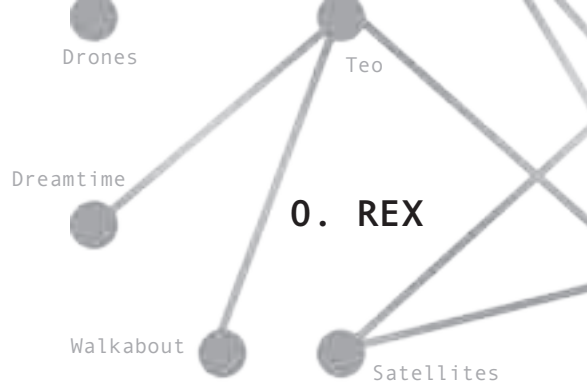


PROLOGUE

THE VANISHING





The night Teo disappeared started off just like any other.

I was at my desk, trying to finish a few projects before I got too tired, when the front door opened. The hinges were rusty and the screech they made was like nails on a plate. Ma had begged me to put some oil on them but that would've defeated the purpose. Those hinges were our alarm system.

Just hearing the door creak open wouldn't normally have given me pause.

A lot of people came over to our house. Sometimes they'd even show up before breakfast. But this was near midnight. The town was asleep.

It was silent.

It took a second for the fear to creep in.

I switched off my desk lamp and glanced down the hall at my parents' bedroom. Ma and Papa were asleep, curled up together, him snoring.

Teo's door was closed, and he only closed it when he slept.

So who just opened the front door?

I leaned back in my chair to peek around the corner toward the front of the house. It was hard to make anything out in the half-light.

I scanned the room, my eyes making out rough shapes as they adjusted to the dark. The couch. The TV on its stand. Nothing out of the ordinary . . .

"That you, Uncle Bobby?" I asked, trying not to be too loud.

No answer.

Uncle Bobby (who's not really my uncle) would sometimes show up at our place drunk. And when he was drunk he sang Mexican folks songs, *corridos*, as loud as he could with his big, thick gringo accent. I think, deep down, he was a Meximorphic and he really believed he had an inner Mexican begging to escape. He and Papa connected because they understood the land. It was fun to watch them differentiate hundreds of trees and plants by their possible "medicinal" qualities (aka booze content).

Papa would say things like, "Did you know that in Europe they throw away all their corn if fungus grows on it? I'm serious! In Mexico, *huilacoche* is like caviar!" And Uncle Bobby would just nod in agreement.

Thing is, Uncle Bobby never came by this late.

That's when my chest tightened.

Okay. Okay. You can handle this. Just need to wake Papa.

My hands scrambled over my desk for something, anything to use as a potential weapon. I found a screwdriver. It was dinky, but I had nothing else.

One . . . two . . . here goes nothing.

I got up and crept into the front room, ready to scream at the top of my lungs, left hand balled into a fist and—

It was Teo.

I instantly relaxed, then got really mad.

"You scared the crap out of—"

Teo put a finger to his lips and shushed me. Glancing out the window as though he was reading the darkness, he said, "I want you to go to your room until morning. Don't come out."

"What do you mean? Why?"

"I'm leaving, Rex. I don't want Ma and Papa to know."

"Where?"

"On a walkabout."

I was confused. "Walkabout? What do you mean? How long?"

"Forever."

I should have asked, "What's wrong?" But I didn't.

I was too stunned to say anything.

Teo led me back to my bedroom, sat on the edge of my bed, and frowned. "I don't want Ma and Papa to get too worried. I'm fine. I'll be fine."

"I don't get it. Why aren't you coming back?"

Teo just stared off into the shadows. "Something big is coming and I need to be out there to be a part of it." Then, looking me straight in the eye, he said, "World's going to change, little brother. We're all going to have to shift out of our default settings and I just hope I can wake everyone up soon enough to realize it. Good-bye, Rex."

"What about Ma and Papa?"

"You take good care of them for me." Teo stood up.

"Wait! I don't understand. Why are you doing this?"

"I have to."

Then he left.

I heard the door to the house screech one last time, then it was silent. I looked out my window, searching for Teo in the darkness, but I couldn't see anything.

I was tired. Confused. And scared.

Too scared to move.

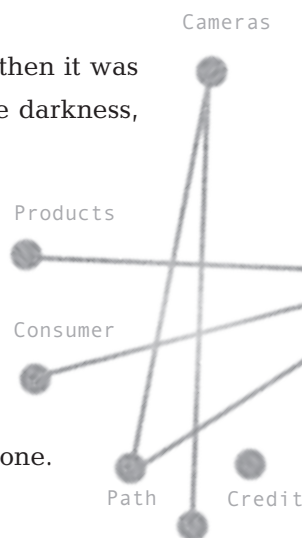
After that, I guess I just passed out.

