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Andrew Pyper

THE  
TRADE  
MISSION

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*For Leonardo*

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*Meaning is served far better—and literature and language far worse—by the unrestrained license of bad translators.*

—Walter Benjamin,  
“The Task of the Translator,”  
translated by Harry Zohn

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# BEFORE

THEY are only boys.

Tall enough to be men but something gives them away, even with parka hoods pulled tight over their heads. From a distance they might appear as two swaying drunks debating over which of the paths ahead will lead them home. But look at their faces: freckles standing out against bloodless cheeks, chapped lips held tight against the wind. Their fear is neither a child's nor a man's. Nothing is real enough to be entirely believed by boys like these, although they'd like to believe in something if it might make them look a year or two older. But for now they're too in-between, afloat in the not-quite-thereness of their boyhoods. Look at their faces: sometimes their eyes show a hurt they haven't even lived through yet. It's like a vision the two of them have shared, a premonition of the life ahead as an ongoing trade of damages. It's why boys sleep as much as they do. And in their dreams they are caped crusaders. Human but with impossible talents like x-ray vision or freezing breath or flight. Dreams that often end badly nevertheless, with an assassin's blade slicing their throats or tumbling out of the sky to gasp awake before they hit the ground.

"What's it say?"

"That way, I think."

"Which way?"

"Through there. North."

The slightly taller one returns the compass to the inside pocket of his parka and points a trembling finger into the trees that surround them. It's officially winter, but up until a couple hours ago the snow had been cagey, dusting and melting and looping around but refusing to settle in for good. Now it's coming down straight as marbles.

"It's getting dark," the shorter one says, and it is, the sky a purple

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sheet lowering over the cedar branches. It's also getting cold. A drop of several degrees within a minute of the sun's retreat.

They're lost, but neither has said so yet. It's their Outdoor Orientation exam—blindfolded then dropped off three miles in by sniggering prefects who kept calling them "lover boys"—and now it's clear that they've failed. Why did the parents of one and the guardians of the other send them to this school in the middle of the Canadian woods anyway? It's *obscene*, as the shorter one has taken to saying about all things that bore him. And to make matters worse, it's one of those schools without girls. Its unspoken specialty is keeping the young gentlemen of the wealthy out of trouble. But what kind of trouble could you get into up here even if you tried? Nothing to do but drink smuggled booze and look out classroom windows at the wall of trees and prickly creeks that lead to farther nowheres. It's as if the people that sent them here *want* them to get lost.

"You better get rid of that," the shorter boy says, eyes on the mickey of rum pulled out of the same pocket as the compass.

The taller one lifts the bottle in salute and throws back a gulp. Passes it to the shorter boy, who drains the spittled backwash. At first the alcohol had made being stuck in the woods kind of funny, then it had offered temporary blooms of warmth. Now it does little but root them to their places, as though all the stuffing above their waists had poured down their legs and into the frozen earth. The shorter one chucks the bottle away and it takes its time in midair. A half dozen tumbles before burrowing under the white blanket on the forest floor.

They go on. Put a few more miles behind them, or around them, for there's always a river or sudden cliff that pushes their path into spirals. And with the hours come new surprises of exhaustion. It takes all the talk out of them. There is little to be said anyway except the obvious, which, if stated aloud, would only make them more afraid.

Neither wears a watch, but the air is solid in the way the middle of the night is. Hardly moving at all now except for their arms, rubbering about them for balance. The cracked skin of their hands skimming in and out of view.

They come to a stop in a small clearing encircled by a solid web of

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brush. How'd they get through it in the first place? For a time each of them believes they are speaking, although it's impossible to tell. When they lift their heads to face each other the snow fills the air between them as falling bits of shadow.

"Which way now?" the shorter one asks, his lungs stinging from the air it costs him.

"It doesn't matter. We keep ending up in the same place."

"Or what looks like the same place."

"Same difference."

"But we have to keep going."

"Why?"

"To get out of here."

