

## *Thread*

‘It astonishes me that the memory works like it does, like one of those holograms you used to see in old science fiction shows: it’s a *network*, a glib, tenuous spiderweb of random events held delicately on a single frail line, a wishy-washy electric cable buried under decades of settled mud and clay. I know it’s all there, I know it all happened, and yet it only ever comes in pieces and fragments. 75 years worth of memories, a *lifetime* of experiences were on that little mouse, on that sprig of cracker I dropped on the floor, on that block of cheese that the nurse brought in for me from Martha... 75 years. My *whole life*, the entire span of my fleeting existence, balanced like a trapeze act on the tightrope of that terribly, terribly delicate thread, flitting and flowing from me in fragile torrents like the cross-stitching in the hem of my woolen vest.’

‘Can’t lose it. What was I looking for? Pens! That’s right! Okay, pens, pens. Cupboards? Nothing. Spoon drawer? Nothing. China cabinet? Desktop? Desktop drawer? Nothing. Good Christ, have I been going along all this time without any pens to my name? Ooo, I’m losing the yarn... Why am I looking for a pen, anyway? *O, don’t think about it*, I’m sure I’ll know why I am looking once I’ve bloody found one...’

Charlie checked his pants for a pen five times after checking the cupboards and drawers, and then checked the drawers again. And then his pants again. And then the cupboards again. He scratched his head. ‘What was it that I was looking for?’ he thought. ‘Shoot, it seems to have left me. But I’ve still got this *itch*, this anxiousness, like I forgot to turn the burner off or something. What was it? Oh, God!’ he sighed hopelessly. ‘This is no way to live. I can’t just keep going from one tenuous thread to the bloody next like this.’

‘Okay. Breathe. I’m in the kitchen now,’ Charlie mused to himself. ‘I must’ve been in here for something... I’ll just have to retrace my steps again. What do I remember?’

‘I remember beating the alarm this morning and rolling out of bed. (I’m getting up earlier and earlier now, damned old age... Why can’t it go the other way around?) I walked to the bathroom, showered, put my dentures in, and got dressed. The morning music was on by the time I came through the living room and into the kitchen, I remember turning it off after the announcements...’

Charlie walked from his bedroom to the kitchen, rubbing the stubble on his chin (must’ve forgotten to shave, he thought,) and glanced up and down the little hallways of his apartment, watching the preceding events of his day slip through the spindle of his mind’s eye like homespun cotton. ‘I took my Tuesday medications, and then I had breakfast... Breakfast... What did I eat for breakfast?’ He turned on his spot in the kitchen towards the cupboards and opened them. ‘Ah! That’s it! I had some crackers and cheese! I remember dropping some of the crackers on the ground when I tried to open the darn bag. And then... Come on, don’t lose the yarn, don’t lose the yarn...’

His glance turned towards the counter, where the daily schedule had been placed by the maid. ‘Ah!’ he thought. ‘I’ll just check the schedule to find out what happened next. Let’s see... Daily schedule for Glendale residents, I guess that’s me... What’s this red marker? – O, that’s right! They’re playing that old twilight zone show at 8:00pm, that’s in an hour... Okay, stay focused... Here we are: “After breakfast: go for a walk out on the porch.” ’

‘That’s right!’ Charlie exclaimed aloud. ‘That’s when Martha and I chatted on the porch while the radio was playing! I remember the whole conversation.’

–‘Lovely day, isn’t it, Charlie?’ She asked me, as I came to our spot under the veranda.

–‘One of the lovelier days that I can remember,’ I replied, slowly making my way into my favorite shabby old rocking chair. ‘And thank you for asking, how are you?’

–‘O, I’m alive,’ she said, bending forward to rub her calves. ‘Did the nurse give you that cheese that I sent for your room?’

–‘Ah! So you must be Martha!’ I replied, tying the strings together.

–She giggled. ‘Yes, Charlie’, she said, ‘that’s me, I’m Martha.’

–‘Sorry,’ I said, clearing my throat, ‘I’ve a terrible memory on me...’

–‘I know Charlie, I know,’ she said, smiling. ‘We’ve been through this a thousand times before. Was the cheese any good?’

–‘The cheese... Any good... Ah, yes, for breakfast! Yes, it was quite a delicacy for me. I really can’t tell you the last time I enjoyed some fresh gorgonzola on a cracker. I was very glad that the nurse let me have some of it.’

–‘O, a bit of cheese is not going to run your cholesterol off the rails, dear,’ Martha returned. They watched the sun slowly slide over the humid afternoon like a fried egg while the other residents pursued their game of lawn bowling, or perhaps today was the day of the chess tournament?

