to even divulge the name of the math whiz who has asked him on a date. There was, it seems, much more to this trend. I wasn't looking for clues in the role-playing games we played together, nor in the video games he designed or in the movies we went to see or in the music he listened to -- and in short, I was going through a number of teenage traumas myself, and hardly believed that any other person alive could have traumas more worthy of attention than my own. But there was Gary, viciously funny and cynical, the smartest person I had ever met, able to recite entire chunks of his favorite novels whenever it seemed like I would be most annoyed by such a maneuver, fascinated with death and completely enmeshed in the world of scientific speculation about the nature of existence; and Gary indeed was having quite the internal crisis at the time.

Gary, you see, was hearing Voices in his head.

Now, this is quite the dilemma for someone as defiantly rational as Gary. Gary doesn't like this one bit. Gary sits around at night and does every damn thing he can think of to mentally defend himself against the onslaught of Voices in his head that feel as though they are emanating from *outside* his head; and it isn't working very damn well at all. Gary's got a number of hypotheses concerning these Voices: he knows this could be the onset of severe schizophrenia, he knows that, really, his only options are that he is either extremely fucked up in the head or else something highly unusual is happening with the local reality. And he really can't decide

which option is more palatable to him. If not for these Voices, Gary would have had no problem believing that he was an incredibly stable human being, very high up the evolutionary ladder in terms of intelligence and ability to survive under extreme circumstances (those circumstances being, of course, a highly Christian household, which used to be the primary thing driving him nuts until the Voices came along). But: if Gary's Voices are indeed the onset of severe schizophrenia, then Gary will soon have to hold suspect nearly *all* of his perceptions, not just the ones regarding strange Voices in his head. If this is indeed schizophrenia, soon Gary will be unable to discern for himself which of his perceptions are actual, phenomenological, and which of his perceptions are ludicrous and conjured up by sickness, by his mental unhealth. Gary believes he is in a position now to identify his sickness, combat it, but what if unbeknownst to him, one of his ludicrous perceptions is the one that *tells* him he is in a position to combat his sickness?

The flip side of all of this, of course, when Gary decides to consider an alternative that doesn't leave him stark raving schizophrenic, is the notion that these Voices are indeed autonomous, emanating from somewhere else in the space-time continuum; and this opens up an entirely other can of unusually unattractive worms. If this is the case, then a number of the truths Gary previously held about reality, about the universe, are no longer applicable, and pretty soon he might be wandering down the garden path toward believing in ESP and Uri Geller and things that go bump in the night, and this is *clearly* an unattractive position, if only for the sheer ridiculous-ness of the aesthetic of those things, as though a Time/Life series of books on the supernatural might contain an actual chapter on Voices that show up in your head. No fucking way, that's what Gary would like to say to that.

So he is definitely caught between a rock and a hard place, the proverbial Scylla and Charybdis, and it's taking every trick in the book just to keep him on a path toward the future that might possibly in some way resolve into some variety of happiness. Prospects are bleak. Can't talk to Scotto about this, he'll think I'm fucking crazy.

The Voices start off as a kind of incoherent nagging itch in the back of his mind, almost attributable to line noise, as though he's perpetually on the verge of starting a migraine headache but never quite diving into it full force. Then, gradually -- and absolutely *amazingly* -- this morass of tickling whispering sounds begins to resolve into actual words, occasional sentences; not necessarily going so far as to resolve into *meaning*,

but certainly aiming at syntax in some deliberate fashion. It makes him a very cranky human being, when this shit starts to happen. What in the fucking world is the appropriate response to that which signals a complete fucking anomaly in your model of the universe?

And then, over another, shorter period of time, these unintelligible stabs at linguistic sense begin to resolve into actual *identities* -- he can *feel*, in a way, a kind of *who* behind the gibberish, the chatter. He can distinguish between discrete entities doing the actual Voicing of the phonemes and the lexemes that are swirling around chaotically in his brain. They take on personalities; he can tell when they're frustrated that meaning hasn't yet evolved, he can tell when they're pleased by some new technique for raiding his mental lexicon in an attempt to impose some order onto this mess. And they never leave, they are constantly lurking in the background of his thoughts; they leave him just enough space to get his regular, everyday thinking done, and they monopolize the rest of the space in his head, and he cannot fucking stand having to share the vast panorama of his genius with these, these, these little nonsensical *chipmunks* that are lurking in and around his synapses.

