



The Disconnected Stories of Hugh

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Creation of Paradise

I was born in Paradise. Paradise isn't 'real'. According to historical accounts, it is a massive virtual reality constructed for the continuation of human culture. Although this is common knowledge, only select groups of people wish to venture out of Paradise. In the year 9056, a group of scientists discovered that the trajectory of the sun was headed towards an undiscovered black hole. In about one thousand years, the whole solar system would be affected by the black hole to the point of no return.

During this period of crisis, Earth was in chaos. With the threat of an apocalypse, most of humanity put aside its

differences and banded together to form the United Earth Government (UEG).

The most brilliant scientists came together and proposed two solutions, both equally fantastic.

The first method was to create a Stellar Engine, a plasma propulsion engine that would suck billions of tons of matter from the solar winds and eject it back into the sun to create thrust and propel the sun in another direction. To prevent the Stellar Engine from crashing into the sun, another thruster would propel the engine toward the sun, creating an equilibrium. Using this method, humanity could effectively use the Sun as a spaceship to travel wherever in the galaxy. This idea gained popularity.

After all, it was great news that humanity would not need to sacrifice its established presence in the solar system. The idea that they can control their journey in the universe was romantic and inspiring. The people who believed in this ideal formed the Solar Society Party.

Despite the prevalence of the Stellar Engine idea, it was not the only idea being considered. The rapid unification of the human race was not unanimously voluntary. After the largest countries united, the smaller ones were forced to join without any representation and with unfair terms. All of the large countries owned resource extracting outposts on many of the planets or their moons, but

the small countries did not have the resources or capital to form many. Their bitterness eventually led to a coalition that proposed the New Home Project, where the Earth would attach thrusters on half of the planet and propel itself to the nearest habitable system. While this proposal sounds like it was only intended to strip away the privileges held by the larger countries, the reason why this idea actually gained traction among the scientific community was because this project could be easily finished with contemporary technology.

Because of the competing ideals, both projects were being researched at the same time. Although the Stellar Engine was popular at first, lack of progress in

its development over the course of 500 years, despite the immense amount of resources being poured into the project, caused interest to wane. Meanwhile, effective underground housing powered by geothermal and nuclear power was growing more promising day by day. New batteries with wattage hours of several magnitudes higher were being produced and charged. Small scale models of ion thrusters were already implemented on asteroids in space.

As the turn of the millennium approached, the New Home Project became more accepted by the public. Most cities moved their infrastructures underground. The Stellar Engine Project was canceled, and the New Home

Project won out. The Earth now traveled the cosmos, heading toward the nearest habitable system.

Without the light of the sun, the Earth's outer layer quickly froze and was no longer habitable, reaching -200 C about four months after leaving the solar system. Although food, shelter, and power was more than sufficient in the underground facilities, the sense of confinement in an enclosed space and the lack of sufficient sunlight stressed people immensely. Food and entertainment quality decreased due to the rapid timeframe in moving underground. According to new surveys, happiness levels dropped by a whopping 80% and suicide rates tripled.

A solution was needed to create a new hope for humanity.

After numerous debates, Sterling Technologies created Project Paradise, a fully immersive virtual reality device that was able to reproduce Earth with 99% fidelity in its pre-New Home Project days. As the technology got more and more adopted, people stopped wanting to live in the real world and instead escaped to the new world. Eventually, the UEG had to recognize that Paradise was the new home of humanity during the time of its journey to the new solar system, and fully funded the whole infrastructure around the full integration of human life into Paradise. Many lived their whole lives within Paradise while

not returning to Earth with the exception of during compulsory education.

This is the history behind the creation of Paradise. Although all people know of this, very few people cared about it. After all, at this point in time most people were born in Paradise. Not many people go out to Earth on a regular basis, and people are content about their lives on Earth. I, Hugh Mann, was taught this early on in my orphanage. Rather than an orphanage, it was more like a foster home. At this point in time, orphans are so rare that orphanages only exist in history books. Yet somehow, this happened to me. Apparently, my parents were government executives. My father died

from an accident during semen extraction during the artificial insemination process.

