

Mechanical Refinements

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This story, like all of Matt's stories, was written out of home, never at a desk, never stationary. (Matt's original rule was 'only while walking outside' but was revised into 'must be moving through earth based coordinate space' this allows occasional exceptions for trains, buses, etc..). Everything is written with pen and paper, then put into a document with voice-to-text, and finally edited and polished by Matt alone, no other human or AI is involved.

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“How did life turn out this way?” Pine wonders silently, standing in the doorway of the study watching Wilk, who is sitting hunched over at the desk. “How did I end up with someone who's so uninterested in me, so indifferent to everything I do, so dismissive of everything I care about?”

Stewing in those feelings of resentment for a while, Pine eventually taps with fingernails on the door frame a few times. “Huh?” Wilk turns around, mildly startled, seeing Pine standing there with stiff posture and a poorly repressed disapproving expression. “...Do you need something?”

Those eyes widen and glare. “Do I need something?...” Pine starts tapping again. “...I don't know where to begin answering that question...”

“...Is there something wrong, I...” A sudden flash of realization “Oh, right! Happy anniversary...” Wilk begins swiveling around to get up.

“Oh don't get up, it's fine.” Pine extends a hand with palm forward in a ‘stop’ gesture. “I don't want to interrupt your important work.”

Still readjusting focus, coming back down from head in the clouds, Wilk is flustered by that response “...Umm...” The motion to stand up stalls, and the situation is evaluated.

That raised stiff expression from the doorway suddenly droops as Pine turns and walks off without another word.

Wilk sits there processing the situation for far too long, first sensing the obvious anger but reluctant to leap up and chase, out of fear, fear induced by the mental image of a confrontation. ‘Maybe it would be better to just let things cool down’. Looking back at the messy desktop, it was obvious that returning to the realm of that puzzle was the wrong choice. After several minutes of cowardice and contemplation Wilk finally stands up and goes looking for Pine.

Out of the study and heading down the hall, approaching the end of the hall, the view of the living room gradually widens, the long back of the couch slowly coming into frame, then that familiar silhouette of a head and shoulders comes into view.

The pace of steps slows to a halt, now staring from behind as Pine flips through a magazine. Positions have now been reversed, but roles are completely different. Wilk is anxious ‘What do I do? How did we end up like this? It's like nothing I do is good enough like... Sitting there, mad at me... For what?... For being myself? For loving what I do?’ Wilk hovers there, locked in a sense of helplessness, wondering ‘How do you talk to someone who doesn't understand you? How do you engage with someone who always assumes the worst of you?’

Maybe it was a faint noise, or subtle shadows, or maybe it was a sixth sense. Pine feels a tingle of awareness, sensing that someone is there.

“Go back to your work dear.” Pine says emotionless, without turning around. “I made a dinner reservation, I’ll come get you when it’s time to get ready.”

The notion of doing that flickers in Wilk’s mind for only the briefest of instants before realizing that would be a mistake. “No, it’s our anniversary. We should spend time together.”

Putting down the magazine but not turning around, only lifting eyes up, staring straight forward at the wall, then speaking harshly. “Like what?” As those words resonate in the silence that follows, a mental image forms in Pine’s mind of Wilk standing there, feeling awkward and suffering from the sting from those barbs. Just as a sense of vengeful justice begins to surface, it is dispersed by an upwelling of regret. Not wanting to feel the guilt or be an equal participant in their degrading relationship, Pine now turns to look at Wilk. “That’s a good idea, dear. What would you like to do?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?” Those words of apathy and deference suck up what little warmth was in the room and the temperature plummets. Pine was making an effort to project softness, but now stops trying and that forced gentle expression freezes into an icy glare. This all happens in a second, Wilk immediately recognizes the disappointment beneath the anger and reacts reflexively. “...It’s a nice day, let’s go for a walk. Maybe we think of something, or maybe not. Let’s just start strolling aimlessly, it doesn’t matter where we go, as long as we are together.”

A correction feels less authentic, but Pine can still see the effort, also noticing a concealed timid and nervous fear, it’s almost cute, enough to melt the ice. “That’s sweet, I like it.” Standing up and walking over, touching Wilk on the arm and saying “Shall we then?” The two of them head to the front door.

