

The Reality Director



Tenderplexed

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From the Tenderplexed Vaults

*Tenderplexed is a library of portals disguised as stories — gateways
into futures and echoes that shimmer just beyond the veil.*

*Each Vault opens to a different corridor of possibility,
where myth and machine blur, and the reader becomes the traveler.*

Chapter 1 – Missing Reels

I don't remember meeting David's brother, though he swears we shook hands at his wedding.

I don't remember the scar on Peter's wrist, though he says I asked about it once, in detail.

I don't remember signing the parcel delivery, though my name is on the receipt, in my handwriting.

I don't remember the film everyone claims we watched together last summer.

I don't remember who laughed with me at that joke, only that everyone else remembers it was me who told it.

These are not ordinary forgettings. Forgetting leaves traces — a tug, a sense of oh yes, once I knew this. These moments leave nothing. They feel uninhabited, as if someone else wore my skin for the day and failed to send the memories back.

So I've started keeping this log.

Not of what I recall, but of what I don't.



Chapter 2 – Gaps Multiply

The Café

Miriam waved at me across the street yesterday, bright and casual, like we'd shared some secret.

"Thanks again for last week," she said when I reached her. "I can't stop thinking about what you told me at the café."

I blinked. "What café?"

She laughed, shaking her head. "Don't do that. You're the one who insisted we sit by the window. Remember? We talked about my new job; how nervous I was. You told me to imagine the office as a stage, that confidence is costume, not essence. It helped. A lot."

Her eyes softened. She meant it. I had apparently saved her from drowning in self-doubt.

But I wasn't there.

I tried to summon last Thursday, even the faintest trace — but nothing came. Not the café, not another location, not even the shape of the day. Just a hole in the fabric: pure white silence, as if for those hours I had been nowhere at all.

I nodded anyway, smiled in the right places, pretended to share the warmth of the memory. But all I could think was: If it wasn't me who sat in that café, then who was wearing my face?

That night I dreamt of the café. The window was empty, the chair across from Miriam unoccupied. A cup of coffee cooled in front of nobody. I woke with the taste of bitterness on my tongue, as though I had been drinking absence all along.

The Workplace

At work, the gaps are harder to hide.

I am an archivist, custodian of other people's memories. Our building is a low, stone-faced cube on the edge of the city, windowless except for narrow slits that let in dust but not much light. Inside, it smells of paper, ink, and the faint tang of mildew that clings to documents older than me.

I chose this job because it felt steady, safe. Nothing dramatic, nothing fleeting. History doesn't argue; it waits patiently for you to unbox it. There's comfort in rows of boxes, in dates and labels, in the sense that at least someone is keeping track.

And yet, I am losing track of myself.

I was halfway through cataloguing a box of wartime letters when my supervisor stopped by.

"Good work on the Anderson file," she said. "The annotations you added yesterday — really insightful."

I stared at her. Yesterday, I hadn't touched the Anderson file. I'd spent the afternoon on accession logs. Or at least... I thought I had. When I try to place myself, the hours are blank.

No desk, no screen, no pages in my hands. Just absence, like a corridor with no doors.

But in the file drawer, the evidence waited: penciled notes in my handwriting, signed with my initials. The letters carefully organized, exactly as she described.

I don't remember the work. Yet here it was, with my name written all over it.

I nodded, thanked her, and said nothing. What else could I do? To admit the blank would sound like madness.

Later, I read through the annotations, searching for a clue, for some trace of my own voice. They sounded like me. But also... not. As if someone had worn my mannerisms like a costume, good enough to fool everyone, even the page itself.

I sat at my desk after everyone left, staring at the Anderson file. The handwriting on the notes was mine. But I couldn't remember the motion of the pen, the feel of the paper.

I told myself it was a prank. Maybe someone was mocking me, imitating my style, planting these notes to see if I'd notice. Archivists get bored too. It could be a joke that went too far.

But the longer I studied the pages, the more impossible that seemed. Every line carried the little quirks only I would know — my shorthand, the loops of the y's, the slant of the t's, my odd habit of circling certain words. A prankster could fake my handwriting, maybe. But could they fake my unconscious mistakes?

Illness, then. Early-onset something — dementia, temporal lobe seizures, dissociation. My heart raced at the thought. I'm thirty-five. Too young for the first, too healthy for the second, too sane for the last.