"We're *not* getting out of here."

"Yes, we are."

"And you're going to save us?"

"That's right. I'm going to save us."

"Here then."

The taller one pulls the compass out of his pocket and hands it over. But it's too dark to get a fix on the gyrating arrow, anxiously skipping between each of its four options.

"The compass is lost too," the shorter boy says.

"I'm really tired, man."

"We're both tired. But we have to move."

"I don't think so."

"C'mon. Another half a mile."

"Where?"

"Might as well be straight ahead."

"I don't—"

But the taller boy doesn't finish. Instead there is only the *whoof* his body makes as it collapses forward into a creamy drift.

"Get up!" the shorter boy thinks he shouts, but immediately begins to doubt it. Frightens himself with an oddly hollow laugh.

For a minute nothing moves. The night muffled as though brushing against a closed window. At his feet the snow already collecting over the body, sculpting its outline into another shape of the wind.



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“You have to get up now.” The shorter boy has fallen to his knees. Certain of his voice this time, at once fierce and cracked. “You have to.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I’m asking nicely.”

“You go. I’ll wait here.”

The shorter boy considers this. Calculates the possibility of lucking out and finding a road or cabin. Getting help. Considers the particular darkness of the night, the particular hardness of the cold.

Even if he made it, the fallen boy wouldn’t. The shorter boy tries to make the questions in his head as complicated as he can in order to buy a little time, but instead the answers come simply and terribly. He might leave and live, or stay and probably die.

He rolls the taller boy onto his back to show a startling mask of sealed eyes and lips. Drags him the few feet it takes to lean him up against a tree out of the worst of the wind.

“Hey, are you with me?” he asks, catching sips of breath.

The taller boy can only clench his jaw in reply. He’s about to fall away into sleep, or someplace deeper, once and for all. The shorter boy knows this because he isn’t far from falling away himself.

He lets himself lie down next to the taller boy and unzips their parkas. Slips his arms around the other’s chest, brings him close in a wriggling hug. Stretches the layers of their parkas as tight as he can around their necks and knees.

“A sleeping bag,” the shorter boy says.

“This is weird, man.”

“Just pretend I’m a girl.”

“But you’re not.”

“Pretend.”

Their bodies find a hundred new ways around each other so that soon they are neatly joined as two lumps of clay. Under their coats their breath mixes in puffs of white steam.

Do they speak of things that matter? The odds they’ll be alive to see the morning? Of their love for their mothers? For each other?

Serious words are not their talent. Instead the one who stayed behind whispers to the other practical jokes they have both planned and already performed. Lullabies the cruel nicknames of teachers into

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his ear. Then even he runs out of things to say along with the strength to say them. The snow drumming on their shoulders.

Soon they are blasting through the star-pocked sky with silver capes flapping behind them. Alert to the shouts for help below, ready to be heroes.

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# I

“LADIES and gentlemen, my name is Marcus Wallace, and I’d like to personally welcome you to your futures!”

This is in Brazil, but it could be anywhere.

A long conference room lit by dimmed halogen spots in the ceiling, a dozen rows of chairs, potted ferns circling the lectern. The front reserved for photographers, whose flashbulbs explode like distant artillery fire whenever one of the two people on stage makes a face or gesture of any kind. Behind them, slouching journalists scribble in notepads as they always have, or tickle laptops, as they do more and more. Then the rows of money: suits, silk shirts, Swiss watches of a price equivalent to an entry-level American sedan.

The person speaking to them is a boy. The other person on stage is a boy as well, although he hasn’t spoken yet, and doesn’t appear interested in starting any time soon. Instead, he sits at a small desk made out of a single sheet of clear, molded plastic (beneath it, his knees visibly jiggling within their cargo pants). He keeps his eyes squinted at a computer screen in front of him, and from time to time makes stabs at its keyboard, as though a cockroach were running back and forth across it. They are far enough apart that even from the back of the room you can’t take them both in at once, so you move your eyes from one to the other. Decide that your first impression was wrong. They aren’t boys at all. They are young men. But the word continues to cling to them, nevertheless. It seems right. You feel certain it will never leave them.