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The next morning I wasn't surprised that he was really gone.

That word, *forever*.

Man, nothing's worse to hear than that.



Teo's vanishing act hurt. Deep like a knife wound. And the days just after were filled with fear, worry, and panic. Panic because calling the cops would mean exposing my parents' immigration status to the world, and not calling the cops meant we were somehow giving up on finding my brother.

We debated it endlessly, watching the hours tick by, and finally decided we had to call. The police did what they could, but without any evidence of a crime, Teo was written off as a runaway. And that was it. Even with California's lenient immigration laws, we knew we couldn't call again.

Amazing how you can get used to something, though. Even torture like that.

Eventually, the pain turned to numbness and then, finally, tears. Every meal Ma would have to stop halfway through and go to her and Papa's room, biting her bottom lip to try to hold the tears in. Everything she cooked was bland, like her tears had washed the flavor from her cooking. And Ma loved to cook. She worked at a Thai restaurant a few blocks from our house and used to love spending the weekends piling our kitchen table high with a crazy smorgasbord, where stuff like *jim jum*, *chiles en nogada*, *panang gai*, and *papatzules* sat side by side. But that was before.

Got so bad that Papa and I couldn't eat, either. We'd just sit there and listen to Ma cry until Papa pushed his chair back from the table and knocked on the door to their bedroom real soft.

I wouldn't see them for the rest of the night.

I'd put myself to bed, or more often fall asleep at my desk with my head on my keyboard and a half-eaten Oreo in one hand.

There were the usual stages of grief.

First it was denial.

We sat around the phone just knowing it would ring at any second. That Teo would be on the line and laugh and tell us how



sorry he was for worrying us. He'd say he was coming home, that it was one big, crazy adventure and he couldn't wait to tell us all about it.

That quickly turned to anger.

I found myself endlessly replaying my last interactions with Teo. They weren't good. The months leading up to his disappearance were filled with antagonism and disappointment. He'd just gone through a series of knock-down, drag-out battles at college over politically motivated hacking, and dropped out. Bitter, he kind of gave up on biology, too, and instead spent almost all his free time online in hacktivist and anarchist forums. He got really into this group of radical hackers called Terminal. Terminal was shady. It ran defacement and denial-of-service attacks on multinational corporations and totalitarian governments. But Teo defended them, said they were bringing power to the powerless and actually accomplishing things.

"Yeah, bad things," I'd tell him when he said it.

"They just look bad," he'd reply.

Unlike Teo's anger, however, ours dissipated. We couldn't hate him for long. It took months, but for Ma and Papa, that sadness eventually transformed into a numb sort of acceptance.

Papa, he got real into work, breaking his back in the winery as the harvest cellar operator. His nose got him that job. I sometimes joked Papa could sniff an aroma from a grape when the plant was still a seedling. Regardless, he worked harder than anyone else in that place once he got the promotion.

Ma, she built a shrine to Teo in his room. It was nothing fancy, more like one of those things you see on the side of the highway where someone crashed into a pole or flipped their car after a drunken night out.

That shrine, it said more about Teo than he'd ever admit about himself.

It had his least favorite picture of him. He looked too thin, his hair was kind of goofy (and Teo spent a lot of time on his hair), and his smile was all lopsided. One of those “in the moment” photos, and even though it didn’t capture how cool Teo could be, it captured who he was. Underneath all the fussed-over detail, he was one of us, someone who wanted to be liked, someone who wanted to belong.

About eight months after Teo had gone, his name started to drift.

Soon it wasn’t Teo this or that, it was “your brother” or “our son.”

The shrine started to gather dust.

In their own private ways, Ma and Papa had grown used to the idea that Teo was gone for good, that he wouldn’t ever come back to us, that our family was shattered.

But not me.

Sure, I went on the same emotional roller coaster.

I found myself lying awake at night, bargaining. Making ridiculous offers for a swap—me for Teo—to every higher power I could think of. Sounded like a great deal at the time. None of them took me up on it.

The whole bargaining phase didn’t last long.

Depression set in fast and hard. Almost bowled me over.

Just this deep emptiness, like the moon missing in the sky.

I got angry, I got sad, but I never gave up.