Getting ready and putting on shoes is a very quiet and courteous process, both constantly offering to let the other go first, and flashing polite pleasant smiles. The quiet well-mannered atmosphere follows them out the door and down the street, like a calm fog encompassing and drifting along with them.

They both start to itch as the neutrality begins feeling sterile and artificial. Pine was more attuned to this unspoken and increasingly obvious shared irritation, but Wilk was the first to scratch it. “I’m sorry I forgot our anniversary. I’ve just been so bogged down lately...”

“Don’t act like that’s new!...” Snapping to cut off Wilk’s coming train of excuses and begin berating, but Pine catches what was going to be an equally long chain of heated criticisms. Now opting for a gentler but still firm response. “...I don’t want to rehash the same old fights we’ve had a million times before. Please, just leave it at ‘I’m sorry’. You don’t need to explain.”

Silently taking a few more steps. For Wilk each step seems to sink deeper into the pavement, sinking into a sense of shame, then suddenly popping right back up, head raised high. “Yes I

do!” Turning to face Pine, who returns a startled gaze. “You always assume the worst of me. I’m always stuck between a rock and a hard place, explaining myself annoys you, but if I keep quiet then I’m convicted in absentia, judged for a malicious intent I’m not actually guilty of.” As those last words are spoken the courage dissolves, replaced with an impulse to retreat, but Pine jumps in before there is time to backpedal or soften that position.

“Are you seriously trying to turn this on me?” that response ends with such an audibly loud ‘huff’ that even Pine notices, but the emotional self-awareness isn’t enough anymore, no longer interested in trying to lubricate this friction. “It’s not enough to avoid responsibility, now you’re blaming your excuse making behavior on me? Even your excuses have excuses!” That hard glare begins to soften then turns sharply to look away. Intentionally using furious twisting body language as a misdirection, desperately trying to cover an emerging irrepressible pain and sadness. As these thoughts and words take form, a dry brown leaf catches Pine’s eye. “You used to give me tender loving flowers, now you only give me dry withered excuses.”

Wilk replies instantly. “You told me not to buy you flowers. You said…”

“Arg! Think! Listen and think!... You supposedly think for a living but it sure doesn’t show. Always going on about ‘the implications of this’ and ‘the underlying mechanics of that’... but what about me? ... I’m just some superficial empty shell to you! You spend more time contemplating the internal workings of your click-pen than considering what I feel or think!” Eyes turning red, tears beginning to leak. Pine now turns to face and make eye contact, Wilk sees the anger and snarl which provokes an instinct to stand firm. But those teary eyes and trembling lips, they evoke a blend of empathetic grief and guilt, Wilk’s gaze timidly drops to the ground and turns away. Then the emotional venting continues, this time a distilled and elaborated form for emphasis and clarity. Still deeply upset, but sorrow now dominates the anger. “The flowers were just a symbol. I did tell you to stop buying me flowers so often, but I never told you to stop giving me love, time, and attention.” Those vulnerable words unexpectedly brought forth a sense of self-disgust at how pathetic, needy, and weak they sound. “...You used to make me feel seen and cared for, you gave me love and attention, now it’s all just evasion and excuses.”

“I... Tha...” A feeling of innocence and injustice is trying to speak, but there is an equally strong recognition of truth and what Pine has said. “I don’t know what to say... I can’t argue. You are right, I don’t spend as much time with you, I just... Life is busy... Things change, you know?” Wilk is treading carefully, being very cautious to not ‘make excuses’. Repeatedly aborting trains of thought, trying to let an abstract feeling materialize in an ‘acceptable’ verbal form. “What you said is true... I’m sorry... But...” Pausing to explore ways to express more, but the moment is only allowed to hang for a couple seconds before being interrupted.

“That’s all that’s left in you, excuses!” Pine was hanging on every word, there was a twinkle of hope and affection as Wilk expressed acknowledgment and regret, then it all crumbled when that word was spoken, ‘but’, that word that precedes all excuses. “But you are too busy, but there are more important things, but we have responsibilities, but but but! You just can’t help it,

can you? You can't stop making excuses for..." the angry rant was ramping up, more and more intense, but then sharply cut off.