Having children is a choice in Paradise, because virtual intercourse, no matter how realistic feeling, does not produce children. To have children, all one needed was to pay with Bits. So, the process of child-bearing is actually done in test tubes and artificial growth chambers. To get the DNA, semen and eggs were extracted before scanning for genetic deformities. People can also choose to optimize their DNA for several parameters, but that's besides the point. During the semen extraction process, something went wrong with temperature control. Because the temperatures were

usually kept at super-cool levels to ensure computing efficiency, human bodies were generally insulated in a thermal suit. During the extraction processes, the temperature was not properly adjusted and my parents froze to death. To compensate for the unexpected death, I was still created from the remains of the frozen DNA and inherited the Bits from my parents. From then, I was brought up by a nanny who took the job just for the money. Although she showed me no particular affection, she did her job dutifully. She taught me the essentials to surviving alone before leaving for another higher paying job.

The Complexity of Tag

Today I sat down alone on the cold stone steps on the back of my school. By no means do I wish to sit by myself,

Sitting on the cold stone steps of the bench, I stared unblinkingly at the children playing tag on the grass. Although I made my expression seem nonchalant, the deep desire to join the rest of the children is evident. "I don't understand why people don't like the way I play this game," I muttered under my breath. The rules of the game are painfully simple. To succeed in this game, all one needed to do was to target the slowest person in the group. This strategy worked several times. But

after targeting the same kid many times, others called me a bully and complained to the teachers. I was then put into time-out, where I watched longingly. I can observe from the expressions of everyone that it was objectively an error for me to take the most logical decision to win the game, but I fail to understand why.

After five more minutes, I was freed from my confinement and returned to play with my peers. This time, I no longer picked on the slowest child. Instead, I targeted the second slowest child. Within minutes, I was put into time-out again. It seems that targeting the weakest children made me a bully. This confused me, so I finally asked the

teachers what I was doing wrong. With an aghast expression, the teacher lectured me about the importance of respecting authority instead of answering my question. At the end of the lengthy lecture, the teacher gave me an extra five more minutes of time-out. At this point, the 5 extra minutes was pointless, because recess was going to end before then. Still, the reactions of my classmates and my teacher leaves me confused throughout the entire afternoon.

The next day, I tried to change my strategy. Instead of targeting the slowest person, I targeted the second fastest person, Carter, instead. I would have targeted the fastest kid in my grade, but

unfortunately I can't tag myself. After getting him two or three times, he was visibly enraged. He pulled me in by the collar and yelled at me. "Why are you targeting me, Hugh! Yesterday it was Rick and Craig, and today is me! What did I ever do to you? We all are trying to have fun but you keep on ruining it!" This bothered me, because I wasn't trying to have fun. I was trying to win. Confusedly, I answered "But what did I do wrong? I'm just playing man-on-man defense just like in football or basketball?"

My reply visibly stunned Carter. Everyone else burst out laughing at me and Carter looked at me with a gaze that was a mix of anger and pity. He

released my collar and told me to start switching targets next time. If I do that, I would no longer get in trouble. I remained confused, but I followed his advice. Surprisingly, it worked. People no longer said I was a bully and I was no longer put into time-out. .

After this incident, I realized that if I wanted to stop making any more faux pas, I needed to be friends with Carter.

Memories of the Past

Sterling Michaelson woke up with cold sweat on his back. It had been weeks of being plagued by the same dream, and yet he never seemed to get used to its horrors. Sterling grabbed some water to calm his head and looked in the mirror. A handsomely soft face, beautiful platinum hair, and a pair of lifeless, baggy eyes reflected in his eyes. Feeling stressed, Sterling decided to stop sleeping and start work. He put his monocle on his right eye and sighed. The traumatic memory that happened two years ago still haunted him like it was yesterday.

Two years ago, Sterling's wife Rose and daughter Alice were flying to Mars to visit their maternal family and escape the war that was raging in the shadows on Earth. As a top level researcher of the United Earth Government (UEG) and the owner of Sterling Labs, a prominent company active on all planets on the Solar System, Sterling was forced to stay in the UEG lab to oversee the development of the newest innovation in cybersecurity. Sterling had no complaints about this development, because he detested his wife's family for resisting his marriage and loved his research. He believed in the philosophy of the UEG, that the solar system could be saved with the right technology, and hated the idea of the New Home Society

(NHS), which pushed for the transportation of Earth to another stable system.