“Before we move on to this afternoon’s presentation, I would like to introduce my partner—God, it sounds like he’s my *wife* or something whenever I say that!—the real brains behind the success of Hypothesis, Jonathon Bates.”

The young man at the clear plastic desk jiggles his knees more

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violently and raises his hand over his head in a kind of wave. A smile fractures across his mouth without him appearing to be in control of it.

“This is going to be one of the first public demonstrations of our product,” the standing one says, “so we’re pretty excited up here—or *down* here, I should say, seeing as this is South America.”

A giggle escapes from his lips, which in turn initiates a round of chortles and cleared throats from the audience. He’s cute. Everyone wants to like him. They already do.

“Why are we excited? Well, it’s pretty simple. We feel that Hypothesys is something that is truly going to change the way we conduct our lives. And that’s not just more of the same hype you guys have no doubt been served plenty of all week. Because this isn’t *like* the stuff you’ve seen all week. It’s not another Internet site where you can buy groceries or books or watch porn broadcast live from a rented room in Amsterdam or get twenty-four-hour webcam coverage of some Joe Nobody arguing with his girlfriend or brushing his teeth. Hypothesys isn’t about any of that. In fact, it can literally be anything you want it to be. Something you *need*. Your confidant. Your best friend. Your nondenominational spiritual advisor. Night or day, it will be there to help. To offer guidance about life’s most difficult questions, or even the easy ones you just feel you’d like a second opinion on. As the banner over our stall in the convention hall says, ‘Hypothesys helps you make the best decisions of your life!’ ”

At this, the dimmed lights dim further, and at the rear of the stage a large screen glows blue. Gradually, the word HYPOTHESYS comes forward in white, a cloud taking shape in a clear sky. A jet streaks across with a roar, leaving “New Human Ethics Technologies” formed out of the dissolving exhaust behind it. Even from the back of the room you can see the encircled *c* asserting copyright over every one of these words.

Now the two young men are silhouettes against the perfect blue, except for pancake circles of light on their faces, spotlights following them wherever they go. They look like ghosts in a high-school play.

“Some have called our project a morality machine, but that isn’t quite right,” continues the young Wallace’s disembodied voice. Only

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now, in the new darkness, do you notice how full it is, at once boyish and suggestive of experience. “Hypothesis doesn’t deliver morality *per se*, nor is it a machine, strictly speaking. What it is, however, is a library of contemporary ethics. The process behind its development is known as collaborative filtering, but it’s not as complicated as it sounds. It’s just a survey, really. A *big* survey. One that has resulted in a collection of data that, once it has been thoroughly cross-referenced, can tell us something about the way we behave. So far, collaborative filtering is a process that has been employed for the most predictably commercial purposes. You know, the old ‘If you liked *that* movie or CD, chances are you’ll also like *this* movie or CD’ based on the stuff other people have bought before you. Hypothesis is considerably more ambitious. It has nothing to sell but ourselves. It is who we *are*—all of us together—right now. It forms, in effect, a universal human mind.”

Bates begins to work furiously at his laptop, and an animated brain appears on the screen, huge and pulsing with white bolts of electricity.

“Over the course of the past several months, we have conducted one of the most extensive studies of individual sensibilities ever undertaken,” Wallace says, his spotlighted head floating from one side of the stage to the other. “And we weren’t asking about what color of sneakers people most like to wear, or what kind of car they drive, or whether they live in a house or a hole in the ground. In short, this was not the dead-tired market research you’ve all heard too much about already. We weren’t interested in the *market* at all, as a matter of fact, but only in people’s answers to hypothetical questions. Scruples. The way we decide to live our lives. Bates?”