"But I'm tired of being the villain! I'm tired of everything being my fault! You used to understand me, you used to think the best of me, even when it wasn't true." The blunt force of that uncharacteristic outburst shocked them both. It resonated like the disorienting ring after a deafening explosive 'bang'. They stopped dead in their tracks, Pine is still shell-shocked when Wilk eventually speaks again, unapologetic but gentle now. "I remember when it felt like you got me. You knew me, sometimes better than I knew myself. I remember when you would seem to know what I wanted to say before I even had the words. You used to assume the best of me, even when it wasn't true. I used to want to live up to the person you believed I was... Now I'm just scared that I'll turn into the horrible person that you think I am." Turning face-to-face for emphasis on those last few words with a hardening tone. The pair is stupefied, knocked out of the 'here and now'. Both of them know they should have thoughts and feelings about what just happened, but there is nothing. They are both staring into the pools of their own consciousness, waiting for something to emerge. But there are no waves, not even a ripple, just a smooth surface. Boulders just splashed into the sea of their souls and somehow the waters are motionless and calm, the pools of their consciousness are so still that the surfaces are invisible, like staring into a void.

They were both still waiting for something, anything, then Wilk took a step without knowing why, maybe it was just to leave that spot behind. They both started walking. The sights and sounds were all so sterile now, nothing evoked any reaction, nothing stirred any waters.

A few minutes of strolling in silence, then single word gently slips from Pine's lips "How?..." That was enough, that one word started unfolding into more. "How did this happen?"

"I don't know..." Wilk started answering before knowing what to say. "...It was a long time coming I guess. With this much unspoken baggage, it was inevitably gonna blow up in an argument..."

"No." Pine cuts in, gently, like the flow of slow and courteous merging traffic. "...I mean how did we end up like this? How did this happen? How did our relationship start going downhill?"

They both ponder that question then Wilk answers. "I guess I started ignoring you. I'm sorry. I should have set aside more time for..." But that flow is interrupted, this time aggressively cut off.

Pine abruptly stops walking. "Oh don't! Don't do that!" Wilk stops one step too late, now in front. Turning around to see a stern expression waiting behind. "I'm serious, I want to know how. I don't want a blind apology. I don't want to blame you... I've been blaming you for years... We... We've been blaming each other for so long... How did this happen?!" By the end of that demand the harsh tone had turned into pleading for an answer.

But Wilk doesn't have an answer and just stands there looking confused, until Pine gets frustrated and starts walking again. Getting a few steps ahead now, when Wilk blurts out. "I don't think it started at any specific time." Jumping to catch up.

A growing curiosity now takes control of Pine's train of thought. "Is that really how you remember me?" Asking hesitantly as they walk. "Always understanding you, knowing you better than you know yourself."

"Yes!" Wilk answers with immediate certainty. You made me feel it so much that I even have memories of thinking about it. I remember times obsessing over how you just seemed to know everything I was thinking, wondering how you always managed to anticipate me, waiting for me to do or say what you already knew I was going to do or say..." That description halts as a realization takes its place. "Wait, I've said these things before... Back then... I told you this back then, several times."

"Huh?" While listening to that description Pine had inadvertently drifted off, cradled in the warmth of feeling cherished. Startled by the question, unprepared and clumsily struggling to respond. "...Um.... Yeah I guess... But you said so many sweet things back then. I didn't know which were charming sweet-talk, or which were genuine and important to you... Is that... Is that why you fell in love with me? Because I understood you?"

"Yes!... No!" The strong confident 'yes' floats for only a second before it is retracted firmly. Pine flinches at the sharp 'no' and looks at Wilk, who is staring off into the distance, swimming in fond memories, then follows up speaking with a soft smile. "I fell in love with you before you understood me."

Neither spoke, this interval felt perfect, but fragile.

Eventually, after soaking in memories, Wilk had composed a more refined response. "I fell in love with your gentle kindness. I remember how much you cared about everything. You empathized with everyone, you were happy for other people's happiness, you genuinely hurt along with other people as they suffered. Your empathy and caring shined through so clearly, I fell in love with you right away. I remember thinking..." Wilk stops abruptly, eyes widen, then head drops a little while exhaling slowly before continuing. "...I remember thinking how you weren't jaded or cynical, and how I wanted to keep you in my life... And... That you should choose to be with me because I would appreciate and treasure you for who you were." Listless and sinking into shame. "I chased you, I promised you, and I promised myself, that I would protect your gentle sensitivity. I'm sorry it's all my..."