I never let the wheels stop turning in my head. I investigated every square inch of Teo’s room, certain he’d left behind a clue. I checked his books, the carpet, underneath the carpet, in his desk, and all his knickknacks.

I tested lint. Measured light. I even triangulated the position of all the objects in his room—from a sock under his bed to a marble in the air vent—and ran them through a quick sub-match graphing program.

Here's a diagram:

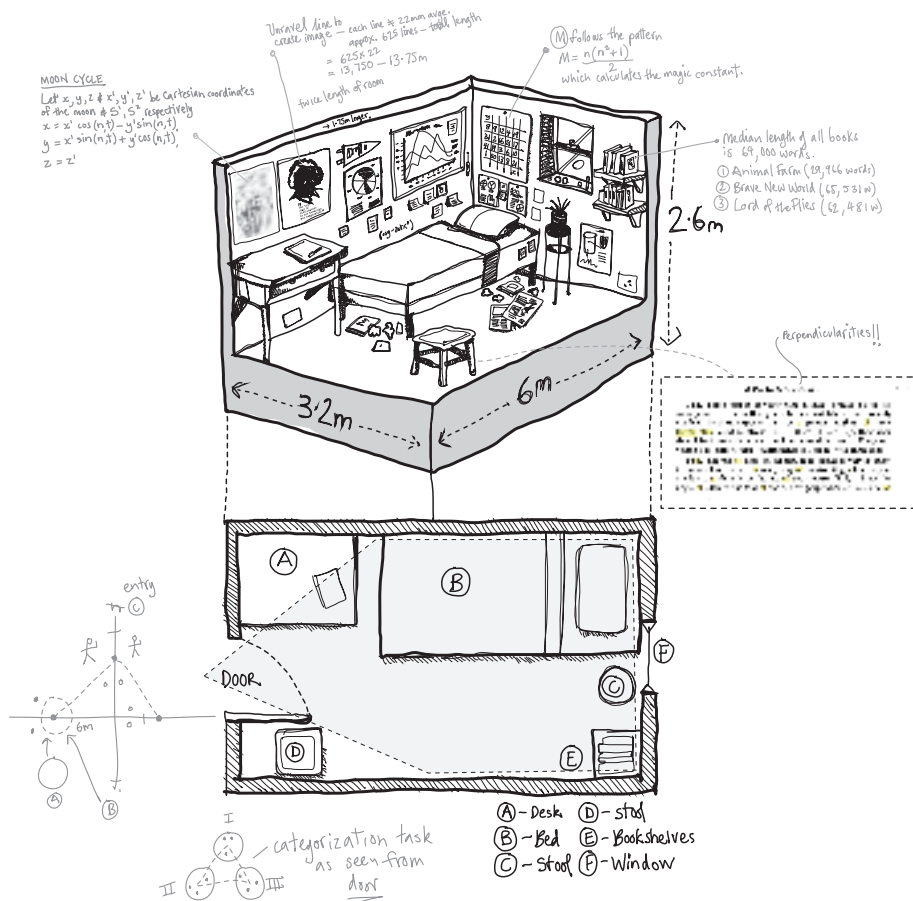


Diagram of Teo's room

Everything I tried, every test I did, turned out the same: nothing. No clues. No solutions.

With Teo gone, my world seemed darker, the possibilities fewer. Still, even though all the plans we'd made, all of our great dreams of exploration and discovery, felt too distant, too childish, I never really let them go. Just because my world seemed smaller, I wasn't

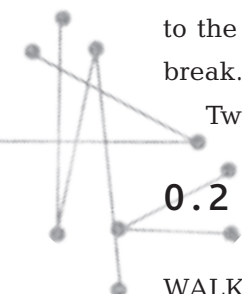
going to sit on my hands. No, I took all that pain and anger and disappointment and sadness and I made something with it.

One day I started writing code and I didn't stop.

Days, weeks passed.

I ate at my desk. Drank nothing but coffee. Outside of running to the bathroom and perfecting power naps, I didn't take a single break.

Two months later, WALKABOUT was born.



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WALKABOUT was the most complicated computer program I'd ever written.

Coding so diabolically complex that even I didn't know how I did it. Coding so crazy, it could only be effectively run on a quantum computer, a machine that functions on the quantum level. We're talking the bleeding edge of technology. We're talking about a computer that runs ten billion times faster than the laptop on your desk. Not exactly something you stumble across every day.

See, WALKABOUT was downright mystical.

Yeah, I'm exaggerating a little, but only a little.