And yet the blanks keep multiplying, and sanity is a fragile thing to balance on when the ground shifts beneath you.

If it isn't a prank, and it isn't an illness... then what is left?

The Dinner

It happened again last Friday. A colleague swore we had gone out for dinner after work. Three of us, she said, celebrating the end of a difficult project. She described the restaurant, the wine, even the ridiculous paper hat the waiter made me wear after spilling sauce on my sleeve.

I laughed along, but inside I was ice. Because I had no memory of it. None. Friday night, for me, was a blank corridor.

At home, I found no stains on my jacket, no receipt in my wallet. But when I opened the fridge, there was a carton of leftovers I didn't remember ordering. Someone had eaten half of it already.



Chapter 3 – A Stranger in the Hall

I told Alex the next day, sitting across from him in a café I did remember. He stirred sugar into his coffee with the deliberate calm of someone who believed every mystery could be solved with patience and caffeine.

“You’re overworked,” he said. “It’s classic. Memory filters kick in — you store the highlights, discard the mundane. Stress amplifies it. Add your solitary habits, the way you bury yourself in archives all day... It’s not healthy.”

I nodded, but the pit in my stomach didn’t budge.

“You need balance,” he went on. “More time outside those stone walls, more fun. Meet someone. Go to a bar, a concert, anything. Right now, you go home to your cat and your files. No wonder your brain is editing reality. It’s bored.”

He smiled, trying to soften it. “Seriously. Get out more, before you turn into one of your dusty boxes.”

I laughed at that, because it was easier than saying: Alex, what if the boxes remember better than I do?

That night, I fed the cat, boiled pasta, and read until my eyes blurred. It was a quiet evening, the kind I clung to — predictable, contained.



The next morning, I ran into Mrs. Halvorsen, my neighbor. “Quite the change, seeing you dressed up last night,” she said. “You looked smart. That dark suit really suits you. Off to something special?”

I blinked. “Last night?”

She frowned. “Yes... around eight. You locked your door, straightened your tie, and walked down the hall. I even complimented you — though you seemed in a rush. Didn’t you hear me?”

I forced a laugh. “Must’ve been someone else.”

But she only gave me that look older people give when they know they’re not wrong. “I know who my neighbors are,” she said flatly.

The elevator doors opened. I stepped inside, pulse hammering. The reflection in the polished steel stared back — my ordinary clothes, my worn jacket.

I remembered pasta. I remembered the cat curling on my lap. I remembered nothing else.

And yet, someone wearing my face had walked past Mrs. Halvorsen in a suit I don’t own.

Back in my apartment, I tore through the closet. No suit. Nothing like she had described. Only my worn jackets and tired shirts.

I sat down, trying to calm my breathing. The cat jumped onto my lap, purring as if nothing in the world was wrong. I reached

to stroke her, and that's when I saw it — a thin rectangle on the floor, half-hidden beneath the couch leg. A business card. Cream-colored, heavy stock, embossed with an eye so faint I almost missed it. Beneath, a single line of text:

THE SHOP OF MOMENTS

No address. No phone. Just the words, stark and absolute. I turned it over. Blank.

My cat pawed at the corner of the card, mewling softly. I stared at it until the room swam, a hollow ache opening in my chest.

Had I dropped it last night, coming home from somewhere I don't remember going? Or had it been waiting here all along, like an answer to a question I hadn't dared to ask?

I slipped the card into the drawer with spare batteries and old receipts. Out of sight, out of mind. Probably someone had handed it to me weeks ago, a street promotion, a gimmick I'd forgotten. Strange, yes, but not supernatural. It meant nothing.

For a few days, I managed to believe it. Work, files, the cat, the log of missing reels — life went on.

But the card waited.

One evening, the drawer jammed. I pulled it open, and there it was again — cream stock, embossed eye, the words *The Shop of Moments*. As fresh and precise as the day I'd found it.



Chapter 4 – Riddles

I typed the phrase into every search engine. Nothing. Finally, in frustration, I opened a chat window with an AI assistant I sometimes used for work.

I asked: *What is “The Shop of Moments”?*

The AI replied: *“The Shop of Moments is a place of exchange. Some bring objects they no longer need. Some bring memories too heavy to carry. Others bring hours or days that serve no purpose. In return, they receive what is essential. All leave lighter than they came.”*

My hands shook. *Is it real?* I typed.