"Oh, cut it out! We aren't kids anymore. You aren't responsible. I didn't need you to protect me back then, and I don't need you to take the blame for who I have become now." Pine gently punches Wilk in the arm. "Besides, I wasn't as fragile or innocent as you thought. And just because..." Searching for a gentle way to phrase the next part. "... Just because our relationship

has 'cooled off', doesn't mean my heart is frozen. I have lots of friends, family, and community in my life. We lost our passion and warmth... 'We', not 'Me'."

"That's fair." Wilk's spirits lift a bit, it's a little humbling to confront the reality of only being only one piece of Pine's much fuller life, but it is better than the guilty feeling from a moment ago. "What about you? How do you remember us falling in love?"

Pine had already been revisiting memories and exploring this, so the answer was ready. "Your meticulous devotion. You had such meticulous passion in everything you did, and you were so attentively devoted to the people you cared for." Reviewing these memories had already brought up some old feelings, but saying this out loud now stirred up a much stronger emotional surge. Taking a moment before describing a beloved core memory, knowing it will surely be even stronger. "Do you remember the day you made that origami flower for me, using a napkin at a restaurant. The napkin was so soft, when you finished the first one you said it wasn't good enough, and you kept trying. Asking that poor waiter over and over for more napkins, haha... By your third attempt I noticed how I felt about you. Watching you so intent on turning that floppy napkin into an intricate flower to give to me... I realized that I had already fallen for you. I had been seeing that meticulous devotion in everything you did, and had become enchanted by it."

That story brought forth a surge of nostalgic fondness not only in Pine, but also in Wilk, whose eyes are tearing up a bit. "That was the day we went to the fair. I won that prize for you, then later you gave it to some parents to help them calm down their crying child. That moment stuck with me all day, I kept thinking how you were definitely the one." Throat tightening, a hint of choking on the next few words. "I didn't think you even remembered that. I couldn't find a way to show you how I felt that day. I was desperate to earn your heart and trying everything I could think of to impress you. I thought you just found it cute. Are you telling me that it actually worked?"

The memories of that day are now so fresh in Pine's mind that it feels like yesterday "Yes!" This 'yes', this affirmation, it felt somehow similar to the one given on the day Wilk proposed. "...It would seem we quietly fell in love with each other on the same day." There would have been a cute laugh to follow that, but it gets stuck behind Pine's lips and throat which are tightened, constricting in a strained attempt to contain and conceal overwhelming emotions.

They dwell in their memories of that moment. This new perspective gives that long-past day a new tender glow. Both have impulses to show affection, however neither dares, perhaps it's practicality or fear of rejection. The broader context of everything that happened today looms overhead, smothering their urges to turn or embrace.

Bathing in long unfelt feelings is intoxicating them both, their silence was so prolonged that when Pine finally spoke up they had already wandered deep into the park. "So what changed?" That question had stood alone in Pine's mind, but speaking it out loud exploded into more. "You are still meticulous and devoted in so many things, and I'm still caring and sensitive with so

many people. So how did this happen? We both still have the same qualities that we loved, so why did we stop giving those things to each other?"

They continue wandering through the park scouring their memories. The way things are now is obvious, and they clearly remember the close loving relationship of long ago, but no matter how hard they inspect their history there are no cracks or fissures, just a couple's love devolved into resentment, there are not even any obvious transitions.

As they keep moving and searching for answers, a fluttering tune creeps up on them, the music is someone practicing the flute in this corner of the park. They are walking on an old wood footbridge across the creek when something about that melody catches their attention. Turning to face the side of the bridge, Wilk's palms rest on the guardrail, Pine joins, and the couple stares out towards the source of the sound, but they can't see who is playing, it's coming from somewhere behind the tree line.

The flutist is clearly an amateur, the notes are all correct but there are frequent leaky airy sounds beneath the tones. Something about those raw breathy lines of melody make it feel real. It begins to resonate in Wilk's mind until swelling into a cohesive thought.