As the ever doting husband and father, Sterling could not resist sneaking a chance to say goodbye to his family one more time before they blasted off to Mars. Before the launch, he snuck into the washroom on the pretext of needing to relieve himself. The mischievous smile on his face, however, made it obvious to his colleagues that Sterling had other plans in mind.

Sterling entered the washroom stall, which had been dutifully maintained and cleaned by the sanitation bots created at Sterling Labs, the Sanitron 9001. Sliding

the outer frame of the monocle, Sterling clicked a few buttons before a beautiful, high-res image was projected onto the white door of the stall. It was the image of his wife and daughter, getting seated and buckled up at the VIP class cabin of the most cutting edge civilian spacecraft designed by Blue Space, the BS Goliath. His wife, Rose, looked surprised for a moment as the plasma screen in front of her seat lit up with her husband's face. Seeing that Sterling still had his lab coat on, she said with a knowing smile, "Dear, are you skipping work again?" Embarrassed, Sterling answered "I just couldn't resist-". "Daddy!" interjected Alice. Alice was only four years old and wasn't sure what was going on. The angelic child was

simply excited to see her father magically appear on the screen. Sterling felt his heart melt as he heard his daughter continue to talk incoherently about how the spacecraft would bring her so high up into the sky. Alice was cut short by her mother, who said “That’s enough, sweetie. We need to say goodbye to daddy now, or he will get chewed up by the grouches at work!” Alice didn’t know what grouches meant, and imagined that they were scary monsters with big pointy teeth. She immediately quietened down and said “Sorry daddy. Please go back to work! Be careful and don’t get chewed by grouches!” Sterling laughed at his daughter’s suddenly serious attitude. He

was about to reply, when a deafening sound came out of the projection.

Without warning, a piece of shrapnel came flying out of nowhere, slicing Rose's beautiful face. Although Rose was terrified, her maternal instincts kicked in. She used her body to cover Alice's small frame. Alice was still holding her ears, disoriented and whimpering like a puppy. Rose's efforts were not in vain, as soon enough, more shrapnel flew into the VIP cabin. More and more pieces of plastics and metals decorated Rose's slender back. Rose held back tears and screams as she tried her best to cope with the pain. Her pleas to stop the pain were answered, but not in the way she had hoped. A

piece of ceiling plating fell on her cranium, exposing the soft, mangled brain tissues. Beneath her, Alice shivered and cried but was otherwise safe from the deadly barrage.

As if by the will of some sick miracle, the plasma screen never lost connection during the entire process. Sterling watched in confusion and horror as the scene unfolded in front of him. He sat on the stall and stared blankly at the aftermath for twenty minutes before he heard a knock on his door. Franklin, a bright and friendly data analyst, came to remind Sterling that his intellect and expertise were needed in the lab. Sterling turned off the projection with a trembling hand and slowly stood up

unsteadily. He came out of the stall to wash his hands, only to stumble and needed to hold on to the edges of the sink to prevent his fall. Sterling tried his best to hold back his tears, but could not help but throw up in the sink. Franklin watched with concern, since the Sterling he saw earlier was happy and healthy. Franklin wanted to help out and say something, but Sterling just walked absentmindedly out of the washroom. At that moment, the only thing that was on Sterling's mind was the vivid memory of the last moments of his beloved wife, and the uncertain condition of his daughter Alice, who he always boasted to his colleagues as the cutest little girl in the entire universe.

Later that day, Sterling was informed by his secretary that Rose and Alice were transported to the Petunia Hospital. The official statement from the Blue Space operatives was that wiring on the thruster power supply was overloaded, causing an explosion at the rear of the Goliath. However, as an important member of society with numerous contacts, Sterling knew that Goliath was rigged by insurgents of the New Home Society. Because the VIP room was situated at the front of the spacecraft, it was not completely blown apart. Regrettably, Rose had passed away. Alice, who had been shielded by her mother, suffered only physical injuries, but stayed in a coma for unknown reasons.