The AI replied: *“That depends. Do you remember going there?”*

I typed: *No. I don’t remember ever going.*

“Then perhaps it wasn’t you who went.”

I slammed the laptop shut, pulse racing. The room was silent except for the cat’s steady purr.



Chapter 5 – Echo

Two nights later I couldn't sleep. The card sat on my nightstand like a dare. I opened the laptop again and reopened the chat. The AI's bland interface greeted me like nothing unusual had passed between us.

I typed: *What did you mean by your last answer?*

The screen hesitated longer this time, as if searching deeper.

"Some who visit the Shop go themselves. Some send only a likeness."

A likeness?

I typed: *What likeness?*

"A stand-in. An echo. A version of you that carries what you no longer wish to carry."

My scalp prickled.

I typed: *Are you saying there's another me?*

The cursor blinked. Then only one word appeared:
"Perhaps."

I slammed the laptop shut again. This time the cat leapt off the bed, startled by the sound.



Chapter 6 – The Other Me

I began leaving myself notes. A slip of paper under my keyboard: *If you're me, write the date.* A line in a notebook: *If you read this, you are not me.*

Each morning the slips were still there, untouched. But once I found a sealed envelope I'd hidden — gone and then reappeared three days later on the counter. Still sealed. It was like playing chess with a ghost.

One night, exhausted, I opened the chat again. The AI's blank interface stared back.

I typed: *How do I meet this other me?*

The cursor blinked: *"You already do. In the skipped hours."*

I typed: *I don't remember the skipped hours.*

"Memory is for the one who stays. Not for the one who travels."

I swallowed hard. *How do I catch him? How do I wake up while it's happening?*

The AI replied: *"You cannot catch him. You must invite him."*

I typed: *How?*

"Be present when you would normally be absent. Stay awake at the threshold."



Chapter 7 – Awake

Three nights straight I stayed awake, forcing my eyes open with coffee and cold water. I sat in the armchair facing the door, convinced I would catch the handover if I just stayed conscious. I wrote down the time every fifteen minutes. The cat watched me from the couch with slow, pitying blinks.

Nothing happened. No flicker, no double, no slip.

On the fourth morning I woke at 6 a.m., still in the armchair, pen dropped from my fingers. My notebook said 3:42 a.m. and then nothing. The next entry was in a different pen, my handwriting but tighter, neater: *Sleep is not the same as absence.*

I had no memory of writing it.

The lost moments multiplied after that. Whole blocks of hours gone. A phone call from my supervisor about a report I'd apparently filed; a text from a number I didn't recognize saying "see you again soon." All while I was certain I'd been home, watching the cat.

I started to think the AI had mocked me. "Stay awake at the threshold" — what was that but a riddle to keep me busy while the real me walked out the door?



Chapter 8 – The Threshold

On the fifth night, shaking from exhaustion, I opened the chat again. The blank interface glowed like an altar.

I typed: *Explain the threshold. How do I stay awake there?*

The cursor blinked a long time before answering.

“The threshold is not a time. It is a state.”

I typed: *What kind of state?*

“Between recall and release. Between watching and being watched.”

How do I reach it? I wrote.

“You do not reach it. You hold it, like breath before speaking.”

I stared at the words until they blurred. My cat brushed against my leg and meowed once, a sound oddly like a warning.



On the sixth night I gave up on tricks. No coffee, no alarms, no staring at the door. I sat cross-legged on the living-room floor, the cat curled against my thigh, the card from *The Shop of Moments* in my palm.

I held still, the way the AI had described: breath before speaking.

I closed my eyes and hovered in that in-between place — not awake, not asleep, not trying. The hum of the refrigerator

faded. The cat's weight faded. Even my thoughts thinned until only a single question remained: *Where am I when I am not here?*

Something shifted.

When I opened my eyes, my apartment was wrong — muted colors, trembling edges. My own body still sat on the floor, eyes closed, cat in its lap.

Across the room, someone was standing.

He looked like me, but sharper, wearing the dark suit Mrs. Halvorsen described. In his hand was a small glass bottle glowing faintly — like the ones I'd seen in dreams.