"I think we mistook the frame for the painting." Hearing this, Pine turns to look curiously at Wilk, who continues staring out into the distance. "We confused skill and heart... I fell in love with your gentle kindness, your heart. But somewhere along the line I started thinking what made you special was how well you understood me, a skill."

Those words ring true with Pine, turning to stare out towards that imperfect beautiful sound as well, thinking for a bit before adding "...I fell in love with your meticulous devotion, I think I started confusing 'the way you do things' with 'the things you do'. You are still meticulous and devoted in our relationship, just in different ways now."

"Different how?" Wilk left very little space before asking, with a hint of neediness.

"Practical. You try to take care of me instead of showing interest." Pine answers immediately, then takes a moment to center before restarting. "I know I said that before, or shouted it, so I want to be clear... I don't want to fight about this, but that's just how I feel. It's like you give me the attention you 'should give me' instead of the attention you 'want to give me'."

"I get it.. In some past fights you accused me of losing interest in you... And I denied it... I denied it adamantly! But after spending this much time revisiting the memories of how we used to be... it's obvious to me now. You are right." That admission was hard to make, especially after denying it so many times before. It was just as intensely appreciated as it was difficult to give, because that acknowledgment finally loosened a horribly tight knot inside of Pine. "I don't know when or how it happened, but I started to feel like I couldn't figure out how to 'share-interests' with you, so instead I just lazily relied on showing that I 'care-about' you."

The word sorry was not even said, but that admission felt more apologetic than anything Pine had ever heard.

Pine's head tilts upwards and eyes roll all the way back to look up into the sky, speaking softly with dripping eyes. "I'm sorry I started thinking the worst of you." A little snuffle interrupts the flow. "Maybe..." Another snuffle. "Maybe if I hadn't started assuming the worst... Then maybe..." The image of an offender and scapegoat is now cracking and Pine feels guilty of being unfair. Tears are rolling as that petrified image of Wilk as the antagonist is shattered, and now self-doubt is surging with thoughts like 'Did I start this by assuming the worst?', 'Was this all just my own self-fulfilling prophecy?'. Empathy and understanding were pillars of Pines identity, and now those pillars of self-image are crumbling.

"Don't you dare! Don't you dare blame yourself!" The invisible contextual barrier between them is torn, whatever constraints and inhibitions were insulating them broke down. Wilk embraces Pine, who is surprised by it, pushing back with palms forward. Then all of those refreshed memories of how they fell in love saturate, replacing any other thoughts or impulses. The push of those rejecting palms turns into grasping claws and all resistance dissolves, leaning relaxed into the embrace as tears continue flowing.

"Like you said, no blame... It's not that bad, we just drifted apart... It is what it is." Wilk consoles, loosening the tight squeeze into a softer hug.

One big snuffle, then releasing those clawing fingertips and pushing back gently but firmly, Pine wipes away some tears and looks to see Wilk's eyes are equally drenched. "It doesn't have to be... Not anymore." An optimistic and half-confident smile starts tugging at the lips and cracks the corners of the eyes, as Pine reaches up to place a hand on Wilk's cheek. "Now that we know what went wrong, we can fix it." There is a long pause as the couple gazes at each other, then their breathing gently slows and stormy emotions subside into calm.

"Yes, you're right." Looking intently at Pine, whose open palm is still gently caressing Wilk's cheek, and now Wilk's hand blankets and presses it firmly. "So tell me dear, what do you want to do?... I don't mean that like I used to, I'm not asking you to choose the restaurant or pick where to go. I'm not just relegating the planning to you. I really want to know what you are interested in doing."

Smiling and gently tugging on that trapped hand, Pine's hand slips free and slides down, then taps Wilk on the collarbone. "Oh... I don't know..." Pausing to ponder, trying to come up with a good suggestion "...We haven't been to the art gallery in a long time."

"Oh come on..." Wilk dismisses that idea with playfully pursed lips and scrunched nose. "That's such a generic date, it's something you would select as a compromise. I know you like the gallery, but I'm also sure there must be other things you would prefer, things you want to do but..." Trailing off before making a reference to past friction, reluctantly taking a breath and

continuing. "...Things that you would normally do without me, because I wouldn't be interested. That's what I want to do today."