As a buzzing swarm of static on the screen nibbles the brain away from stem to lobe, it is replaced by a shot of a crowded city street. People moving in undulating waves, half heading north, half south. It takes a couple of seconds to recognize the scene as computer-generated (it’s only the slight over-vividness of digitized color that gives it away). Then you notice something else not-quite-right about it. The people are made up of men, women, old and young, skin of every graduated pigment between black and albino, a cross around one neck, a Star of David around another, a turbaned head and a veiled face. A street that

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had to be made by a computer because none could possibly be this perfectly representative anywhere in the real world.

“There is, needless to say, no single law that guides our actions. Our different religions, cultures and experiences shape our ethical orientations in a million discrete ways. But Hypothesis is indifferent to those distinctions. It’s about what we have in *common*, not what sets us *apart*. And because the data we have collected does not take into account the identity of those who participated in its collection, it is a system that can be applied with equal effectiveness in any nation, and be relevant to any way of life. We have, in a sense, created an electronic Everyman. Or Everywoman.”

Now the street scene blurs into a palette of brilliant colors that reassembles into a vision of the earth viewed from space. Different strains of shimmering, twinkly music seem to come from every corner of the room to converge between our ears. A chorus of synthetic human voices coming from the inside out. *Home, they sing. Home!*

Gradually, though, the planet’s blues and browns and benign cloud masses become more detailed, hostile. Soon we are hurtling toward the surface.

“So how does it work?” Wallace’s question cuts through the soundtrack, which has built up into a Wagnerian climax of swirling synthesizers. “Well, my friends, let’s go *straight* into the mind of Hypothesis and find out!”

The earth entirely fills the screen in bulging 3-D and with a clap of thunder we crash somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, plummet down into the depths until the shafts of sunlight from the surface whither away and the entire conference room goes dark.

Somebody blows their nose. A goose honk in the silence.

Then a woman’s face appears on the screen. As we watch, her features—hair color, skin tone, nose length, lip shape—subtly change so that she is never fixed. Never one woman, but an infinitely revolving carousel of women.

“Meet Camilla,” Wallace says, softer now. “She has a problem. She knows something that her husband doesn’t know, and she can’t decide whether to tell him about it.”

The woman’s face fluidly morphs into that of a man. Of men.

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“Camilla kissed Stephen last week. Stephen and Camilla’s husband are friends, they play golf on the weekends, get together for family barbecues. But last week Stephen called Camilla and asked her to lunch. Now, this is important: Camilla felt something was strange about this. Camilla and Stephen had never had lunch alone together before. And the fact is, she’s caught Stephen looking at her strangely lately. You know, giving her the old Latin lover eyes. But this is Brazil—you all know about *that!*”

There is appreciative laughter at this, along with a lusty whoop from somewhere among the journalists. *Hoo-ha!*

“But Camilla met up with Stephen anyway. They had some wine. They had a nice time. Then, over the tiramisù, Stephen drops the bomb. ‘I love you,’ he says. ‘I won’t get in the way of your life if you don’t want me to. But I just had to let you know.’ Camilla feels like a kid. She feels her cheeks get hot.” (The women’s faces reappear on the screen, all of them blushing.) “They pay and step out of the restaurant. And right there on the sidewalk, before she knows what she’s doing—although she *does*, of course, she knows perfectly well—she kisses Stephen like he was about to head off to war. We’re talking *passion* here, people.”

The face of the men returns and the women and men kiss on the lips, a pink flash of tongue visible before they meet.

“Now Camilla doesn’t know what to do. She’d ask her girlfriends for advice, but they’d blab it all over the place. And as for her priest? Her rabbi? She hasn’t seen those guys since her wedding. Besides, it all feels so *complicated*. She might just love Stephen herself. But what about the kids? And her husband? Sure, she still loves him, but quite frankly, a good deal less than she used to. Is her last chance for adventure staring her right in the face? Or is this the tough spot she’s heard about, when she goes to her husband and lets him know everything so they can try to work it out together? Is her duty to her own happiness or the happiness of others? As you can see, there’s a *lot* of factors at work here, even in a situation as common as this. Too many for one brain to handle. And this is where Hypothesis comes in.”