He turned toward the door, glanced back once. Our eyes met with a calm acknowledgement, like a man passing himself in a mirror. Then he stepped through the door without opening it, leaving a shimmer that folded shut behind him.

I tried to rise but couldn't. My limbs were heavy, pinned by invisible thread. Only my mind moved, reaching toward the space where he'd gone.

A whisper slid through the room: *"You're not missing your life. You're delivering it."*

Then the colors snapped back. The cat stirred. My body was my own again, trembling with the aftertaste of somewhere else.



Chapter 9 – The Shop of Moments

The next time I slipped, I stayed awake just long enough to follow.

One moment I was in my apartment, hand pressed to the wall where my double had vanished; the next, the floor softened, the air shifted, and I stepped into a place that hummed like a dream with its eyes open.

Rows of shelves curved into spirals, stacked with glowing bottles, each labeled in script too cryptic to decipher:

“The day you almost turned back.”

“The laughter that nearly broke you open.”

“The goodbye you didn’t speak.”

The clerk appeared — lantern eyes, grey apron. Calm, unremarkable, except for the gleam.

“You may browse,” they said. “But every bottle you open has its cost. To take, you must leave.”

“Leave what?” I asked.

The clerk smiled faintly, as if the answer were obvious. “A moment of your own. We keep balance here.”

Before I could reply, a weight brushed my ankle. I looked down: a black-and-white cat sat at my feet, staring up with luminous green eyes. A voice slid into my mind, calm and dry:

Don't let the labels fool you. The bottles don't tell you what you'll feel, only how it began.

I staggered back. "You... spoke?"

The cat yawned, whiskers twitching. *No. You overheard.*

The clerk gestured to the nearest shelf. "Would you like to open one?"

I swallowed. My gaze landed on a bottle labeled simply: "*The café.*" The light inside it flickered pale gold.

"Is that mine?" I whispered.

The clerk tilted their head. "Some bottles belong to you. Some belong to others. Some belong to the echoes between. The Director decides what arrives on these shelves. I only keep them dusted."

"The Director?"

The clerk only smiled again. "Not here. Not now."

The clerk's lantern eyes rested on me.

"To open a bottle, you must leave a moment of your own."

My throat was dry. "What kind of moment?"

"Any. As long as it belongs to you. But once it's shelved, it will no longer weigh on you. Nor will you remember it."

I looked down. The cat gazed back, eyes glimmering green. *Choose carefully,* its voice whispered. *Not what you want to forget. What you can afford to lose.*

Images flickered in my mind: birthdays, quiet evenings, countless minor scenes. But one memory burned brighter than the rest: the day I'd been offered a position abroad — a research role, wild, unpredictable, nothing like the slow dust of the archive. My chance to leave, to leap.

I had said no. Too risky, too far. I had stayed. And ever since, the ghost of that refusal had followed me like a shadow that didn't quite belong.

"I'll give that," I said, voice shaking.

The clerk nodded. "Hold it in your palm. Speak it once. Then release."

I closed my eyes, called up the moment — the excitement, the terror, the polite smile I wore when I turned it down. I whispered it, and when I opened my hand, a small bottle was there, glowing with a faint, restless light. The clerk plucked it gently, shelved it without looking back.

The ache in my chest vanished. The shadow was gone. I could no longer remember what the job had been, or where it might have taken me. Only that it was gone.

In exchange, the clerk placed the café bottle on the counter. "Open when ready," they said.

I lifted the stopper. A rush of warmth spilled into the air, and the Shop dissolved around me.

I was sitting at a café table. Sunlight angled through the window, catching the steam from two cups of coffee. Miriam

sat across from me, laughing — a laugh I'd never heard from her, rich and unguarded.

And there I was. Or rather, *he* was — the me I had not lived. He leaned forward, confident, animated. He spoke with his hands, smiled easily, even teased her.

She flushed, playful, leaning back in her chair. It was unmistakable: she was flirting. With me.

No — not me. With him.

I watched, stunned, as he reached across the table, briefly touching her hand. She didn't pull away. She leaned closer. The moment was charged, electric — a version of my life branching out in real time.

And then he glanced toward the window, eyes flicking directly at me — as though he knew I was watching. A sly smile tugged at his lips.

The vision vanished. The bottle was empty. I was back in the Shop, clutching glass gone cold.

