

WORMHOLE PEDESTRIANS

a surreal tale...

He was a devotee of the painting of concentric rectangles that hung on the gallery wall. Its clarity and sense of order engrossed him; flawless black lines traced through a stark white background creating the stunning illusion of a tunnel. He would lose himself in the painting for what seemed like hours, watching the rectangles fall backwards into infinity.

One day while staring at the painting the illusion formed as usual. After immersing himself in its peculiar effect for some time he looked away and ran his eyes over the other surrealist paintings in the room which had less addictive qualities. Glancing back at his favourite painting he gasped to see that the tunnel was still in place. Normally it took a few moments for the illusion to form, even with his trained eyes, yet here it hovered beckoning his attention.

Other people walking through the gallery didn't seem to notice the tunnel. They looked at the painting, enjoyed its effect and moved on. Finally alone in the room, he reached out his hand to touch the canvas and to his astonishment his fingertips brushed through empty air.

Entranced by the apparition the art lover stepped inside the painting. Half expecting his nose to be squashed against the gallery wall he instead found himself standing in a long white passage interspersed with black rectangles. Taking a deep breath he proceeded to walk through it. Occasionally he turned to see the light of the gallery disappearing into ever-smaller frames, until a small point of light was all that remained of the entrance.

Although there was nothing solid beneath his feet he continued to place one foot in front of the other. He had the sensation of floating through alternate sections of white light and black voids. The effect was dizzying. Eventually he reached the end of the tunnel which was sealed by a black, rectangular door. He knocked.

As the door opened the art lover was overpowered by the redolence of old books, but it was the strange creature who opened the door that stole his attention. He was ancient looking - short and rotund - with long white hair and a beard that brushed his feet. His face, hands and feet were covered in deep folding wrinkles that

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obscured his facial features and nails. He wore a white gown that moulded to the folding skin underneath giving him the overall appearance of an old molten candle.

With a wave of his arm the creature motioned the art lover into his room. It was immense. The walls were covered in books; countless books that had the appearance of ledgers. Some were incredibly old and appeared to be fused together. In the centre of the room was a wooden desk and chair into which the creature climbed. He looked toward the art lover and addressed him in a low tone, his face quivering as he spoke, 'Your name?'

Is it the books or the impossibility of my situation, thought the art lover, that gives this old creature his air of authority? He announced, 'My name is Tobias Rex.'

'Your reason for visiting?'

Reason for visiting... how do I answer that? 'Curiosity,' he eventually announced. The creature selected a well-used stamp sitting on his desk and pressed it into the book he was writing in.

'What will be your length of stay?'

'I'm staying?' Tobias asked ingenuously.

The old man entered Tobias' answer into his book as if he had heard it many times before. Lowering himself from the seat he opened a door nestled between two bookshelves. Looking at Tobias he said, 'You have one hour, then the wormhole will close.'

'You mean I've walked through a wormhole? My favourite painting is a *wormhole!*' Before Tobias could finish his queries he found himself standing outside the door in a covered alcove. The door closed behind him. Wanting answers he tried to open it, but it was locked. Tobias looked at his watch - it was 1 o'clock.

Bordering the alcove was a street filled with pedestrians; hordes of people who rushed by him, so close that they were only centimetres away. It was a regular street scene in that there were two rows of buildings with people walking in between, except in this case there was no road. The footpath took up the entire space between the buildings and was absolutely, toe-to-toe, packed with pedestrians. Each of them wore an identical hat and overcoat, held a newspaper under their right arm and

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rushed forward at equal speed with their heads bent to the ground. They were all, without exception, moving to his right. It was like standing on the bank of a rapidly moving river. *I've got nowhere else to go.* He had little choice but to jump in. He was quickly immersed by the crowd of pedestrians, whose unerring flow determined his direction. At first he faltered but soon he fell into step with the crowd. It was a matter of keeping up a brisk jog, allowing the brim of the hat in front of him to stay a few centimetres away from his forehead.

It was impossible for Tobias to see the faces of any of the pedestrians. Their upturned coat collars, tilted hats and downcast faces created a shield from his inquisitive eyes; however, the newspapers were not so secretive. They all contained the exact same headline: 'Latest Art Lover Arrives Today', below which was a picture of Tobias admiring the painting of concentric rectangles. Tobias' face turned white and his throat went dry. *A nightmare.* Suddenly, following the curve of the street, the crowd bent in a giant arc and Tobias, nudged from body to body, was manoeuvred into an adjoining lane. The torrent of pedestrians now passed behind him.

Tobias had lost all sense of time and was surprised to see his watch read 1:30. The crowd's rhythmical movement had hypnotised him and he was awakened only by the terrible discovery of the newspapers. Before this he had lost himself; absorbed with the crowd, he had felt united with everyone. It struck Tobias that the feeling of absorption he felt in the crowd was identical to the feeling he had when he stared at the painting. Now, he felt the rude shock of rejection and found himself standing in a narrow alleyway.

The alleyway's dark walls were only an arm span apart and towered so high that the sky appeared as a thin painted line. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he saw that the alleyway was a dead end, and in its gloom stood a creature holding something over his right shoulder. The creature was exposed by the dim light of the alleyway as it walked towards the art lover and to Tobias' horror he saw that he was being approached by himself - *a doppelganger* - carrying a large axe. He could have been looking in a mirror, except for the ironic grin and mischievous glint in the doppelganger's eyes.