Pine wiggles free from the embrace and leans up against the rail facing outwards, Wilk then turns to do the same. Side by side, looking down the creek. Pine considers the question. "Ah.... Um..." Reflecting, then answering in an uncertain tone. "Well, I've really been looking forward to watching that documentary, the one that just came out but you wouldn't be..."

"The one about that singer you like so much?" Wilk cuts in, quite confident in that guess.

"Yes. I've been trying to carve out time to watch it for days." Pine confirms. "But you don't have to..."

"I want to!" Wilk asserts, then takes a more sheepish and remorseful tone. "I know I used to scoff at that sort of stuff... I'm pretty sure I went so far as to belittle you for enjoying it. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Pine places a hand on Wilk's shoulder. "You don't get it, and that's fine, it's not your cup of tea."

"I want to get it" Wilk insists, not letting this be dismissed. "I always write off that celebrity and pop culture stuff as silly tabloids and gossip, but I know how smart you are, so there must be more to it than that. Right?"

"Well... Yes and no. Sometimes it is just silly gossip. Sometimes it can be nice to just relax and read some pop trends or stupid celebrity drama, hehe." Pine giggles, then looks down at the water with a pensive expression and continues. "But I mostly enjoy it for deeper reasons."

Pine was clearly searching for the right words, but Wilk's impatient curiosity jumps in. "Like what?"

"Like... like that!" Pine says, pointing down at the gently flowing creek beneath the bridge.

"Water?" Wilk asks in complete confusion.

"Haha, no. The reflections of us." They both stare at their rippling warped reflections.

"Celebrities can be like a mirror of ourselves and the people in our lives. It can help to look at things from a distance, sometimes you first need to notice, identify, and name something from a detached perspective before you can see it in yourself or your friends and family."

"Huh! I never thought of it that way." Wilk remains focused on the reflection for a while, then comments. "But the lives of celebrities are so grandiose and distorted from our perspective, especially as we perceive them through gossip and media."

“Oh! That's a feature not a bug, haha!” Pine says with a smirk. “It's not just distorted, it's magnified, ‘larger than life’. That's what makes it fascinating while also feeling easily detached from our own reality, like you are laughing at, crying with, or criticizing an enormous caricature... Until, without warning, you realize you're criticizing yourself in the mirror, or crying at the pain of your worst enemy.”

“That makes so much sense. I can't believe I've been so dismissive and close-minded all these years.” Surprised at the depth of that explanation, Wilk is digesting it and building visual interpretations. “The way you describe it, it feels like standing inside a spherical but imperfect mirror, looking around at giant magnified and warped reflections of yourself. The vast distant surfaces appear like giants all around you, but they are really just your own distorted reflections”

Filled with a wonderful familiar feeling, turning to look at Wilk, who is still gazing at the water. “I forgot how much I love it when you do that... When you listen, understand, and then show how much you value my ideas by refining my words, or constructing such elegant analogies with them.” Savoring this old familiar feeling of being heard and valued, something that Wilk was so good at giving. “Okay, forget the restaurant. Tonight we can just order in and watch that show together, if you are sure you really want to.”

“Excellent! You won't mind if I ask questions, right? We might have to pause quite a few times, haha.” Wilk says playfully, but also serious.

“Ask as many questions as you want, it's more than okay.” Pine is already imagining this night on the couch together sharing a good show. The thought of talking throughout it, instead of just watching in silence, makes it infinitely more ideal. Enjoying this anticipatory fantasy for a while before noticing that Wilk is concentrated on the water, and strikingly silent, in a familiar way. “I can tell your mind is off somewhere far away. You look so serious, what are you thinking about that has you so fixated?” A prick of worry stings. “Something about us?”

“Huh... Oh... No.” Wilk was deep in thought so that question echoed several times, like a skipping record player in the background, before it finally registered and provoked a response. “I was just thinking about that spherical mirror idea, and then I looked out a bit further down the water. See over there, where the water reflects the trees and those buildings? ”

“Yes.” Pine answers, waiting for the much longer and detailed elaboration which is sure to follow.