Eventually, it becomes apparent that there are four distinct Voices competing for time, or trading off shifts, and a strange, unnatural, sickening sensation sweeps across his forebrain when they actually manage to say their first words with any real intention: they say his name, they repeat it over and over for a while, "Gary..." "Gaaaaaaaarrrrrrryyy..." And there is a flash of pride -- unfuckingbelievable! -- almost as though he is a parent who has heard his child say "dada" for the first time, and then outright REVULSION at the fact that these things seem to *recognize* him, good *god*, what the fuck is going *on* around here? And then, over another, even shorter period of time, they get around to introducing themselves, and Gary becomes acquainted with a charming, smooth Voice named Vince, and a stoic, stodgy Voice named Jack, and an angry, gruff Voice named Gregory, and a tough, single-minded Voice named Gale.

And now, Gary has to go through life knowing that his madness has given itself *proper fucking names* -- can you believe this shit? -- and it only makes some sickening kind of *sense* that eventually these formless megaphones from another dimension will have something specific to say to him. And indeed, while Gary goes about the business of trying to get through school, of trying to master all the known branches of mathematics and physics, of trying to leave subtle clues for his unfortunately dim-witted friend Scotto that "THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITHIN THE

KINGDOM OF GARY!", his Voices eventually do come up with things to say, offer him *advice*, give him *hints* about what to wear, start whispering answers to him on tests -- I already *know* those answers, you fuckers, you're just a bunch of smartasses! -- and then,

"Hey, listen, Gary, I got an idea," says Vince, smooth as can be. "Why don't we build a space ship?"

Shut the fuck up shut the fuck up, I'm trying to watch a movie, man, I'm trying to eat my supper, I'm trying to watch this paint dry, I'm trying to do *ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING I CAN* that doesn't involve *LISTENING TO YOUR SILLY ASS IDEAS ABOUT BUILDING A SPACESHIP, YOU SCHIZOPHRENIC MINDFUCK!* But that's what they want, you know, and over the next, even shorter period of time, these Voices *all* start to chime in with how absolutely wonderful it'd be if we could all just think about building a space ship for a while, about building a really beautiful space ship that could blast off into outer space, I mean, c'mon, Gary, doesn't that sound like something that's more fun to think about than "existential loneliness" or "schizophrenic sickness"? Play along here, Gary, we really think you're going to enjoy this....

You simpering fuckers. I'll show you, thinks Gary, in that small corner of his mind that isn't monitored by anomalies who sound like game show hosts and TV anchorpersons. The *last* thing I'm going to do is think about space ships, you ridiculous bastards. But the tide is turning, and Gary can feel it; because the next thing on these Voices' agenda involves not just speaking to him, but *manipulating* him.... What if these Voices get hold of his motor control? What if these Voices get hold of his *personality*, and don't give it back? "All we want, Gary, is a little cooperation from you," says Gale, in a strict, sensible tone of Voice. "Yeah, Gary," Gregory chimes in, "you wouldn't want us to get *nasty*, now would you?" And Gary is forced to agree that he wouldn't, god damn it, he is forced to agree; this is really a humiliating situation, all and all, even worse than thinking back on the days when he believed some long-haired hippie weirdo could come back from the dead and save us all from sin.

And then, Laurel walks into his life, and a plan formulates almost immediately: Sure, yeah, I'll think about a space ship. I'll, umm, devote *this* much of my mental energies to thinking about it (I mean, what am I, a fucking rocket scientist?), but all the rest I'm gonna devote to Laurel. I'm going to think about nothing else, in fact. I'm going to be obsessed. I'm going to do whatever it takes to make *her* the center of my world. It's a brave new experiment, I'll have to trash my internal solipsism programs

entirely. It's an incredible risk, but hell, I believe Laurel is worth the risk. I'm going to think about Laurel because Laurel is the first thing that's happened to me in the last however many years that doesn't point toward suicide in one way or another. This is my compromise, Gale. Thinking about Laurel is good for my survival. You help me think about Laurel, and I'll help you think about space ships. Agreed? "Agreed," agrees Gale. And the game is suddenly afoot....

Meanwhile, Gary's friend Scotto was, as we have mentioned, an aspiring young artist at the time, entertaining notions of fame and fortune, playing parts at the local children's theatre, and writing silly little science fiction stories for Gary to read. Gary is one of Scotto's only friends; they shared the experience of going to a Christian grade school together (where Gary's father was the principal and Gary's mother was the first grade teacher), and they first met when Gary tried to teach Scotto how to program an Apple II computer, only to find that Scotto was singularly unable to grasp even the simplest of such concepts. It was Scotto's notion that, although he was not the veritable brainiac that Gary was, one thing Gary *couldn't* do (or at least didn't choose to do at the time) was create the kind of art that Scotto could create; and maybe Scotto could make himself useful to the planet by creating art that would entertain those people who did all the truly meaningful jobs, like doctors and teachers -- and Gary as well, of course, who seemed to be constantly angry and depressed about something or other.