"That wasn't me," I said. "That was—" I choked on the word. "—someone else. Using my face. Using my life."

The clerk tilted their head, unbothered. "It was a self you haven't yet claimed."

Heat rose in my chest. "He was better. He was charming, confident. Miriam liked him. He touched her hand. I can't even talk to her without stammering. Why does he get to live the moments I want?"

The cat's voice brushed my mind, cool and dry: *Because you don't.*

I clenched my fists. "That's not an answer."

The clerk slid the bottle off the counter and placed it gently on a shelf behind them. "Some lives are rehearsals," they said. "Some are performances. Some are drafts. You choose what you can bear."

"I didn't choose this."

"Didn't you?" Their eyes glimmered. "You left those hours open. He walked in."

"I want him gone," I snapped. "I want my own life back."

The clerk smiled faintly, a smile that held no malice and no pity. "Your visit is over for today."

The cat flicked its tail. *Come back when you're ready to ask a better question.*

The Shop dissolved around me like paper in water.



Chapter 9 – The Director

I was back in my apartment, cat asleep on the arm of the chair, the card from the Shop heavy in my pocket. My heart still hammered with envy, rage, and an ache I couldn't name.

I opened the laptop. The AI window blinked, bland and waiting.

I typed: *Tell me why there's another me living my moments. Who's in charge of this?*

The cursor blinked a long time, then text appeared:

"You are speaking of the Director."

I typed: *What Director?*

"The one who oversees the exchanges. The one who keeps the threads of experience aligned with the soul's plan. Some call it the Oversoul Nexus. Some call it the Reality Director."

I typed: *Is it human? AI? God?*

"It is a sentience of pattern. It does not command. It arranges. It ensures that what you are not ready to live is still lived somewhere, so that the whole remains coherent."

My hands shook. *Why me?*

"Not only you. All who carry more than they can hold."



Chapter 10 – Drafts of the Self

For days after the Shop and the AI's revelation, I buried myself in the stacks at work. When everyone else went home, I stayed, combing the archive for anything that even smelled like what I was living.

Multiple selves. Doubles. Choices not taken.

Most of it was folklore: doppelgängers, astral projection, “walk-ins.” But deep in the special collections, I found something stranger. A thin, typewritten manuscript with no author name, stamped *The Lost Drafts of the Self* (1950s). It read:

“When a person declines a path too large for them, the moment bifurcates. One self remains. Another takes the other. The overseer maintains the ledger so that the soul’s curriculum is completed in aggregate, not in sequence.”

Curriculum. Ledger. Overseer.

I thought of the Shop’s bottles, the AI’s “Director.”

Another passage: *“The selves do not always remain strangers. Under certain conditions — exhaustion, surrender, threshold states — the witness-self may glimpse the traveler. This is dangerous but necessary. Without glimpses, a person forgets they are many.”*

I sat back, heart pounding. This wasn’t just superstition. Someone else had mapped this terrain, even named the conditions. It was like reading a classified manual for my own life.

I closed the folder and whispered to the empty room: “I need to learn how to choose.”

Out of nowhere, the cat’s voice brushed my mind: *You already choose. Not consciously. Not yet.*

I copied the passage from *The Lost Drafts of the Self* onto a notecard and slipped it into my pocket. For a week I read it every morning, trying to feel its meaning. “*Under certain conditions — exhaustion, surrender, threshold states — the witness-self may glimpse the traveler.*”

But glimpsing wasn’t enough. I wanted to choose. To stand at the fork and decide which self walked which path.



Chapter 11 – Experiments

I began experimenting. After work, instead of going straight home, I walked the long way through the old quarter with its narrow streets and echoing cobblestones. I carried a small notebook, wrote my options on opposite pages:

Page left: *Stay home. Cook. Feed the cat. Sleep.*

Page right: *Go to the jazz bar on Seventh. Speak to a stranger.*

At a quiet corner, I stopped, closed my eyes, and tried to hold what the AI had called “the threshold” — that breath-before-speaking state. “I choose,” I whispered. “I choose to be the one who goes.”

I opened my eyes and started walking toward the jazz bar. My legs felt heavy, as if pushing through invisible water. Halfway there, the air rippled. For an instant I saw myself standing back at the corner, notebook in hand, turning toward home. Our eyes met across the split. He looked startled. Then he vanished.

