

It's February.

It's also November, if he counted the days from when the Class Graduated—March 22, 1997.

One of the older members said it's a cycle every 2,000 years, and there's always the chance to join the 39 that left, if he wants it enough. So, he brought the entrance fee—five dollars and three quarters.

An email was sent a few hours ago, before he got on the road. By the time he drove on, Crlody would have received it.

"I'll see you upstairs."

It might as well be that they will never see each other again.

He slept less and less as the day progressed, contemplating in bright daylight how to escape the sun, befriend the black hollowness, and integrate with the ephemeral matter erasing itself from a distance—Hale-Bopp comet. It was a seemingly endless drive, a muddy-engine car fixated on a blank road. As he entered Ehrenberg, Humphrey wondered how far the gas would take him.

And more. How long would his Vehicle stay with *him*?

Sometimes he tried to find the traces of the comet in daytime, only to find nothing but violet-tinted black spots as he shut his eyes. His vision, or his Vehicle's vision, the one that enabled him to see, blinded him from seeing beyond the framed reality. His selves were blending into each other, a dire cue for evacuation. He needed to be *him*, only *him* belonged to the Evolutionary Level Above Human.

The *him* whose voice agglomerated into the steady tenor hum of the Class song *Do-Re-Mi*, becoming indistinguishable. The *him* who no longer picked up distant comments about his long dress, as if he had just stepped out of a pool, still dripping water. The *him* who was part of the grand organ of the Class. The *him* whose Vehicle's eyes no longer lingered on women's ankles.

Desire is a drug. So is lust. He needed to be *him*, not his Vehicle.

Whenever he gets the language mixed up, he touches the patch on his left shoulder—Heaven's Gate Away team. A tranquillizer, a vacuum, a ticket to enter a window, the chance to discarnate what is stopping *him* from stepping into a new land. The last chance.

Sometimes he frantically replayed what he heard from the radio on the 26 of March, just to make sure his clothing doesn't go astray. Nike Air Decades, black sweatpants, five dollars and three quarters in the right pocket, black t-shirts. Nothing could go wrong this time. His palms glittered as he shuffled over and over through the two things. Purple shroud, plastic bag. He

told himself he'll make it to the Exit, just like the 40 others in his Class.

Humphrey thought about Wayne Cooke.

---

The studio air is stale, heavy with the scent of burnt coffee and old electronics. Overhead, hot stage lights prickle at his skin. A bead of sweat creeps down his temple, tracing a deliberate path he's too aware of but can't interrupt.

Humphrey sits upright in the metal-backed chair. Across the table, the interviewer leans forward, all sharp angles. The red *ON AIR* sign flickers to life, buzzing faintly.

"Welcome back to *60 Minutes*, where we dig into the stories you think you know," the interviewer begins. "Today, we have Charles Edward Humphrey, one of the few surviving members of the Heaven's Gate cult."

Humphrey feels a wave of coldness behind his ears and down his neck, like a thin layer of cement solidifying in an instant. He had expected the word. *Cult*. The sickening word. He despised the way his Vehicle processed his sentiments, not with consequences in mind, all grounded to the present, infiltrated with indignation. How he wishes he can correct the interviewer with a lenient speech. But how could he manage the stiffness of his Vehicle, so at odds with his thoughts?

His Shephard tells *him* to look forward.

"Let's start with the obvious: Mr. Humphrey, could you explain why you left the group?"

Humphrey meets the interviewer's gaze, unflinching. His Vehicle has now synced up with *him*. "Although I'm not with my Classmates, I never left the class."

The interviewer raises an eyebrow. "But you're here. Breathing, alive. Last I checked, that's not how it works." Now the interviewer glances to the side. Humphrey waited for him to finish exchanging his disbelief with the camera.

"I temporarily parted with my classmates because I felt like there were areas in my own discipline that I wasn't able to keep up," Humphrey replies evenly. "But there is no 'leaving' the group. Left is only for the Exit."