Back in his kitchen, Charlie glanced all about himself. Nobody was around. He scratched his head. ‘Have I been talking to myself?’ he pondered suddenly. ‘O, it’s no matter, what was I just thinking about? Sun... Cheese... Oh, Martha, yes! Don’t lose the yarn, don’t lose the yarn – what did she ask me?’

–‘How is that project coming along,’ Martha asked, ‘the one you were working on just a few days ago?’ Charlie frowned a little, fumbling his loose fitting teeth with his lips, and tugging his sweater downwards for better comfort.

–‘That project?’ he asked, drawing a blank. ‘O, O that project!’ he blurted, feigning recognition. ‘Well it’s, uh, it’s coming along great, you know. All things in their time, I always say: a hundred cuts dig the well; a thousand bricks put up the wall. You know how it goes, *a-herm!*...’

‘...What project was she thinking of?’

Martha smiled benignly.

–‘Well, it’s good to hear you’re keeping productive. I’ve come a long way with my knitting in the last few days. Do you like this turtleneck sweater that I recently knitted for myself?’

Charlie was taken aback by the red sweater around her; he hadn’t noticed she was wearing it until she mentioned it – she was always changing her day attire, but she rarely wore anything so bright and colorful.

–‘Well, I think it’s just lovely!’ He ecstatically replied. ‘It gives you such an added presence of color! You clearly do quality work.’

She smiled. It occurred to Charlie just then that he only ever saw Martha there in that porch corner, knitting, watching the other residents going lazily about their day; it suddenly seemed like he only knew Martha as this floating head, a ghost that occasionally came alive through this lifesized elderly mannequin in the afternoons, and then disappeared into the blackness of his periphery until the following day, when they’d catch each other again in the afternoon. ‘*Another thread in the web,*’ Charlie mused to himself introspectively.

–‘It’s funny you say that,’ the mannequin suddenly spoke, ‘because this is the one sweater which I don’t have quite perfect. Everything is great except for this cross-stitching going up the side. Most sweaters come together with one single yarn, but this one just fell to pieces as I was working on it. No matter how I go at it, it keeps coming loose – it just won’t stay put. It’s a real shame because it’s such a nice sweater, but since this *one* little loose stitch won’t stay fastened, the whole thing is now coming apart. It’s no good anymore.’

–‘*A-herm,*’ Charlie quickly returned, realizing he’d trailed off in thought, ‘yes, too

bad. What else can you do? You'll have to throw the thing out.'

–'I suppose,' she replied, sighing. 'All that work for nothing.' She shrugged. Her mannequin lips pursed slightly to prevent her dentures from sliding out of her mouth.

'Lunchtime came quickly,' Charlie muttered to himself, continuing to recollect his day, 'and the staff brought it all outside. Most of us ate at the picnic table in the front yard, while Martha enjoyed her ham sandwich in her spot on the porch, out of the sun. I don't remember much else of the front yard... Probably because I never interact with anything else but the porch and the picnic table. Green grass, always green grass, at I least recall that.'

Slumped in deep thought, Charlie continued to reminisce in the kitchen: 'I recall chatting with five new friends at lunch... They seemed to be putting on like they had known me for a while... I didn't recognize a face, but they were friendly.'

At the table, each man unrolled his life like a dusty runway carpet through their chewed bologna: one was a carpenter, one claimed to have been the president of a country for a time, one said that he had been a fisherman (which really got Charlie reeling...), and when it came time for Charlie to tell them about his life, he barely had a thing to say.

'I enjoy listening to birds sing and sitting in the sun,' Charlie started, 'and I like to play solitaire. I love music too, though I didn't much care for the stuff they play through the PA system in the mornings.' His life story seemed lacking compared to theirs, but they didn't seem to mind, they just kept telling him that everything he said was great:

–'That's great, Charlie!' one said.

–'Good on ya, old man!' said another.

–'Very nice, Charlie,' said one.

Charlie walked to the fridge, picked up the brick of cheese on the middle shelf,

and carefully sliced two pieces of cheese onto the counter, glancing at the kitchen clock. '7:15pm. Boy, I'll never figure out what it was that I was doing, it's too far gone. But that itch! That damned loose-end just won't tie itself off! Oooh, God!'

'Sigh.' He wiped his forehead. 'Stranded again,' he bellowed, patting his pet cat, poetically remonstrating to her: 'How loosely we hang from these ghostly clothespins, Mina, struck by our own wind like bayweed on a dockline, tugged at from incalculable places – something pulls me forward, something hauls backward... Maybe if I look in the living room, I'll find –'

Charlie lifted his foot up at the sight of a mouse. It scurried out from under the cabinet in front of him with a wedge of broken cracker and then scuttled quickly over his lumbering big toe into the kitchen pantry, with the cat following in hot pursuit. Déjà vu struck him like lightning. 'Yes, that's right,' he thought. 'This happened once today, just after my dinner, in fact. The mouse grabbed the cracker and shot underneath the door of the pantry, and when I opened the pantry door to look inside it...'