In Australian Aboriginal culture, going walkabout is when a young man goes out into the wildness of the outback to survive alone for as long as six months.

It's a rite of passage.

It's a break, a getaway from the ordinary. A time for reflection and figuring out what you will try to accomplish with your life, what you want to become.

It's also a sacred event in which the seeker can potentially cross over into a more spiritual plane known as Dreamtime. There, past, present, and future overlap. In Dreamtime, you can access your

ancestors, and through them you can find answers to all of life's questions.

When he left, Teo told me he was going to walkabout.

I was going to use the digital equivalent of Dreamtime to find him.

The concept behind the program was simple: Every hour of every day, you are caught on camera. If it's not a lens tucked into a corner of the room you're sitting in, then it's on the roof of the gas station you just walked past.

The cameras are in stores.

They're in malls, in airports, even at train stations.

They're on cell phones and computers.

Even more, they're in the sky: satellites and drones.

Unless you live deep in the woods or in a bathysphere at the bottom of the ocean, there's someone watching you, probably lots of people. Heck, even if you live deep in the woods or at the bottom of the ocean, someone can find you if they really want to.

And guess what? Lots of people out there, lots of programs, are looking at that surveillance. They're looking at where you went, who you saw, what you've been up to, and, even more important, *what you're going to be up to*. Predictive analysis. Digital foresight. Electronic Cassandras. It's the twenty-first century, my friends; of course you're being tracked.

Find anyone

Here's the neat twist: That's not what WALKABOUT does.

Sure, it rides those main highways and it sneaks a peek at that surveillance.

But the technology's not the thing.

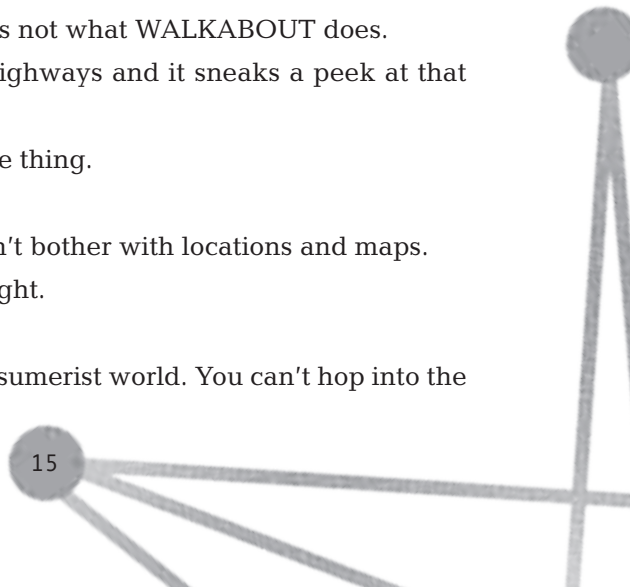
It's the data.

Want to find someone? Don't bother with locations and maps.

Bother with what they bought.

Bother with what they ate.

We are consumers in a consumerist world. You can't hop into the



bathroom without tripping over a dozen brands, a dozen products.

Go on and try.

Try walking fifteen feet without encountering a purchased product. Unless you live deep in the woods, you're not going to.

We all leave a product trail, a traceable path.

Trick with finding Teo was that wherever he was, he wouldn't want to be tracked. He would be aware he was leaving a data trail. And he'd be trying to mask it. He'd be trying to wipe his digital fingerprints. But unless he'd gone native and was living in a cave, there would be at least a few traces to follow.

Some of Teo's Favorite Things:

Bands: M83, Nozinja, Grimes, Jessie Ware, Blood Orange, Crystal Castles, Trust, mind.in.a.box, Frank Ocean, Death Grips

Brands/products: Fred Perry, Zeiss, Band of Outsiders, Oculus Rift, 3D Robotics, Apple, Touch Wood

Books: *Digitally Enabled Social Change* by Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, *Wonderful Life* by Stephen Jay Gould, *This Thing of Darkness* by James Alfred Aho, *The Irony of Free Speech* by Owen M. Fiss, *Synners* by Pat Cadigan

And that's what WALKABOUT would find.

Once I ran it, Teo was as good as found.

Thing is, to run it properly, I needed a quantum computer, and there were only six functioning quantum computers in existence. To

use WALKABOUT to find Teo, I'd have to travel to Moscow, Paris, Toronto, Buenos Aires, Sydney, or Boston.

None of them exactly close to Santa Cruz.

And none of them hackable online.

Still, I was determined.

I had to get to a quantum machine.

But how?