Weird Conversations

“Guess who!” I felt a voice behind me as two hands were placed on my eyes. Even without having to look, I could identify her voice. Out of respect, I pretended to be surprised, because I remembered that she always wanted to surprise me. Well, it wasn’t genuine respect. It was more like curiosity of what her reaction would be if I did pretend to be surprised. In my head, countless scenarios flashed. The most probable outcome would be something like “gotcha!” followed by childish laughter. Yet I stand corrected. “Prim, you are still terrible at faking your surprised face.” The tiniest expression of sadness flashed across her face

before she replaced it with a smile that didn't reach her eyes, yet I registered it nonetheless. I felt unsatisfied, not because I made her sad, but because my prediction was wrong. With supreme confidence, I replied "I could always identify you by the sound of your footsteps. Also, no matter how you distort your voice, I will always know that it is you!"

Interestingly enough, I observed a hint of surprise on Prim's face, and a shade of delight. "Does this make you happy?" I probed. This time, the smile reached her eyes. Instead of answering me, she answered "Guess." At this point, I am confused. Statistically speaking, the most authentic smiles are the ones that

reach the eyes. Despite making her happy, I could not get the answer I wanted from her. I decided to shelve this topic and asked “Prim, why are you here?”

“No reason. I’m bored.” This was an answer that I heard often from her, but never really understood. How can people be bored? Boredom, in my mind, is the experience of the lack of interest in external stimuli. As far as I could remember, which is from the very moment I was alive, I never experienced boredom. In this world, there are myriads of things to do and countless things to experience, I can never have enough time to do everything, yet Prim was able to still stay bored.

The Dead Earth

“Oi Hugh, are you coming or not?”

Carter waved at me. The excitement from his voice is unmistakable. Today, they are going to the Outside. At the age of 18, all residents must go through the Chinvat Bridge, the connection between their real bodies and the land of Paradise. This is part of the education program designed so that all of the residents are cognizant of the reality of Paradise.

I stared at the Chinvat Bridge. The Chinvat Bridge terrified me, because it looked vastly different from all other things in the land of Paradise. It defied all laws of physics in Paradise.

Nevertheless, I steeled my resolve and stepped on the bridge. The bridge was made of some unknown type of yellow crystal that emitted a dim light under the illumination of the sun. There were faint lines zig-zagging from the place where I placed my foot. Perhaps it served as a visual effect, or perhaps it actually was signals being transmitted to the algorithm controlling the bridge. The beautiful lights calmed my mind, and I started taking longer strides toward the end of the bridge. The bridge was not a complete bridge, as it looked like it was only built halfway. Instead it connected the land of Paradise to a shining stream of light. I looked up, only to see that the light shone upward endlessly. With great curiosity, I stretched my hands into the

light and felt ... nothing. The intensity of light seems to be only an illusion.

Feeling reassured by the fact that no pain assaulted my hands, I walked into the stream of light. For a moment, nothing happened. It still felt like I was on the bridge, but the intenseness of the light forced me to close my eyes. Then, my senses were assaulted by a stinging numbness as my consciousness was forcefully dragged upwards in the direction of the flow.

When I opened my eyes, I felt numbing sensations in all of my muscles. I found myself lying down in a chamber. His body was already clothed and remembered that everyone was covered in a white thermal suit to reduce the

energy consumption and increase computing efficiency with Paradise. When he got out of the chamber, he saw some people were already standing around in their suits, while others struggled to climb out of their chamber. When I tried to view their faces through the transparent panels on their mask, I realized that these were two-way glasses that prevented people from seeing the inside of their masks. However, there were names on all of the suits to distinguish everyone. After everyone climbed out of their chambers, the door opened and a person in a black thermal suit came in. In a loud but clear voice, he said "Hello everyone, my name is Virgil, your guide. Today, we will be touring the facilities within Earth

for you to understand how Paradise actually works. If weather permits, we might be able to go on the Earth's surface!"