Charlie opened the pantry. Nothing. The pantry was empty except for the broom & dustpan and the other maid tools. 'No, no, I got something from in here, and brought it into the livingroom...'

There in the living room, on the table in front of the T.V., was an opened black rectangular chest, about the size of a toolbox. 'That's right, that's right!' he recollected. 'What was I doing with this?' He glanced inside the opened chest. A bundle of documents and pictures were stuffed harshly and haphazardly into the depths of the chest. He peered at the pictures pasted on the interior of the lid. Faces strange and familiar covered it, meshing like a mosaic; they were the faces he'd seen in the labyrinth of a long forgotten dream. 'I remember!' he said aloud to himself. 'I was in here just moments ago, looking at all this stuff...'

He remembered glancing over some of the papers in the box an hour earlier. Memories squeezed through his mind like fluorescent river water sifting through rocky

silt. Old dreams and forgotten happenings raced through him like roman candles. ‘*That’s me,*’ he thought, ‘with that young, able body hanging off the stern of that ferry boat. *That’s me* with those kids – are those *my* kids? Grandkids? My God, I see it all now!’ He looked at a circular paper cut-out in the middle of the box lid. It appeared to be some sort of summary. He read:

*“Charlie Arthur Zuckermann,  
born 1937 in Billericay, ESS, England, to ‘Cathy’ (Irish) and ‘Arthur’ (Jewish)  
Zuckermann.  
Graduated from Billericay secondary in ‘55, and then from Billericay  
Consortium in ‘60, with a degree in British Military Naval honours.  
Sailed most coasts of the world (excluding the furthest reaches of the East – the  
Phillipines, Australia, the Mongolian coast, e.t.c.)  
Settled down with Marguerite, loved her very dearly up until her death in ‘99  
in an elevator shaft. Kids did well in college & had kids of their own, but  
none were particularly well-to-do, financially speaking.  
Alzheimer’s around ‘02. Shipped off to Glendale in ‘08.”*

‘The thread!’ Charlie excitedly announced. ‘I’ve found it! O, what a relief, what a thorn to be pulled out from me!’

Charlie’s entire life slowly flashed though him. Shuffling through some of the papers in the box, he noticed something hard at the bottom, which made a loud resonance upon knocking it. He lifted it out, almost emotional. There, in his wiry hands, was the only physical echo he had left from the wild dream which was now replaying and reliving itself in his mind like a loop reel. His old fiddle.

He softly and reverently rubbed the strings, felt the tired grit of the old-fashioned catgut shiners, smelled the stale, raunchy bow rosin humming from within the box. He

sobbed. Not out of despair, or even joy, but rather, simply from the pure force of the torrent which was now coursing through him like a tidal wave. The nostalgia, the smells and sounds of numerous lifetimes spent serenading crewmates on the decks of countless ships on innumerable shorelines, poured over his brain like hot wax. He rosined the bow and tuned the fiddle by his ear. The bottom G string was long missing, but he didn't care. He lifted the bow, placing the fiddle against his chin, and exhaled.

Melodies began to surge from the old man like an overfilled dock bucket, streaming out of his beloved antique fiddle in long, winding strands like cigar smoke. He knew polkas and waltzes; he knew jigs, reels, and foxtrots, he knew tangos and hoedowns; and he played them all until his fingers were too cramped to keep up with his whirlwind musical soul, about 45 minutes. He relived his whole life, imagining in his mind the times, places, and people he was with for every song that he played. The fiddle was like the time machines in his much-loved science fiction movies: with every stomp of his foot and every musical measure that he passed, he could see the wonder in the faces that sang and clapped his songs back to him at the dancehalls, chanting his lines and returning his melodies like a bat's sonar reverberating against a wall; he could smell the cigarette smoke and beer ferment of the taverns he tore through as a young man; he could hear the giggles and the stomping feet of grandchildren dancing giddily through the colorful hallways of his innumerable melodies as he coursed through them.

After he played all that he could, he placed the fiddle back into the box. 'I ought to keep this thing out and play it for the other residents,' he thought. 'I'm sure I'd be a hit around here, and that everyone would love me for it! What a great idea!'