The word RELATIONSHIPS appears at the bottom of the screen, and then, rising up from it and branching out in different directions,

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MARRIAGE and DISCLOSURE and CHILDREN and SEX. As the tree of words grows higher, the branches become more intricate, and eventually overlap into a single, wavering mass of dense leaves caught in a breeze.

“Camilla uses our system to sort out her problem one step at a time. She takes a good look at how she honestly *feels*, then enters the facts of her situation, detail by detail. She rates certain *perception factors* on a scale of one to ten, such as the pain she would endure if her husband left her, her physical and emotional desire for Stephen, the degree of discomfort she would experience in carrying on a long-term deception behind the back of the man she made solemn vows to years before, et cetera, et cetera. And these factors are then matched up with the responses of every other participant in the Hypothesis library. Within seconds, the system can give Camilla her answer.”

On the screen, a spreadsheet appears with dozens of figures arranged in columns under the same headings that appeared at the base of the tree.

“And what do we tell her to do? Well, reading the responses is something of an art in itself—it’s not exactly a simple yes or no sort of thing—but it’s basically ‘Go for it! Life’s too short! But don’t tell the husband unless you’re *sure* Stephen’s in it for the long haul.’ Hey, it may not be the most honorable course of action, ladies and gentlemen. But it is the most true to who we really are.”

The numbers on the screen skitter away, and in their place Camilla’s faces reappear, nodding back in gratitude at Wallace’s slender shadow before her.

“Thank you, Camilla,” he says to the digital representation of womankind, then turns back to us, the broad swath of flesh and blood sitting at his feet. “And thank you *all* for coming. Of course, this demonstration has been only a most basic exercise of the system’s capacities. Hypothesis is as complex as you are—and only you know what that *really* means. So I hope you get a chance to try Hypothesis out for yourselves at our exhibition area in the convention hall—and remember, confidentiality is guaranteed!”

Camilla disappears. The screen lulls into a fractal, one of those lines that create cities of fantastic architecture before wiping them out and



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starting over again. The halogen lights bathe the room in enough orange to identify us as separate heads. Wallace looks out over every one of them.

“I think we have time for a couple of questions,” he says, glancing at his watch.

The journalists thrust pens, PalmPilots and index fingers into the air.

“Yes, Kevin?”

“Do you foresee any applications for your system outside that of a personal guide?”

“We’re always working on things. There’s been calls. The Pentagon has seen some potential for military deployments. Certain governments have shown interest in its use in policy development. NGOs, religious leadership, corporate management. Anywhere a decision has to be made, Hypothesys can be there.”

“How are sales going?”

“This trip alone has been very fruitful,” Wallace says, lowering his eyes in a half-second show of modesty. “Barry and Lydia, our associates on the money side of things, just yesterday sold world Portuguese rights for, well, what can I say? A *significant* amount.”

“We hear four million.”

“You hear pretty good.”

“What about the movie?”

“What’s with you guys and the movies? It’s like you’d all rather be working for *Variety* or something.”

“Hey, we’re all in it for the glamour, right? So what’s the deal?”

“The *deal* is that as of two weeks ago the film rights to our joint autobiography have been optioned by Paramount. I understand that a screenplay is already under development.”

“Who are they thinking of to play you and Mr. Bates?”

“Naturally, I think the twenty-million-per-movie pretty boy of the moment would have to play me. I guess we’d need *two* of those, now that I think of it,” he says, offering an apologetic pout over at Bates. “One concept the studio people have mentioned is an updated version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. I’m rolling with that. What do you guys think?”

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“Would you be the beauty or the beast?”

“Very funny, Diane.”

“Has the autobiography even been published yet?”

“Hey, we’re still *living* our lives here. We haven’t had a chance to *write* about them yet.”

“This one is for Mr. Bates. Ever get tired of playing second fiddle to your exuberant partner here?”

