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Man in a Room

HE HAD BEEN BORN INTO A ROOM WITH FOUR WHITE WALLS, a white ceiling, and a cold, hard, white floor. Light hit and reflected off it, diffused, so only a bare glow could be seen within it. In the corner there was a bed, an airy metal frame with a mattress no more than the length to his second knuckle high. A thin red covering adorned it, and a pillow rested at the short edge up against the wall. In the corner opposite the bed was a seat with a large hole in the center. A reservoir of some barely-visible and easily disturbed substance sat in its concave surface, and by pulling a lever he could have it replaced when it became dirty. Where it came from, he did not know.

He had no memory of his mother or father, or even the slightest hint of such concepts existing. When he awoke in the mornings, a box lay in the center of a wall opposite the wall where he laid his head. Inside were various different colorful objects, which he had learned long before he could remember tasted good and were necessary for continued survival. There were also eight smaller boxes, containing the same liquid he found in the seat in the corner. Strange symbols he couldn't interpret covered the boxes. It was tasteless, but refreshing.

Once he had begun to question if the things in the box really were essential to his wellbeing. After all, he had not remembered the circumstances that led him to deciding they were, and he had never gone a day without consuming them. He had only his assumptions to go off of, and he knew that wasn't actual proof. He began attempting to pass the days by without opening the boxes. These were simultaneously the least stimulating and least boring days he could remember. The objects in the box were a surprise to him each day, aside from the boxes with their strange markings, which were consistent each day. The seconds in which he decided he was going to open the box but had not yet done so made him feel light and energetic. It was a strange feeling, but one that he decided he was fond of. After opening the box, he knew one of three feelings would follow. One was a climax to the light, energetic feeling, caused by his eyes being met with colors that belonged to things he knew tasted good. The color of that stuff that came from his own body when he had somehow inflicted harm to himself was his favorite. The second was a betrayal of that earlier feeling, when he saw colors belonging to things he didn't like. There was a color similar to his own skin that he found most repulsive. The third feeling was an in-between of the two earlier feelings, much like what he felt throughout most of the day, caused by seeing things he didn't particularly like or dislike. Objects that had the same color as his wall or floor were bland, but not necessarily offensive like that sort-of skin colored one was. Ingesting the objects themselves was much of the same routine as discovering them. This was often the highlight of his day, and without this ritual, he found himself thinking that his days felt much like the room. At the same time though, he was venturing into unexplored territory. His mind raced with questions and rushed to answer them every second of the day.

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By the end of the first day, he found himself feeling quite normal. There had been a period where he had to fight with all his will to keep his body from tearing apart the box on its own, but it and the feeling that had accompanied it had subsided. The day after was much the same, but this time he had to fight much harder to keep himself away from the box. On the third day, he woke up feeling quite heavy. He had to put much more thought into getting his body to move the way he wanted it to, and he had to keep the box out of his sight at all times. The questions in his head became more nonsensical and frantic, and his mouth was dry like it had never been before. Falling asleep was very easy that night. Three days was as long as his experiment would last. The next day he ripped open the box before he even knew what he was doing, all thinking cast aside. He had become an animal that needed to survive and nothing more. He decided this was evidence enough.

At night, before he closed his eyes, he stared up at the dark ceiling. Doing so for long enough unlocked an ever-changing flurry of colors he could observe for as long as he pleased, provided he didn't focus too hard on any of them. Most nights this sight lulled him to sleep. He often flailed his body about when the lights were on. Failure to do so often replaced the pleasant colors on his ceiling with monstrosities he could only comprehend enough to be scared of. He would move his arms, jump up and down, and see how quickly he could go from laying down to standing up straight. He used to practice lifting his bed frame above him, but this soon became a trivial task. Soon after he realized that after his bed frame the heaviest thing in his room was himself. The question of how he could go about lifting himself rattled around his head for a week or so, before he decided the best way to do so was by laying straight, facing the floor, and using his arms to slowly raise and lower his body. He had also discovered he could will his throat to create dull drones, and the ecstasy associated with frequently changing these drones while moving about his room dramatically.

One day, the fact that he could envision all the activities he partook in but not himself actually partaking in them began to suddenly weigh heavy on him. He could picture himself from his own perspective and no others. This worried him, frightened him almost. Twisting his body around, he realized he could see all of himself except the part used for seeing. He knew there were a series of openings in this part of his body, five total, and he knew that atop and surrounding it was some strange, soft, easily movable mass. Near the bottom, some prickly bits occasionally interrupted the otherwise smooth surface, but the days when they would be there were unknown to him. The schedule was so arbitrary that checking for them became nearly as exciting to him as opening the boxes, and the grouping of it atop his head frequently changed length as well. He knew roughly the constituent parts of this part of his body, but as he closed his eyes he realized he couldn't for the life of him see how they all came together. He decided to engage in a practice he had partaken in before, with temporary results. He knew he could use the box to coax some of that seductively-colored substance out of his fingers or hands, and he knew that if he then rubbed it on the walls or floor it would be stuck in roughly the same form it had been put in. He had used this knowledge before to try to decorate

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and bring color to his room, but by the time he opened his eyes the next day it had always been gone. He decided now that even temporary knowledge of what this part of him looks like was better than nothing.