And so, now, as Gary's demeanor is becoming more and more stark and hard to comprehend, Scotto decides that if he can't say something directly to Gary in order to offer his help, he will say it to Gary via his art; he will come up with some kind of meaningful story and meaningful characters and meaningful plot that will somehow communicate to his miserable friend that there are ways to stay optimistic when everything looks like shit, that there are ways to be reasonably happy even when all the signals are telling you otherwise. The plot will have to be intense, of course. And the characters will have to resonate strongly with Gary, of course. Scotto will have to write this one, in fact, such that Gary is the *only* audience who will ever truly appreciate the work.

I can't be too obtrusive, yet I need to map out the situation as I see it into the fiction itself. I've never tried that. I've always just made shit up, science fiction fantasy worlds and planets blowing up and majestic space operas where the entire fate of the universe constantly hangs in the balance.

This has to be something else entirely. I have to create a character that will compel Gary to take a look at the universe he is actually living in right now, I have to make this character the embodiment of that which could somehow speak to Gary directly. The character can't be me, can't even resemble me, because he will recognize me, and he has already turned me away as a confidant. No, this character has to be someone else entirely, someone wholly deserving of his respect and attention. This character has to be someone he will never expect to be a suddenly pivotal personage in his mental model, has to be someone who lingers past the pages and follows him around in his thoughts as he goes through his day, I have to create a character so remarkably vivid and so unbelievably lucid and intense that Gary will be able to etceterate her into reality. And in addition to the amazing difficulty of coming up with a personality to fit this need, I will have to pretty much do the impossible and create a character that's smarter than me, in order for her to be able to match wits, so to speak, with Gary. And the way to start this process off is the crucial task of choosing a name for her. Inside the name of a character resides the entire essence of the character. If I don't get the name right, the entire enterprise will come crashing down around my ears, and Gary's disrespect for me will begin to rise like a tidal wave. I close my eyes, figuratively, and let my mind wander, do its search, open myself up to some sheer kind of simple inspiration, wait for the messenger of the gods to alight inside my head and whisper her name to me....

Laurel. I think I oughta call her Laurel. Now let's get down to the business of this story....

Gary agrees to come over to Scotto's house that night, not without some complaining of course ("Just because you don't have a car doesn't mean I should have to do all the driving in this friendship"), and as Gary plops down his role-playing toolkit, Scotto feels that rush of anticipation that always comes when someone is about to experience his art. He grabs the carefully handwritten pages from his desk (he can't even really use a word processor, let alone a computer), waits for Gary's bustling activity to pause for a moment, and then he calmly and deliberately hands Gary the story.

"Gary," he says, "I want you to read this. It's called 'Treehouse.'"

"Now?" Gary asks. "I thought we were going to play Cosmic Soup."

"I think you should read it now, yeah," Scotto says. "I just finished it today. I think it's the best thing I've ever written, and I really think you should read it."

Gary pauses to consider this.

"All right. Get me a soda, would you?"

Scotto nods as Gary sits down on the bed. I'll go get us soda while he reads. That means I'll get to leave the room at least while he reads. It's hard enough just knowing he's reading it, let alone having to be present to see every slight reaction. He wanders through the house, fairly well ignores his family -- not that he doesn't love 'em, of course, just that they're boring -- and meanders into the kitchen. Grabs a couple of sodas, takes out the glasses, takes his time getting the ice cubes, pouring the drinks. Heads back upstairs, already a smile forming on my face in anticipation of Gary's reaction, the story really is the best thing I've ever written, and I'll bet we spend the next two hours talking about it, which'll feel pretty good, I gotta admit...

"Have you been following me around?" Gary demands the minute I walk in the door.

Pause.

"No."

"I thought I told you I didn't want you to know anything about her."

"About who?"

"What do you mean, about who? Don't play games with me, you little prick."

"Gary, chill--"

"Don't tell me to chill. And writing this story about her, I mean, that's just sick, Scotto. I refuse to finish reading this story." He flings the pages away from him.

"Wait a minute. About who?"

"About Laurel, you idiot!"

"Laurel?"

"Laurel! The math whiz, remember?"

"What do you mean, the math whiz? I fucking made her up, Gary. She's a character in a story."

"What do you mean, you made her up? Do you expect me to believe that you just coincidentally decided to write about someone who sounds exactly like Laurel, and then you just coincidentally decided to

name her Laurel as well, without ever having *met* Laurel, or at least spied on her and me together at some point in the last few weeks?"

Pause. That does sound pretty ridiculous.

"Her name is Laurel? The one you wouldn't tell me about is named *Laurel*?"

Long pause. He glares at me.

"Shit. I just made her up, Gary. I've never spied on you. I didn't know her name was Laurel; you never told me. It's just a, a coincidence."

Pause.

"Really?"

"Really."

Pause.