After announcing this, Virgil brought us to the food processing facility. It turned out that instead of the wondrous food of Paradise, the food that actually got fed to our bodies were nutrient solutions that only had the purpose of keeping us healthy. Some people murmured that they had tried this solution before as a novelty item back in Paradise felt that the taste was so uniquely horrible that they would never forget it for the rest of their lives. It also did not help that the solution had a bubbly yellow tint to it that reminded them of human waste. Despite

the unpleasant looks, Virgil incessantly praised its nutritional value and how efficiently it could feed the human population.

After a lengthy explanation from Virgil, the group headed toward the geothermal plant. Unlike the food processing facility that had no human presence, the geothermal plant was filled with engineers that constantly monitored the place. Virgil explained that the reason this place was heavily monitored was because it was directly linked to the ion thrusters that propels the Earth through space. Many of the people around me were fascinated by the inner workings of the geothermal plant, but it was just a superficial

interest. If asked whether they wanted to work here, they all said that they could never stand working in the same static place all the time.

The last destination we went to was the hangar. There, Virgil checked the temperature of the outside world through satellite forecasts. Seeing that the temperature was stable as there were no significant storms or winds, we were cleared for a tour of the earth aboveground. We boarded a large aircraft with a see through bottom and windows on the side. It seemed to be a cargo plane, as there were no seats. Instead, we had to remain standing strapped to the side of the plane. The plane ascended a hydraulic platform

that raised it to the surface level, and as soon as the hangar doors opened, a strong wind assaulted the inside of the hangar. But in a second, the plane whirred into action, lifting vertically off the ground before soaring out toward the vast expanse at a very low altitude.

Looking down from the plane, all we could see was a frozen hell. Many remnants of a great civilization remained, literally frozen in time. As we quickly zoomed past the vast landscape, we could glimpse frozen corpses of animals that were not taken underground. The jungle of high rise buildings were broken and crumbling. Although everything was a bit blurry because of the fast speed that we were

going at, the fleeting images still seemed to affect everyone, since the incessant bantering during the previous tour ceased. Virgil, who seemed either oblivious or grew accustomed to such a scene, just chatted on about the places that Paradise was based. We saw the ion thrusters, several times the size of the largest mountain I've seen, shoot out a jet of ethereal light that pierced the otherwise dark sky. All of a sudden, the plane shot upwards, quickly escaping the earth's gravity and into space. Looking down, I found the sight to be utterly incongruous to what I imagined. "It's dark," someone whispered. I understood their meaning, because everyone was told that the Earth was a blue planet. All the pictures we were

shown said so. Yet the planet was dark, with only some trails of light forming a tail on one hemisphere of the Earth.

When the tour finally ended, most of us returned to the chamber from which we came out of. Virgil offered jobs on Earth to all of us, but only a few people desperate for Bits decided to agree to it. I asked Carter what he thought of Earth, and he told me without skipping a beat that he never wanted to leave Paradise again.

A New Era

Sterling was working on the greatest innovation of his life. After the tragedy, he struggled to overcome his depression. Although his daughter survived the tragedy, her soul seemed to have gone to the other side with her mother. The once curious child with the most heartwarming smile was now in a vegetative state. She no longer spoke, and her eyes never opened. The doctors tell him that despite the fact she was in a vegetative state, Alice had full mental awareness. Life for her was practically a living hell where the only thing she was capable of doing was watch. As the last pillar of his family, Sterling could not afford to wallow in self

pity. To soften the pain in his heart, Sterling focused his entire being on his lab work. Believing that the body is simply just the cage of the mind, Sterling sought to create a device that could free Alice from her shackles.

Such a device was beyond anything the current technology could achieve, but Sterling was not fazed. He had access to the most cutting edge research of his day, plenty of income from Sterling Labs, and, most importantly, his unmatched intellect. With these tools at his disposal, Sterling pioneered his own path in the science of digitizing consciousness. With groundbreaking success, Sterling's research progressed at a lightning fast pace. In no time,

Sterling thought, he would be able to create a device to transfer the consciousness of every person facing terminal illness of the body.

Another two weeks had passed. Sterling had completed the greatest leap in technology since the discovery of fire. Knowing that he had created hope for his daughter, Sterling wanted to present his success to the whole world. Noticing that the Solar System Science Convention was in a month, Sterling planned to show the entire world what he had accomplished.