He tore off a part of the box and began to run it frantically over one of his wrists, as he had done before. The feeling sent jolts through him and his body begged him to stop, but he continued until he was greeted by that beautiful vibrant substance. He dipped the fingers of his opposite hand into it and placed them against the wall. He then began using the hand attached to his cut arm to trace the outside edge of his target. As he did so, his hand against the wall moved in perfect sync. He completed the outline and began to repeat this process with the parts on the inside, constantly having to agitate the cut on his wrist, until he was satisfied that he had mapped this part of himself in its entirety. This part of him, it seemed, was quite angular on the outside, with many lines and ridges within it. The openings it held had smooth, curved edges juxtaposed by the sharpness of their corners. For the first time, he was looking at himself, and he did so until the end of the day when the room suddenly became black. He had spent the day trying to commit this image to memory as best he could, as he knew the next day that would be the only place he would be able to see it again.

The next day, he rolled over in his bed and, much to his surprise, found himself looking once again at himself. He stared into his own eyes until he remembered how much he needed those things in the box. He brought it in front of the him in the wall and began his usual ritual facing it. He carried out many his coming days this same way, studying himself. He decided that he was quite beautiful, and the more that he could look at himself the better off would be.

Eventually, the novelty of the image wore off, and he decided that now that he knew who he was, it was important to know what he was. Beautiful, he knew, but what else? Every morning everything he needed to survive was provided to him without him having to ask, and he rarely felt unpleasant. He never knew or saw anyone else, but he didn't know if he needed to, or even if they existed. It seemed to him that he was alone, the only creature of his kind, and that because of this he was special. Something he could not see knew this, and saw him, and so decided to take care of him. He took great comfort in this thought.

Who and what were well enough, he thought, but they were nothing without a why. Why was someone as beautiful as him alone, and why was he made so special? This was a tough one. Maybe he was special because of his beauty, and was there because he was too beautiful to allow to be tainted by anything else. Maybe his beauty his was coincidental, and he existed solely to open the boxes and consume whatever they contained. Maybe he wasn't there at all, he was somewhere else that he was simply unable to see or comprehend in any way other than how he currently saw it. His bedtime routine of staring at the ceiling was soon replaced by closed-eye pondering of this question, to which it seemed he may never find an answer. His first theory seemed the most plausible to him, but without any knowledge of what lay beyond his room he was only just barely unable to accept it entirely.

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One morning, he awoke not to see a box, but instead a tall brown structure in his wall where the box usually lay. It was patterned by long, flowing, irregular lines that stretched from top to bottom, changing in thickness and direction as they went. On one side there was a piece that stuck out looking to be the same material as his bedframe. It was about the length of his hand, composed of hard straight edges. He stared in bewilderment. Never before had he seen something like this, let alone any alteration from the solid white that colored the walls and ceilings of his room that hadn't been his doing. Had he made this? In his sleep, maybe? It was possible, but unlikely. Slowly, he approached it. A vaguely familiar feeling took over his body. It was similar to how he felt before he opened his box for the day, but overall it made him want to stop rather than continue. Nevertheless, continue he did, until he was close enough to touch this strange new addition to his room. He laid his hand against it warily. It was hard, but seemed otherwise harmless. Against his will his attention shifted to the structure's reflective protuberance. A distinct lack of haste underlined his hand's movement to it until it was firmly in his grip, cold and smooth. The unpleasant feeling had reached its apex as he found that with a little downward pressure, it would move, causing something within the structure to make a noise. He relaxed the pressure on the protuberance and placed his ear firmly where he thought he heard the noise coming from. As he moved this handle down, he felt himself moving relative to the wall and his room and instinctively fell backwards. He scrambled backwards on his hands, breathing heavily and staring up at the space where his wall once was.

