

Wade Occam Cooper is on a journey not dissimilar to the millions suffering depression who lose themselves in the fog. But his mind creates an alter ego who offers him a path out of the darkness, one paved with sexual exploits and philosophic musings. However, another alter will try to pull him back down.

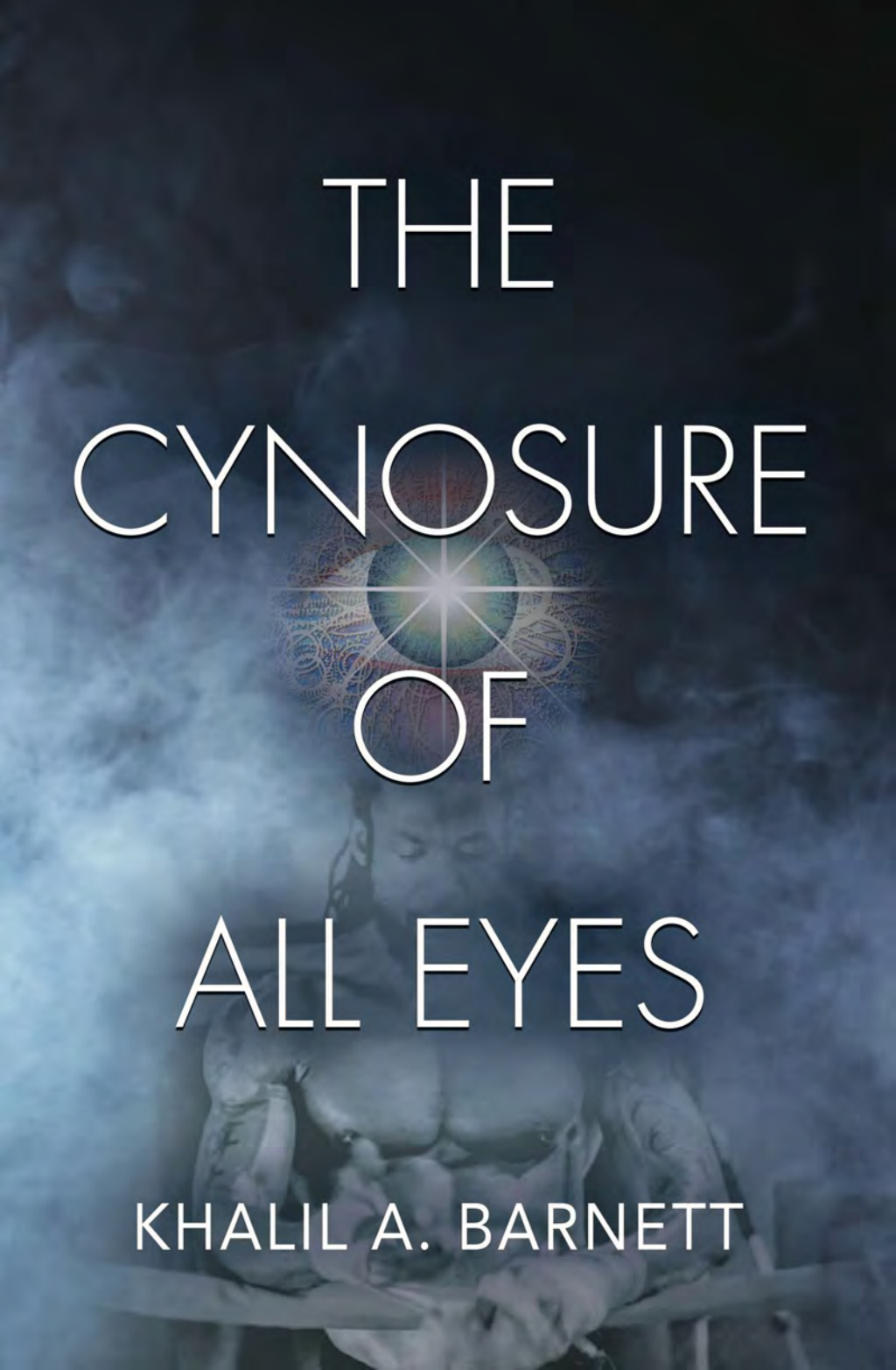
The Cynosure of All Eyes

By Khalil A Barnett

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THE
CYNOSURE
OF
ALL EYES

KHALIL A. BARNETT

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Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-005-7