His attention trailed over to a piece of paper beside the chest. It was scrawled in what he perceived to be his own Parkinson's-inflicted handwriting. It read like a laundry list:



--March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012: *PENS AND GLUE ARE UNDER THE FIDDLE.*

--*Get some pens and glue a piece of paper to this box, which reads: 'OPEN*

*THIS'. Do it before you fall asleep and the nurse puts the box away! It's a possession of yours, so they won't throw it out.*

--*Situate the box so that you can always see it in the morning, like on the kitchen counter, beside the daily schedule.*

--*Open this box every day and REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE!*

—'Good God!' Charlie exclaimed aloud. 'This is my whole life, my life's work, the single thread holding the history of my *entire existence* together; this is very important! I'd better make haste! What am I looking for? Pens! Yes, pens! Gotta find a pen quick!'

Charlie dashed towards the kitchen. He checked the cupboards. No pens to be found. He checked the kitchen drawers. No pens. He checked his pants and the shirt pocket beneath his woolen vest. Nothing. He checked the cupboards and drawers again. Then he checked his pants and shirt pocket once more as he began to comb his suite for a writing utensil. The black box lay opened on the small T.v. table in front of his reclining chair. 'Ooo God!' he relented.

—'The bathroom!' he suddenly cried. 'I know I've got a pen by the toilet for my daily crossword puzzles!'

He ran into the bathroom, turned the lights on, lifted the toilet seat up, and began to urinate. 'Ahhhh, that's better,' he moaned; 'I feel like I've been waiting a lifetime for this. Whew.' After (rather lengthily) relieving himself, Charlie gave his stuff a shake, zipped up his trouser fly, and turned to himself in the mirror, washing his hands. He placed his dentures in the glass of water beside the tap, staring into his gums. 'Shoot,' he thought, 'I suppose I'd better brush my teeth now, so I don't forget to before I go to bed...'

Squiiirt brush brush scrub scrub brush, rinse swish swish rinse gaaaargglerglergle,

pthtooie! He spat. He glared into the mirror curiously, admiring his softly decaying features: his large wrinkled nose, his deep brown eyes, his thin swathe of tufty hair curled gently over his bald forehead...

Charlie walked out of the bathroom refreshed, but slightly agitated. 'Wasn't I just busy with something?' he wondered. He walked into the kitchen, rubbing the gristle on his chin, and glanced at the daily schedule. His eyes shifted to the red marker at the bottom of the page:

*Twilight zone, 8:00pm. Be sure to watch!*

'Ah! That's it!' Charlie exclaimed. He looked at his watch. *8:08pm*. 'Already late!' he muttered, shuffling to his reclining chair in front of the TV just as the maid walked in to begin cleaning his apartment. 'What's this?' he thought to himself, banging his foot on the black box. 'O, forget it, no time – gotta hold the yarn, gotta hold the yarn...'

Charlie sat in his good chair, exhausted from what felt like a long day, and engulfed himself in an old favorite television program of his while the nursemaid shuffled all about him, picking up all of his socks and other out-of-place articles and placing them in a basket, and then returning them to their proper places. She noticed the black chest opened up in front of the chair beside the T.v. table and gently surveyed its contents.

–'What is this black box doing here, Mr. Zuckermann?' She asked politely.

Charlie was totally absorbed in his television show.

–'What's that?' Charlie asked. 'O, I'm sure it's nothing, dear. Would you be a doll and put that wherever it came from? I would be quite thankful that you did.'

The maid shrugged her shoulders and grabbed the black chest beside the chair, placing it on the floor of the kitchen closet, where she'd remembered seeing it countless times before, though she never had the chance to look inside. 'None of my business,' she

thought, grabbing the feather duster and the broom and dustpan and continuing her work.

Charlie shifted uncomfortably in his chair, suddenly noticing that one of the strings in his favorite day vest had come loose at some point during the day. He frowned, picking away at it, as his mind slowly wandered away from the television programme and into space for a few moments. ‘Did I... Was I...’ He pondered blankly to himself.

–‘Excuse me, miss?’ Charlie said aloud, motioning to the maid by lifting his left arm over the back of his chair, where she could see it.

–‘Yes, Mr. Zuckermann?’

–‘Did I... Did I leave the stove burners on, by chance? Could you please check that for me?’

–‘There are no stovetop burners in this kitchen, Mr. Zuckermann,’ she replied; ‘there’s only this microwave oven and the fridge, and they’re both closed.’

–‘Ah,’ he replied. ‘It’s probably just be my imagination, then. Just a loose thread.’

Charlie laid back in his chair, reclining his feet upwards, attempting to fizzle out the unfastened wire itching his tired mind. He lifted the remote to turn his television up louder. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing,’ he thought to himself; ‘I’m sure I must just be imagining things.’