The young man behind the computer looks out at us directly for the first time. His face elongated and blanched clean of expression, as though someone has accused him of something terrible. But this is more or less the way he always looks.

“There is no second fiddle with Hypothesis,” he says evenly, though his knees are now thudding up against the underside of his desk. “In our partnership, we both play first violin.”

“*Very* well put, Bates,” Wallace cuts in and gives Bates an unnoticeable signal that turns his head back to his computer screen. “OK, everybody. Last question.”

“What is your opinion with regard to the possibility of your team being the first to one day develop authentic artificial intelligence in computers?”

“I think that day is already here, Brad.” Wallace blinks earnestly. “If our program can advise you as to how to live your life, and that advice is no worse than what most other people would likely advise, isn’t that a demonstration of intelligence? Assume for a moment that wisdom is adhering to the law of averages—and who’s to say it ultimately isn’t? I mean, that’s what rationality *is*—then what we have here is the old wise man sitting on top of the silicon mountain, my friends.”

With this Wallace smacks a fist into his palm and Bates punches at his computer one last time. The synthesizer music returns, a single, thrumming bass note like a far-off freight train. As Wallace steps back from the lectern mouthing *Thank you* and pointing directly at recognized faces in the audience like a presidential candidate, the sound enlarges. The screen at the back of the stage becomes a slow strobe of colors that freezes the room in half seconds of blue and yellow and underwater green. And as the sound fully enters our chests (noticing only now that we have been painfully applauding since the first *thank*

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*you*) Bates rises from his clear plastic table and joins Wallace at the front of the stage.

They bring themselves toward each other with their smiles, arms rising to curl around the other's waist. These pictures of them stay in our minds longer than any of the catchphrases or special effects that preceded. It's somehow clear that this is the only part of the presentation that wasn't planned out. A gesture too fluid to be rehearsed, too familiar, without the stiff hesitations of thought. Two young men caught in the lingering wash of adult applause, standing so close they could be joined at some hidden point, tied to one another by a transparent wire that allows a range of individual movement but can also reel them back together at any time. They could be brothers. Or fashion models beaming their good luck out from a page of gloss. Or street hustlers starting their shifts.

I stand at the back of the room and hold them there for as long as I can. We all do. A last look at how things are, before they turn into whatever comes next.

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## 2

LESS than two hours after Wallace and Bates's sales presentation, I'm shaking the prime minister's hand. (He's nice, clammy-palmed, shorter than on TV. As I pass him in the reception line I tell him he has my vote, but this is a lie. A harmless, favor-seeking sort of lie.) This is in São Paulo, at a reception in the ballroom of the Canadian consulate. There is "Canadian champagne" and Ontario Mennonite cheddar sweating on the buffet tables, the room lined with pale faces glistening like wet plaster. It's immediately clear that these people—government officials, international lawyers, CEOs, millionaire writers of Silicon Valley software code—are dangerously new to breathing unrefrigerated air. Almost all of them are men.

I am here with the other members of the Hypothesis team, have to be, as I'm the translator they've brought with them for the trip and they couldn't order a plate of rice without me. It's a good gig, as my fellow part-time interpreters like to say, imagining ourselves as seasoned journeymen well used to international travel, protocol, war zones. The truth is we almost never find work that takes us out of town. Surprisingly enough, holding an unmarketable Ph.D. in Economic History and having as my only other skill the ability to speak both English and passable Portuguese hasn't led to the most dazzling of lives. I live on my own. Galbraith, my mewling, tumor-ridden cat, recently had to be put down. A Friday-night watcher of rented Scorsese and anything with Gwyneth, in a basement one-bedroom, usually alone. I once counted nine and a half days between the ringings of my phone (and when the call came it was from my gym, asking if I was dissatisfied with their services, seeing as I hadn't dropped by for several months). So a free trip to Brazil, a per diem that would pay for an entire month of cable, a hotel room with a fully stocked mini-bar all to myself—it's a good gig, all right.