Epub ISBN 978-1-64719-006-4

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64719-007-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

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Part I:
OCCAM

I recalled the excitement of sex. And a truism; that your imagination is much stronger than your will power. Mine is such that it would seem I had no will at all to resist the ebullient intensity of my, Occam's, body thrusting into Loretta's....

THE WAY I ENTERED THE WORLD WAS NOT IDEAL, which, I suppose, is a decidedly nice descriptor for the event of my birth. It took until I was an adult for me to manifest the full brunt of the trauma, but when I did it sucked up nearly twenty years of my life during which I more or less slept through in a fugue of deep depression.

What happened is, when my mother was pregnant with me, 7 months and 3 weeks, she was shot to death by the police. The doctors barely saved me, the cops were never charged for the murder, and my father spent the first six years of my life burning out his own on drugs and alcohol while custody of me was cycled through family members on my mother's side.

My father never got over my mother's death, he never got to properly raise me, and I wound up being the one to serve the cops' prison sentence -*a prison of the mind.*

—

IT WASN'T UNTIL I WAS ALREADY 40 YEARS OLD that I took my depression seriously and made a commitment to stopping it from ruining my life. I cycled through several different doctors and innumerable forms of treatment before finally arriving at an experimental drug that offered me a fighting chance against the **grey beast**, and marked the catalyst of the story that I am going to tell you now. *Will you stay with me for it?...*

The antidepressant was called **CHIMEXIVA**, which was perhaps a play on the word "Chimera" but as a fading man of literature whose heaviest cross was the burden of overthinking, it was best to not hold this idea in mind for too long... Anyway, among the active ingredients of Chimexiva were a synergistic blend of **ginkgo biloba**, the last living maidenhair of the Ginkgophyta; **Curcumin**, the principal curcuminoid of turmeric;

and, the one that caught my eye the most, **Ashwagandha**, *scent of a horse*, the withania somnifera gooseberry that grows in Africa and the drier regions of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In the Ayurvedic medical system, Ashwagandha, often referred to as the “winter cherry”, is considered a *rasayana*, meaning it promotes longevity, vitality, and happiness -essentially youthful sustenance in both the physical and mental spheres. Ashwa, the part of its name that literally translates to “horse”, is a clue to its power.

The way I experienced the cocktail was this; *Here is this guy standing before me; He looks just like me; He is, in fact, an optimum version of me. He is razor sharp in every sense of the word. He introduced himself to me as Occam.*



OCCAM IS MY MIDDLE NAME, ACTUALLY. In full, on my birth certificate, it reads, **Wade Occam Cooper**. Nothing entirely remarkable, that. But naming me was one solid thing my father got to do for me before getting lost for six years in his own pit of depression. So, it meant a great deal to me. And the name Occam, by itself, is quite interesting. Historical in the sense that it has a past, one full of irony -considering.

“Entities should not be multiplied without necessity,” reads the Occam’s Razor, a problem solving idea attributed to the scholastic philosopher William of Ockham. This idea, it is meant by design to draw emphasis towards the value of simplicity, and to clearing all the clutter and chatter and distractions that get in the way of one’s sensitivity for noticing the miraculous in life. Or, put another way, a tool for cutting through all the complicated bullshit of a problem and finding the simplest, most likely answer to a question or dilemma.

The irony then, for me, having a middle name like that, is that my life has been anything but simple...