"That's pretty fucking weird, Scotto."

"You're telling me."

Later that night, Melody and Laurel go in to say goodnight to their parents before bedtime. For some strange reason, Melody feels the need to hug her father just a little tighter than usual. "You're sure in a strange mood," her father says, and she smiles and says, "I got a strange family, huh." And then she hugs her mother, just a little tighter than usual, and her mother says, "Sweet dreams, sweetheart. Tomorrow maybe we can go shopping together after school, how's that sound?" And Melody replies, "That sounds wonderful." And a goodnight kiss, and then she's off to their bedroom, with Laurel not far behind.

The dreaming begins as it usually does, with Laurel arriving a little early. I don't really want to talk to anyone right now, Laurel realizes, and decides to wander the halls for a while, passing room after room, heading upstairs to the third floor, then the fourth, passing the windows and staring outside at the mystical dreamscape. It's astonishingly weird and beautiful out there, dark, and usually raining. The rules prevent them from ever leaving this castle, and sometimes Laurel feels a sort of wistfulness, as if the rules are too constricting for her and maybe she ought to be able to sail off into the distance if she wants to, danger notwithstanding -- and then, the wistfulness passes, and she starts off through the house again. Melody, of course, never seems to chomp at the bit about going outside. She seems perfectly content to stay here. And why shouldn't she be? Isn't this the fairy tale castle of our dreams? I ought to learn to be satisfied with my reality, with the way things are, rather than constantly wondering if there's something else I could be doing with

myself. Melody seems so innocent, so pure, compared to me at least. It's always me who thinks of caution and danger, always she who is willing to try anything. But that's it, I guess -- we're complimentary, that was the idea. She can be an icon of purity and childlike wonder, and I can be the realist, the pragmatist. Surely these dichotomies are artificial and arbitrary, but they are functional nonetheless. I love my sister. I love this place. Then why do I have such horrible foreboding?

Hours pass, dream hours and real hours, with Laurel wandering through the labyrinth of the castle, passing occasional friends and occasional strangers, noting new rooms full of artifacts, new chambers full of people, masquerade balls and chamber orchestras; there's enough excitement here to keep her entertained for the rest of her life, really. And where's Melody? She would *love* to see this, the way these children are playing and laughing, and underneath the house, look at all these shops and merchants, look at those beads, can you smell those pastries? This place is *incredible*; really, I could practically live here if I didn't know there was another reality somewhere else. And where's Melody? Why in the world hasn't she shown up yet?

Eventually she finds herself wandering back toward the kitchen. Alain the chef is the only one in the kitchen when she arrives; "Have you seen Melody?" she asks, and Alain replies, "No, my lady, I haven't seen her in a couple of days." "And where are the others?" "They've retired to the hot tub." And in the front room, indeed, Airee Macpherson the singer and her sidekick Sierra, Tanner Mildew the boy genius, Derald and Janszen the psychics, and Susie Satori are all reveling in the hot tub. "Has anyone seen Melody?" "Not since last night," replies Susie dreamily. Laurel heads off in search of Dawson the butler, and a worried Airee Macpherson follows close behind; if anyone will know if Melody's in the castle or not, it's Dawson. They find him playing chess with a gargoyle of some kind, and Laurel waits a few minutes, not wanting to interrupt his elaborate endgame; finally, the gargoyle stalks off, and Dawson says, "What's the trouble, my dear? You seem a mite perturbed." "Melody isn't here yet, is she?" Laurel asks. "I haven't seen any sign of her all evening," Dawson replies. Immediately Dawson begins to resonate with Laurel's mood; he says, "I take it you were definitely expecting her tonight?" "What should I do, Dawson? I'm getting worried." "Perhaps," Dawson replies thoughtfully, "you should wake up and try to find her." Laurel pauses, considers the ramifications of such an unprecedented act. "Don't worry," Dawson says, a grave look on his face. "I'll take care of things while you're

gone." Laurel gives him a tight embrace, says, "I'll be back as soon as I can." She turns to her good friend Airee Macpherson, who hugs her quickly and says, "Don't forget about us, Laurel." And then, deliberately, Laurel closes her eyes and lets her surroundings swing out of focus...

...and then she's awake. In a bunk bed. Under the covers. "Melody?" she whispers. Do I want to get up? "Melody?" she whispers again, a little louder. Goodness, it's cold in here, there's a breeze blowing through. "Melody!" she says aloud, but there is simply no response. She throws off the covers, climbs out of bed, climbs up the ladder to Melody's bunk -- and finds the covers empty, and the bedroom window wide open, the street light shining in alongside the breeze that's blowing -- and Melody is quite clearly nowhere to be seen--

"Melody?" she says to no one in particular. And then, a terror grips her, and then

"MELODY!"