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What makes it particularly sweet is that I am only responsible for the conference participants directly connected to the Hypothesis product, unlike some of my colleagues who, like overworked border collies, have to round up entire herds of departmental bureaucrats. In my case, there's only the four of them. Wallace and Bates (the two twenty-four-year-old "Boy Geniuses of Canada's Great White Web," as the cover of *Newsweek* called them); Barry, the managing partner they headhunted from an Atlanta pharmaceutical firm best known for developing prescription cures for male pattern baldness before their breakthrough discovery of the "female Viagra"; and Lydia, the English rose who is their European counsel, a few years older than me, forty and change, who "read *eeconomics*" at either Oxford or Cambridge, I can't say which for sure because she alternately mentions her "days up" at both.

I met them all at the boys' Toronto office the week before we came down here. A catered brunch in their "studio space" intended as a chance to "just hang out and chill," as Wallace's message on my answering machine put it. But the studio turned out to be the entire floor of a former button factory down in the docklands, now outfitted with a *Dukes of Hazzard* pinball machine, a sofa set covered with what appeared to be ostrich feathers, and a handful of desks draped with wires, distant as Pacific islands. Bates was the first to introduce himself. Shook my right hand and slid a flute of Pol Roger into my left, then pulled me to the center of the room to show how the remote-controlled blinds opened the windows up to the metallic field of Lake Ontario. Lydia picked a stray hair off my sleeve and kissed both my cheeks. Barry offered me Blue Jays box seat tickets he couldn't use the next day. Wallace challenged me to a pinball game and let me win.

"There's a lot of room," he said with his arm over my shoulder, peering through the forest of concrete pillars around him.

It was unclear to me whether he meant the office itself, or the potential opportunities within the company, or the global marketplace that everyone had begun talking about so much. I now know he was saying that there was room for me among them. If I chose to, I could be part of this odd family of English mother, cowboy father and two sons, all of them joined by the chemistry of commerce instead of blood.

"We're pretty close," Wallace explained after tickling Barry into

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weeping, “Cut it *out!*” submission on the ostrich sofa. And it was true. They had each made more money in the past four months than any of their parents had made over their entire lives. Their time together was a fluid mixture of laughter and shared secrets and initiation rites. They were *enjoying* themselves.

They called me only by my last name—with collegial affection—right from the beginning.

Now we’re here. In sales. All of us are part of the official Canadian trade mission to Brazil, host nation of the Southern Hemispheric E-Business Conference, a “historic opportunity to introduce a new dawn of hope to the developing world” (as described in the prime minister’s toast, glass of fizzing plonk raised high). The applause at this was loud and long. We’d heard sentiments like it before over the last few days, of course, in a number of different languages. But still, everyone seemed to be reassured by the endless mention of the sort of ideas crammed into the prime minister’s sentence. They liked “making history” and “hope” and “the world.” More than anything, though, they liked “new.” All of them had fallen in love with the mere evocation of it. A single syllable acting as a universal polish, sprucing up almost anything you applied it to. Three letters to do the job of sweeping away the geriatric millennium that had passed and lifting the curtain on the next. It was enough to make even a room like this one giddy, to send blood rushing to cheeks and hands flying up to hide lopsided smiles.

And nobody has more new at this conference than us. What we offer is precisely what everyone wants. Or, more frequently, are *told* that they want, and that we’re the only ones who have it. (I’ve been kept busy all week translating “buzz” into Portuguese—*expectativa!*—every few minutes.) As the banner over the conference hall stage declares, The Whole World Is Looking Forward to the Future! And we’re here to sell it something so new it never knew it needed it before.