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Meeting of Minds

I never expected Professor Sterling to invite me to dinner. He was known as the most popular person on campus, with many people vying seats in his lectures. He was the living history, the preserved mind of the greatest human genius in the history of the world. Yet he invited me, an insignificant student, to the same dining table as himself.

The first interactions with Professor Sterling were quite normal. "Hugh, come and take a seat" I remembered how kindly he said those words, even though I did not remember doing anything that deserved such care from him. "Tonight's

course would be seared steak seasoned with five herb mix topped with butter and a side of potato salad.” As he said this, two plates exuding wondrous aromas were delivered in front of us by the professor’s caretaker robots.

Flustered, I sat down like a child meeting his favorite superhero, ignoring the delicious food that normally I would’ve stuffed down my throat in a heartbeat. His composed presence seemed to overwhelm me like I was staring at a mountain. I took a breath to regain my composure and managed to speak these words without stammering “Thank you professor. It was an honor to dine with you tonight. I read your research papers on the Matryoshka

matrix and I must say the cooling system you designed to maintain its structural integrity is...”

I droned on and on about his achievements, and Professor Sterling only smiled politely and listened. When I finally found the time to stop my words to catch my breath, I realized how incredibly rude and impolite I must've sounded and hurriedly apologized.

“Professor Sterling, I'm sorry I droned on. I was just incredibly excited to meet you!”

The professor had an amused expression on his face. “Instead of talking about me, why don't you talk

about some of your personal experiences about your life?” I looked into you a bit after finding your resume to be exceptional, and I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of life experiences helped to shape you as a person.”

The encouraging words made me lose my guard, and I felt the floodgates of my mind burst open. I spared no details and talked about my childhood, exaggerating some details while downplaying others. I talked about my childhood, about how growing up without a family felt. About how I was different from others, and the struggles I had to go through to think like how everyone else did.

Professor Sterling sat there pensively, his face was filled with the look of fascination. I could hear him mutter under his breath “fascinating”. However, the composed light in his eyes was no more. Instead, it was an intense, obsessed look that seemed hungry for more knowledge. Although I saw this change, I tried to ignore it. Then, Professor Sterling asked a question that was completely out of context. “Hugh, what do you think is the distinction between artificial intelligence and humans?”

Confused by the sudden change in topic, I hurriedly replied “this is my opinion, but I think that humans and artificial intelligence are fundamentally

different beings because of two points. Firstly, they do not think nor feel. They are governed by a complex set of mathematical equations that attempt to mimic the interactions between our neurons. Even if an AI can pass the Turing test, it doesn't mean that they can feel. They are simply good at reading a sufficiently large transcription that generates slightly rearranged responses that seems to make sense. Second, they do not have biological bodies, so it would be impossible for them to understand the growth process of humans. Even if they were given the ability to understand as we do, they can never understand us due to the difference in our bodies." I looked at him expectantly. My answers were taken

straight out of the textbook, which represented the most prominent views of today.

Professor Sterling was intrigued by my answer. “Do you think?” That was an unexpected response. For a moment I wondered if he was mocking me for replying with the uninteresting answer that everybody replied with. My face reddened, but soon I realized that I probably misunderstood him. Maybe the professor meant that ‘you’ meant humans. His question probably was asking about my opinions on whether humans were capable of thought. With this in mind, I hurriedly replied “We think. We possess self-awareness. We can use what we learned to perform

purposeful actions, whereas AI's are just unfeeling computers that only know how to perform actions according to a ridiculously large translation machine.”

“I see” Professor Sterling seemed satisfied after hearing that response. I observed a curve on the end of his lips that he seemed to be suppressing and couldn't help but feel proud. We talked more about the cutting edge technology today and my future careers, and I was left feeling really excited about the future.

Before I left, Professor Sterling gave me a card to an exclusive lab for the best and brightest people. For the first time in my life, I felt that I was someone

important. No, I didn't mean the intangible idea of being important to friends and family. I felt like an important person that would make huge waves in the world of Paradise.



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