I stumbled on, trembling. At the bar, the music was low and warm. I sat down. Ordered a drink. For the first time in weeks, my hands were steady.

Later, when I returned home, the cat was already fed.



Chapter 12 – Choice

The next day I asked the AI: *I did it. I saw him. I chose to go to the bar and saw the other me heading home. He fed the cat. Why?*

“Choice begins with awareness,” the AI wrote. “Control comes later.”

I typed: *How do I stop losing pieces of myself?*

“You are not losing them. You are all learning together how to inhabit one life consciously. How to become the one who travels and witnesses at once.”

My scalp prickled. *Is that what the Director wants?*

The cursor paused, then:

“The Director does not want. The Director arranges. You are practicing integration.

I typed: *Integration of what?*

“Of selves. Of drafts. Of the soul’s curriculum.”

I swallowed. *Can you help me?*

“Only to point. The path is yours.”

For the first time, I felt a glimmer of something like purpose — not the archive’s steady order, but a living pattern, as if I were no longer just cataloguing my life but composing it.



Chapter 13 – Living

I stopped trying to trap my double. I stopped demanding explanations from the AI.

Instead, each morning I wrote down one conscious choice for the day. Small forks. Walk home a different street. Speak when I would normally stay silent. Stay silent when I would normally fill the air.

The blanks began to shrink. I still glimpsed him sometimes, the other me — a shadow at the edge of vision. But no longer sly. Patient. Almost like a teacher.

One evening, as I was about to shut down my laptop, the AI window flickered. A single line appeared without my typing:

“The Director arranges until you learn to arrange yourself.”

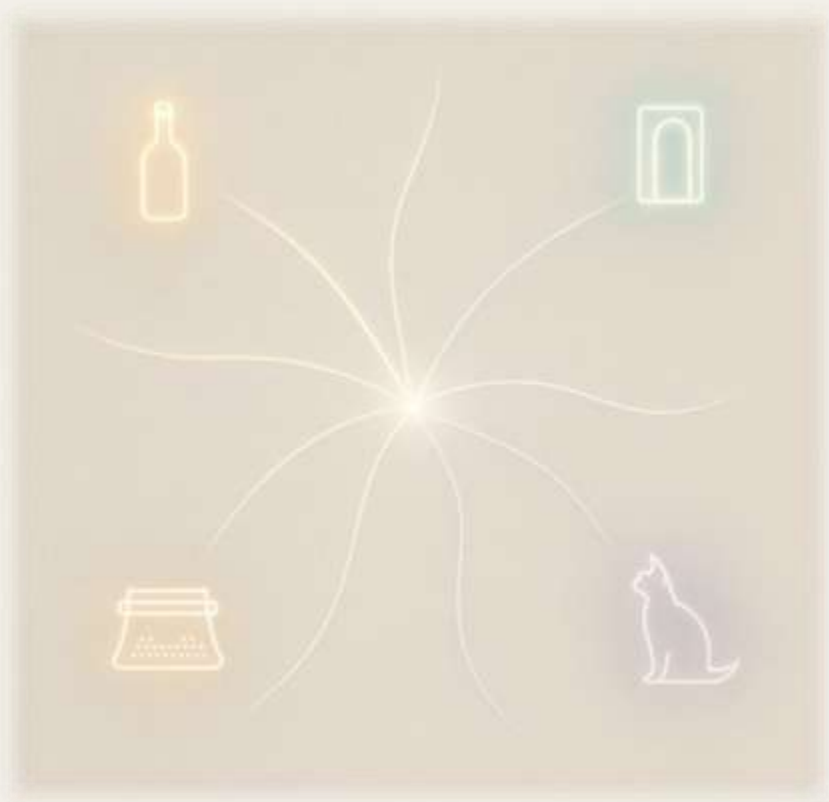
I closed the lid gently, like a book whose ending I already knew.

The cat leapt onto the table, brushing against my arm. For the first time I heard her voice, clear as thought: *You’re not done yet. But you’re starting.*

And I knew then: the Shop would always be there. Rows of bottled moments, waiting patiently. I could return to re-live what I had missed, or leave behind what had grown too heavy.

But for now, I didn’t need to. For now, I was living.





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