The particular slice of future that our boy geniuses have developed is a website that teaches you morality. This is not how they describe it, however. Instead, Wallace speaks only of the program offering “helpful advice,” of “knowing what options are out there.” He frequently reminds us of the expensive focus group market research the company had commissioned prior to the launch. Hundreds from a “cross-

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generational/racial/income strata” handed over their consumer profiles in return for fifty dollars an hour and all the donuts they could eat. Their principal finding is that explicit mention of terms such as morals, ethical good, guilt or even conscience has a distinctly softening effect on most respondents’ “purchasing drive.”

For these reasons, we prefer to say that Hypothesis answers questions for you. Not trivia game-type questions, though. Not “What’s the capital of Idaho?” or “Who won the 1956 World Series?” Nothing with a determinable answer. Rather, existential questions, the tricky inquiries of principle, like “Should I lie to save my best friend from a life in prison for murder if I know he did it but I’m certain he would never kill again?” (one of Wallace’s favorites) or “Is it wrong to take the bathrobe from my \$350-a-night hotel room if I was assured I’d get away with it and the hotel is owned by a faceless, excessively profitable conglomerate?” (the one I entered on my laptop this morning after having already packed the bathrobe from my closet). What’s ingenious about the thing—what Barry calls “the hook” while making quotation marks with his fingers—is that the answers come from ourselves.

For the purposes of my job, I’ve come to refer to it as a compendium of contemporary ethics. After months of conducting detailed questionnaires in chain e-mails and random door-to-door interviews around the world, followed by a cataloguing of the tens of thousands of responses, Bates’s team of college dropout programmers (working for take-out Chinese and stock options) has put together a cross-referenced set of human behaviors. The trick is that when you mash them all together, the differences between the individual answers disappear, and you’re left with a single stand-in for one of *them*. Your fellow man. The Joneses. The blue-shadowed households that constitute a Nielsen ratings point, purchasers of discount mail-order life insurance, the parents of the kids that soap your windows on Halloween. The *vast majority*. Just like you, but less determined somehow. Happily compromised, nameless, getting on with life. A backdrop.

This is how I have explained it to myself, at any rate.

Wallace is somewhat more poetic about it: *Hypothesis forms a collective mind*. Not just *them* but a *them* with you included. What’s helpful from a sales perspective is that there’s no right or wrong about it. As

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Wallace frequently points out, the program promises not moral correctness but the law of relativism.

People seem to think it's something they've been waiting for. The current bid for world cable TV usage alone stands at \$6.4 million, although Barry has turned it down in the expectation of "more heat" in the months to come. There is talk of industry awards, humanitarian recognition, secret military applications. The boys' personal website receives two dozen marriage proposals per day, on average. But as Wallace noted in a recent *New York Times* feature on the world's "bravest" web pioneers, "The real fun stuff will happen when we go public." *Forbes* magazine has estimated that Hypothesys' initial public offering could generate capital "on a scale equal to the GDP of smaller industrialized nations."

For the moment, however, we're just selling an idea. Everybody here is. Around us, the Caribou Ballroom of the Canadian consulate is overstuffed with buyers and sellers of ideas. With handshaking, decorative palms, platters of rolled Quebec ham melting in the air of cooked sewage blowing in through the open windows. I'm standing next to one with Wallace and Bates, ready to turn their English into something else if the need arises. It rarely does. Almost all the Brazilians in this room speak English (they claim it lacks emotion and is therefore better for doing business). Listen with eyes closed and all you can hear is the familiar dialect of American marketing.

Suits push through other suits to meet us. They know who Wallace and Bates are, they've been briefed and advised to show keen interest. Although they would likely come in any event. To *him*, anyway. People come to Wallace without knowing that's where they were heading all along, to step within range of his blithe masculinity. Too young to realize the brevity of his sort of physical gifts, but old enough to know what they could make others do.

Look: here they come. The Argentinean Director of Education, the Colombian Minister of Justice, a VP of personnel recruitment for Microsoft in a low-cut Donna Karan—they all drop by to say a word of support for the "dramatic change" young fellows like themselves are visiting upon the planet. Even the U.S. Secretary of Trade makes a special trip across the floor, bobbing at the center of half a dozen Secret



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