'Don't be alarmed,' said the doppelganger, who sounded precisely like Tobias.

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Tobias was shaking. 'I am alarmed. I am very alarmed.'

'Now, now... The important thing is you are here. I have been expecting you.'

'Who are you?'

'I am you,' said the doppelganger placing his free hand on Tobias' shoulder.

Behind the doppelganger Tobias noticed the alleyway's end wall was moving towards them like the shadow cast from a setting sun. Behind Tobias, the shuffling sound of pedestrians had stopped.

'All I am,' said Tobias, 'is a simple art lover whose favourite painting, I am told, is a wormhole.'

'It is true,' said the doppelganger, 'that you have walked through a wormhole. You are now in another world - a world inhabited by those who just like you love the painting. Many others have come here and chose to stay, as you may. You could be one with the throng behind you.'

Tobias was seduced by these words. *It did feel good in there.* 'What would I have to do?'

'All you have to do, is kill me.' The doppelganger stepped closer to Tobias as he said this and fixed him with a hypnotic stare. 'All you have to do is cut off my head with this axe.' He held out the axe and offered it to Tobias.

Meanwhile, the alleyway was quickly contracting. It was half the length it had been when Tobias arrived.

'You're asking me to cut off your head?'

'I want you to do it,' said the doppelganger now pressing his nose against Tobias', 'that way you can stay.'

Tobias stared into his double's eyes and imagined his head rolling on the ground; the press of the doppelganger's flesh filled him with an eerie confidence.

'Look,' said the doppelganger turning Tobias around, 'look at the crowd from where you have come, look at their faces, look at what you could be.'

Tobias did what he was told and looked at the crowd of pedestrians. They had stopped their striding and all stared directly at him. Their faces were now exposed. But where their faces should have been were suspended rectangular illusions, each like Tobias' favourite painting. He had never seen anything so beautiful. Any joy he had felt immersed in the gallery's painting was now gloriously magnified. The edges,

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what should have been the contours of faces, were blurred air and folded into obscure dimensions; space had been pockmarked and its openings colonised by wormholes. He watched the wormholes wave tirelessly, like a field of windsocks caught in a breeze. *Lose my head and replace it with a wormhole.*

'OK', announced Tobias, 'I am ready. On your hands and knees doppelganger!'

'Good, good. Now remember to swing hard. My head must come off completely.' The doppelganger knelt down in front of the pedestrians with his head and buttocks pointed towards the alley walls and stretched his neck out as far as he possibly could.

'I will need a run up to help with the swing of my axe.'

He backed down the alleyway but stopped suddenly when his foot hit the wall. The alleyway was certainly closing; there was now only a few metres between the wall and the crowd of pedestrians. *It's 1:50. My time is diminishing, just like this shrinking alleyway.* With axe in hand, Tobias ran towards his doppelganger, and in one swift move he threw the axe to one side and leaped upon the doppelganger's back with his right foot, using it like a springboard to reach the shoulder of the closest pedestrian. 'You fool,' his doppelganger cried angrily, 'you don't know what you are missing out on. Wormholes to a thousand existences, your ecstasy, your painting...'. The doppelganger's words continued but Tobias was too preoccupied by his new circumstances to hear what was being said. Just as his foot had touched the shoulder of the closest pedestrian a sea of hands had simultaneously shot up in the air. The crowd was acting in self-defence, like a sea anemone protecting itself from an intrusive fish.

Tobias saw his chance and used the grasping hands with wriggling fingers like they were stepping-stones. Nimble he pounced from one to another leaving each hand before his foot could be seized and pulled downwards. Though his focus was on the hands he could see below them the sea of wormholes, ready to devour him should he fall or be captured. He did not wish to imagine the places he could be delivered to by an incensed wormhole. He continued his acrobatic journey until finally he leaped into the alcove from which he had emerged.

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Tobias looked at his watch and saw that the time was two minutes to two. He remembered the warning: *the wormhole will close in one hour*. He knocked on the door and it was immediately opened by the old creature who pointed toward the open door through which Tobias had originally entered and said, 'Hurry, if you wish to return to your world.' Realising the urgency of his situation Tobias rushed through the black door, which immediately closed behind him. He ran as fast as he could. Again the floating feeling, the sense of disorientation; white light, black void. He ran, willing himself toward its end. His watch turned two. A noise like the echo of a giant's swallow filled his ears. The wormhole was closing. It contracted like a concertina with each rectangle enclosing itself within its larger neighbour. He ran faster, his legs kicking through the air. Tobias' forehead was drenched in sweat. He did not want to be swallowed by the wormhole. The entrance appeared like a tiny window, but quickly grew. Tobias surged forward with all his strength. He looked over his shoulder and saw the passage end rushing toward him. But the entrance was close. He smiled. *I can make it. The gallery, I see it.* The familiar dimensions of the painting were becoming clear. So close. Only meters away. But then the wormhole closed. He felt an overwhelming force crush his bones and end his life as he was squeezed between the concentric rectangles, entombing him in the painting forever.

The painting became a sensation. On the front pages of newspapers all over the world questions were asked: 'How did this happen?' 'Has an unknown artist sneaked into the gallery?' 'Is it a copy?' 'Why does the painted man squeezed between the rectangles look so real?' It disturbed people to see the flattened body and the look of terror on the man's face, but no one could question its artistic brilliance. The effect, the art world lauded, was absolutely life-like.