The interviewer leans back slightly, his chair emitting a faint creak. "The Exit? Care to explain that for our listeners?"

---

The room is dim, washed in muted beige and the flicker of the television no one is watching. They've made a silent consensus on not touching the overly embroidered flower sheet, an

extravagant collage of plant genitals. Every object emits the scent of earthly desire, displacing their sense of morality and control. He wished he had the Procedure Book—spiral-bound and neatly handwritten, governing every facet of their Vehicles' lives.

It's okay. It is only the space that we needed, to keep up with the Class's steps. He heard himself repeating.

Humphrey sits on the edge of an armchair, his hands resting on his knees, fingers curled inward like dried leaves. Across the room, Wayne Cooke paces, restless and hollow-eyed, muttering something about Suzanne.

"I heard her at the conference," Wayne says, speaking slowly. "She said something."

"To you?"

"Yes, to me. To us."

Humphrey nods slowly. He knows what Wayne means. Suzanne is gone, crossed over, and left her Earthly Vehicle behind like a used-up chrysalis.

Yet they still remain in their cocoons.

"She told us to follow the Shephard," Wayne finishes.

This time Humphrey looks out the window. He sees green bushes. There is something subversive about their perfectly trimmed square, a feeling of branching bodies cut abruptly, pieces of hair and flesh decomposing into the soil as if to say: there is no end to eliminate what is destined to grow. Humphrey's head swims. The Procedure Book would say otherwise, and the Shepherd would want the bushes replaced with polyester.

The day is getting longer, and so is the liveliness of living beings. His Vehicle teeters.

He splashes his face with cold water and thinks of the Exit, of the threshold they're about to cross—if they still could, and the bushes, until Wayne calls him from the living room to take their vitamins.

"Got to stick to the time. It's almost 7:23," Wayne watches him as he swallows the pills. Humphrey catches a hint of reproach in his voice. He gets it—Wayne used to be the best at remembering what's in the Procedure Book. But Wayne never told him why he parted with Suzanne and the class.

"I'm sending the tape and the letter," Wayne says, now looking at him.

They are addressed to his daughter.

"I told Kelly it's time for me to go," Wayne's voice fades.

“It’s always been time,” Humphrey murmurs, though not looking back. “It’s always been time.”

The silence between them stretches, broken only by the hum of the air conditioner. The night feels both eternal and fleeting. Humphrey imagined running on the fingertip of Adam as he lay on the floor. A leap, and he will regain life in the Next level.

Time passes, measured by the fading resistance in their hearts.

---

“The Exit refers to the Exit of the Human Evolutionary level. We Exit this planet, and our Vehicles, to pursue a better life at the Evolutionary Level Above Human. When you’ve acquired enough understanding of the Next Level from a representative from that Level, you are to shed your vehicles and follow that representative to ascend.”

He saw the interviewer nodding slowly. It’s always this face: slightly raised eyebrows, squinted lower eyelids, tilted head, downturned lip corners. Saying, “not bad.”

“Vehicles.” The interviewer interjects, “you mean your bodies?”

“Yes. Vehicle, or Container.”

“Alright. And this ‘Next Level’... What exactly is it? Heaven? A new planet? Enlightenment?”

Humphrey shifts in his chair. He needed the edge to press against his spine, to reassure him this is not a synonym puzzle the interviewer puts between conversation.

*Sync up*, he said to his Vehicle. Humphrey loosens his tensed neck with a deep breath.

“It’s beyond Earth,” Humphrey replies, his tone taking a softer turn. “It’s where our true selves belong. Earth, the Human Evolutionary Kingdom, was designed as a place to grow souls, but it’s temporary.”

“Temporary...” The interviewer leans in, pouncing on the word. “So, what happens when you *Exit*?”

---

White lights pierce through the thick fog in Humphrey’s mind.