“See how the reflected image is distorted by those waves and ripples? It's looks like it's pulsing, the image is unstable, almost alive. Each wave bends the reflection as it passes, the waves are like dancing sparkles, blotchy patches, and twisted contours.” Wilk looks over to Pine, who is now also gazing at the reflections, then nods to indicate seeing the described visual effects. “Well, there is this idea called the ‘holographic principle’. There is an interesting way that we can add an extra dimension to a space by using something called scale-invariance. I won't bore you with too many details, but scale-invariance means the patterns and rules are the same, not just

everywhere, but also at different scales. Zooming in or out, the patterns and rules are the same, so the 'zooming' is like an extra dimension. Did I lose you?"

"I think I understand." Pine responds. "It sounds like one of those fractals you love so much."

"No... Um... I mean... That's actually a pretty good analogy... But when you zoom-in on a fractal it is 'spatial zooming', like a magnifying glass. This is more abstract, It's like zooming in on energy levels." Looking over Wilk can see this was more-or-less understood, but Pine is still trying to extract an interpretation. "Don't worry about the details, you are close enough... Anyways... The holographic principle started as a way to model the event horizon of black holes. So it's usually thought of as a spherical surface, and the extra dimension 'fills the volume inside'." Pausing, Wilk can see Pine is showing signs of recognition, remembering the distorted spherical mirror from a moment ago. "So, I was looking out at those dancing reflections, and I thought about pilot wave theory. Quantum mechanics describes reality as fundamentally being made of waves, instead of particles. Pilot wave theory suggests that maybe there really are tiny particles, but we can't see them..."

"Yes dear, you've explained pilot waves to me many times, haha." Pine interrupts. "A pool of water with little styrofoam beads floating on the surface. The beads float and move with the waves, they also make waves. We can't see these little styrofoam beads, so all we can know is that 'things move like waves'. It seems to us like the waves are what reality is made of, when really the little beads are just being pushed and pulled by waves."

"Oh, haha... Yes, I guess I have rambled on about that one quite a few times, haven't I?" Wilk says, a bit embarrassed. "So those dancing and sparkling reflections, I was hit by an idea... No... It was two simultaneous ideas, superimposed on each other. What if there is an objective reality, like pilot wave theory, but what if it was a full solid reality reflected by waves and... What if the reflecting waves are scale-invariant, like the holographic principle." Wilk gestures emphatically pointing with an index finger. Pine delights in a feeling best described as 'vicarious joy' mixed with pride in Wilk's passion and creativity, quietly waiting, knowing the silence won't last long. "Both ideas stand alone, both feel like they individually would be wonderful puzzles to explore... But, I also have a strong intuition that they are most interesting if combined. I'm bouncing between one, the other, and both. I can't decide where to start."

"What does your gut say?" Pine has seen this kind of indecision often, the best way to help is just guiding Wilk to talk it out. "I know you, you are drowning in a million details, and it's paralyzing you. Start simple, what are the single most appealing aspects of each of the options. Only one thing from each."

"Okay well... With trying to model quantum mechanics as waves that reflect an underlying reality, the first thing that stands out is the question of dimensionality." Passion starts to emerge as Wilk answers, looking over at Pine who knows this will be mostly going overhead but stays focused and attentive. "The waves don't need to have the same number of dimensions as the reality they reflect. Are the quantum waves reflecting a lower dimensional reality and inflating it

into our 4D space-time, or are they reflecting a higher dimensional reality and flattening it into our cosmos?”

“I can tell that one will fascinate you, I can see how much it pulls on your passion.” Trying to play the role of logical inquiry, but Pine just can't help smiling. “Okay, what about the others?”

“Attempting to describe a holographic universe as a distorted internal reflective sphere.” Will turns and stares up at the heavens, as if trying to see this imagined shell of the universe through the blue sky. “I can think of several ways to model it, but the most alluring idea is the way you described it, like it's a reflection of yourself. Maybe the only difference that matters is where you are standing inside the sphere. There are only reflections of yourself all around, and they are just twisted and distorted differently as you change your position and viewing angle.”

“I like that one.” Joining Wilk and staring up into the sky, Pine thinks about it, wondering if the only difference between them is the distance between their points of view. Drifting in that pleasant thought for a while before asking. “There was one more, right?”