To him, it seemed as if he were moving beyond the boundary of his room for a moment. Was such a thing even possible? If it were, was it allowed? Far away, he thought he could barely hear some melodic droning. Maybe this really was a way out, and it was being used as a means to test if he deserved to continue to be here. Maybe it was an offer for him to make a choice. He mulled over the possibilities until he began to feel ravenous from not having received that morning's box. The closed-mouth melody echoed throughout his entire being. If he wasn't making this sound, something else was, and the only thing he knew of that could do such a thing was him. Perhaps there was someone else around, and if there was, he knew he had to see them. Surely then he would be fed. With new resolve and bravery, he again approached the newly brown section of his wall. He ignored all the unpleasantness in his body and gripped the handle. Slowly it turned, until his pushing managed to move the structure to a fully open position.

Through the opening in his wall he saw only blackness, a blackness that he would soon be enveloped in as hunger moved him forward. From behind him came a slam, rendering him entirely unable to see. Sight came seconds later, and with it the knowledge that now there was no opening in the wall, nor could he find any place where one might previously had been. He turned around, counting one, two, three black walls before his counting stopped as he made another 90 degree turn. For the first time in his life, he found himself face to face with another living creature. A grotesque creature, too, he thought. While the general shape of their bodies were similar, this being's face was smooth and round, their eyes round and oddly in line with each other, and their mouth running in a straight

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line below an oddly symmetrical nose. The more he looked, the more disgustingly symmetrical the entire face looked, as if the creator had made one side of the face and then gotten lazy. As he studied this person's form, they seemed to study him back. A very familiar feeling, yes, the exact same as before he opened his boxes, but this time much stronger, had been intensifying since he first laid eyes on this person. It did dip a bit when he realized how ugly they were, he admitted, but that was only a small hitch. This person was wearing the same white cloths as him, and it occurred to him that maybe this person was in the same situation as him as well. He raised a hand to try to begin some sort of communicative signal to this person, but stopped when the other person raised their hand at the exact same time. He saw his surprise shared in this other person's face as well, and they shared a laugh together. It was obvious to him then that person was indeed in the same situation as him. He was filled with a new feeling, one that usually came when he laid down and covered himself with his blankets. The pair reached out together in an attempt to share an embrace, but were halted by what seemed to be an invisible wall. They simultaneously recoiled, and tried feel at this invisible wall with the back of their hands. As they squinted together, trying desperately to see this barrier, they both seemed to notice something else instead: a back of a hand they had seen all their lives, on the other's body.

No, he instantly thought, this could not be him. He knew what he looked like, and it was very much not like him. This person looked like one of the creatures he occasionally thought he saw in the darkness of his room when he was younger. They were some sort of beast the depravity of which he could not even begin to imagine. He felt disgusted with himself for sharing such warm feelings with this abominable freak mere seconds earlier. But if they were so different, why did they have the same hand? Slowly, he raised his hand, and the person opposite him did the same. He leaned to the left, then to the right, then slowly descended to the floor. All his actions were perfectly copied by his counterpart. So quickly he surprised even himself, he turned the back of his hand away from him, but this move too was copied. He studied the hand that his partner in this odd dance now presented to him. Indeed, it was exactly the same as his own. No wait, he thought, was that a slight difference he had just spotted? With this person copying each of his moves down to the smallest involuntary sway of his body, it was hard to tell. He was copied still as he laid down and closed his eyes.

He was still hungry. If worse came to worse, he figured he could break whatever lay between them and try to go about consuming the other person. He wasn't exactly attracted the taste of that deliciously hued liquid that came out of him, but maybe this other person's would taste better. His thoughts instantly folded back on themselves at the idea that something about this other person could be better than him. Without being able to go back to his room, he was reduced to sleeping on the cold hard ground. His stomach and crotch ached incessantly. Hopefully he wouldn't have to be here with this freak much longer.

As his consciousness returned to him, he decided not yet to fully open his eyes, but rather to only crack one open to covertly see what the other person was doing. They too were laying down, in seemingly the exact same position as him. As his eyes snapped wide open, so too did theirs.

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This had become far too coincidental for him to ignore, yet it threatened and stood in the face of everything he knew. Regardless, assuming this person was simply purposefully imitating him, there would have been no way to know before it happened that he would open his eyes at that time, and at that speed. The pair rose together, stared at each other together, and together their faces contorted with rage. How could this be him? He had seen himself before, and this was not him. Yet the other person moved to touch their face at the same time as him. How could he be so hideous? He could hardly take his eyes off himself. He was beautiful. He knew this. How were there two of him? He was special. Breaking this barrier between them was the only action he could take that would lead to the answers he needed. After all, there was nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. He raised his hand, and lazily slapped against the unseeable wall. No results. He balled his hand up and swung at the barrier harder, harder, harder each time his increased effort showed still no results. Eventually he swung with all of his might, and the image of himself splintered, fracturing at odd angles. As he stared forward, dumbfounded, he finally saw a familiar sight.

There, he thought. That's better.