“Charles Edward Humphrey. Male. 56. 5’7. Respiratory depression from barbiturates overdose.”

He feels the frictional touch of exam gloves on his face, dragging his skin, invading his senses. Rubber. Antiseptic. With a click of a penlight, he went blind for three seconds.

“What’d you say again?”

“It’s vodka and barbiturates that he took, but guess what, no apple sauce and pudding this time.”

In between awareness and oblivion, he heard someone laugh, and the sound of himself breathing. He isn’t supposed to be here—not in this place, not in this body.

Each breath drags him down, an anchor tying him to a reality he no longer belongs to. His chest rises and falls like a marionette’s, forced, mechanical. Paralyzed by gravity, eyes locked on the sterile ceiling, his body won’t obey him, but his mind refuses to stop.

He sees the bushes again, breaking free from the perfect trimming, crawling onto the hotel walls. Like a curse, like a spell.

Where is Wayne? His head feels leaden against the thin pillow, but his mind reaches out.

Humphrey told himself Wayne had made it. He has to have made it. In the blankness of the ceiling, Humphrey traces the tail of an even brighter comet. He wants so desperately to hear something from him. That he’s in a new form, that he’s with Suzanne, and that the class celebrates his arrival.

Humphrey’s lips tremble as he whispers into the air, barely audible, “They’ll come back for me. They will.” The words hang in the silence, fragile, like a bridge over an abyss he knows too well.

His breath hitches, not from despair alone, but from a betrayal he cannot yet name.

---

Humphrey takes another deliberate breath. “When we Exit, we join the Away Team. We ascend—”

“In a spaceship!” the interviewer cuts in with theatrical enthusiasm. “Correct?”

Humphrey remains still. “The craft could be a tool for reaching the next level, not the destination. It’s how the Next Level transports its members.”

He saw the interviewer chuckle, shaking his head. “So, you die... and get beamed up like in Star Trek?” A fist he made rises and popes open above Humphrey’s head. “Sounds... convenient.”

“It’s not death,” Humphrey corrects, his voice sharpening. “It’s discarnation. Liberation from the limitations of flesh and taking a better life in the Next Level.”

“Right, right,” the interviewer drawls, clearly unconvinced. “And these ‘limitations’... you mean life itself?”

Humphrey waited to put his words together. He focuses on the polished edge of the interviewer's desk. "Life on Earth is a test. A trial. Everything that our class does is so unhuman that we conflict with the bodies that we are wearing. We reject individualization that this age is obsessed with. We are sober and clear-minded. But we can't keep these healthy because we do not participate in human behavior and tolerate indulgence and desire. In a sense, we're body snatchers. We incarnated into these human bodies. Now we're leaving them." He might have spoken too fast.

Indeed, he had. He felt the pressing gaze. But why does he feel a spotlight of pity?

"Mr. Humphrey you still firmly hold this belief after everything that's happened? After losing everyone?"

"They're not lost. They made it."

"To where?"

He sees it again—the metal bush. Stark, lifeless, and untainted.

Not human, not alive, but enduring.

"Home."

---

The wind rose, tugging at his frayed black sweatpants, stirring the desert dust into swirling eddies. Ehrenberg stretched empty before him, vast and indifferent, under a sky darkening toward oblivion. Somewhere beyond sight, Hale-Bopp silently carves its path, trailing through the endless void.

Humphrey traced the patch on his sleeve and thought of the flashing red alert on the Heaven's Gate website he helped maintain. The files uploaded, the sermons transcribed, the invitation eternally extended. They were meant as beacons, breadcrumbs for wandering souls. In some distant corner of the internet, he still speaks, still waits—patient and persistent. A digital echo, immune to decay.

He reached into the trunk, his hands caressing the tools for his Exit.

A fortepiano coda, the engine hummed a constant tune as he closed his eyes.

Hale-Bopp was luminous. A radiant purple ion tail joined its diaphanous streak.

"Boarding now, I'll see you soon."