“Yeah, combining both. It's often better to break complex problems into chunks, and solve smaller pieces before integrating them together. But my instinct says this may be one of those times that are exceptions. Sometimes models can't be constructed by simply layering and combining smaller ideas, sometimes you need a united holistic model.” Holding both hands forward, palms facing each other and fingers curled, as if holding a basketball. Wilk stares into this imaginary sphere in hand. “If our universe is scale-invariant waves on the surface of a sphere, and if the reflections are of something inside the sphere... Maybe it's a hypersphere or higher dimensional sphere, or maybe it's only reflecting a point or a surface... Maybe the reflections inflate or deflate the dimensionality of space...” Wilk trails off, lifting up the imaginary ball as if to look at it closer. “...But maybe it's just a normal sphere with scale-invariant surface waves, reflecting a normal 3D volume inside... There's something oddly poetic about that... The idea that some other 3D reality is flattened into a 2D surface, then inflated again to create our 3D universe.” Hands pressing together and then opening up repeatedly, as if flattening this imaginary ball and re-inflating it over and over.

Pine sees a gleeful delight in Will's face, and is infected by it. “This is already the best anniversary ever, for both of us I believe.” Edging up hip-to-hip and leaning in, reaching over and placing a hand on Wilk's far shoulder. “Why don't you work on those ideas tonight, and I'll watch my show. Today was already perfect, and to be honest, I will probably love thinking about you working on the ideas you conceived here today. It's like this long-overdue reconciliation will echo in those ideas as you work on them. I'm not just saying this, it's really okay, this isn't a test or trap.”

“Oh no!” Wilk snaps out of that daze and looks over at Pine. “We are watching that show together, and you are going to explain everything I don't understand, haha.”

“Aren't you worried you will forget?” Pine asks in a somewhat concerned tone. “You always say how easily a complex idea can fade, that even taking a short break can set you back hours. You once described it as ‘most of the work is just loading up the constructs in your head’, that taking breaks requires reloading, and sometimes you lose bits or whole ideas if you put them down for too long.”

“That's true.” Wilk looks into Pine's eyes. “But that's what notes and mnemonics are for, and these ideas are now connected to the most powerful mnemonic imaginable.” Smiling and squinting before leaning in to kiss Pine, nothing too extreme, just a loving and gentle kiss. It lasted only a bit longer than a second, then pulling back and looking at Pine, seeing a warm loving expression staring back. That was a bullseye, Wilk doesn't dare mess with perfection, now turning back to the dancing reflections. “Besides... I don't think I want to work on these ideas yet.”

“Really?” Pine stares in confusion at Wilk. “That's not like you at all. Usually when you feel a spark of inspiration you immediately dive in head first.”

“Yeah haha...” Laughing gently, and finding the words to explain. “These kinds of ideas and models can be so beautiful, they can feel like whole new paradigms when you're first exploring them. But once you start working out the math, sometimes you realize they were just abstract ideas that don't translate into formulas in any meaningful way. Or they frequently turn out to just be string theory by another name, or a reframing quantum field theory... Haha.” Chuckling at memories of past wild-goose-chases down deep rabbit-holes, they're funny now in retrospect. “I think I want to savor them abstractly before I start trying to work them out.”

“I see.” Pine is pleasantly surprised, a bit proud, and most importantly filled with profound contentment in this relationship again. Leaning sideways into Wilk, just to create a physical sensation between them, Wilk leans back to balance the force. As they relax, that airy flute melody catches their attention again and carries them off into such a peaceful haze.

“That tune is so beautiful. I can't decide if it will sound more exquisite or less enchanting when the flutist improves their skill. Those breathy imperfections might actually add to the beauty.” Wilk begins thinking out loud. “I guess it's like these ideas. Is it possible they will lose their meaning if I start formulating models? Or like us, did the skills we developed for dealing with each other harm our relationship? I guess it's probably not a simple answer, it never is...” Wilk seems fixated and stuck on this. “...I guess all we can do is be conscious and aware... These skills aren't bad things, but if they replace or overwhelm everything else, then they become problematic. We just need to pay attention to these... Um... These...”

Pine leans in and kisses Wilk on the cheek, then gently fills in the blank that is causing so much stress “Mechanical refinements”