But there he stood. He was me, only stronger in both demeanor and muscle, better in posture, cleaner cut. His long locks, they were not merely “done” but perfectly groomed - beautiful even. Tortilla wrapped, this guy was, in dapper from head to toe; shiny Belvedere-red alligator shoes, a tapered navy blue suit over a baby blue shirt unbuttoned at the top to reveal a red undershirt to match the shoes and, below that, a red belt of the same alligator print.

He was waiting for me on the curb to pull up, everything about him instantly making the nondescript clothes I was wearing look as trivial as discarded bubblegum wrap. And though he looked exactly like me, I didn’t for a moment think that I was dreaming. I didn’t think myself insane.



THE CAR I DROVE WAS A BLACK 2018 HONDA CIVIC TYPE R, with red wheel trim and interior passementerie. It was one of the few things I was proud of. I got lucky three years ago in the story of coming to acquire it. My last vehicle, a much older 1998 Civic, was falling apart. A friend of mine from back when I was heavily into the personal training circuit, Argentinian dude named Thiago Pereyra, came from a rich family that owned a chain of car dealerships in the states called Pereyra Motors. He changed cars himself, it seemed, at a frequency of about once every three or so months. Anyway, when he got hold of the Type R, he decided on a whim that he didn’t like it. Something about the handling. Whatever.. I was his trainer at the time, and a few months prior to this decision I had successfully gotten him not only to quit drinking and smoking, but to turn a huge chunk of his persistent body fat into muscle and get him off the path to dying a young diabetic. Full of gratitude, and embarrassed seeing me working in such an important field while driving a raggedy car, he gave me the

Type R in exchange for the '98 as a trade-in for parts. Called it a birthday present. It was also a parting gift of sorts, because I didn't see him much at all after that and we stopped training - abruptly.

But despite that, the way Occam carried himself, the sense of quiescent stateliness I got from his demeanor as he entered my backseat, it made me feel cheap and lowly.

"2264 Oleander?"

"Yep," he said, his eyes looking into me through the reflection of my rear view mirror. Not "at" me, into me. There was no indication of surprise at all from him over the fact that he was now talking with his doppelgänger.

We rode along a little bit before speaking again to each other. It was simultaneously the most awkward silence and the longest seven minutes of my life.

The time was 3:15pm, a Tuesday in Orlando, Florida. It made sense that the traffic was picking up. On the East side of town, we were passing through an area sandwiched between both the University of Central Florida and Valencia Community College. That meant a lot of young, obnoxious drivers sharing the road with us, not to mention the additional traffic from people leaving middle and high schools, city busses, school busses, and the beginning of the rush hour blitz.

We smoothed onto the I-4 where, surprisingly, the lanes were relatively clear. The sun was to my left and so, thankfully, not in my face. I'd been driving since 5am but I noticed for the first time that day that the weather was beautiful. Maybe this was an affect he had on me, Occam in the backseat, having sparked my sensitivity to the surroundings. Or maybe it was the antidepressant drawing my attention away from the anxiety I

almost surely would have otherwise felt in its absence with this curious phantom still staring at me through the mirror.

This was his cue to speak.

“The app tells me your name is Wade,’ he said. Even his voice was assertive. “I find that both interesting and dangerous, at the same time. Interesting because it’s not the most common name, and so it instantly draws to mind certain famous people who share it.”

“Really? Why dangerous then?”

He smiled.

“Well... dangerous because, let me put it this way, we sometimes live up to certain implications embedded in our name’s meaning. Unconsciously, without wanting to, and to any number of faults. Imagine a boy *wading* in water, imagine a man *wading* through life. One *wades* through the shallows, never reaching the deep. Some would call it fear. Imagine that being the foundation of your entire existence. What would you call it?”

I was taken aback by his audacity, and the ease and confidence with which he spoke. It was commanding, that. And though he was low-key insulting me, his every word registered in my mind like soothing aloe on an inflammation.

“It’s just my name, man.”

“Exactly. I’d wager that twenty years ago, you’d have waxed poetic at a question like that. Where’d you go, Wade? What happened to you?”

At that moment, the Uber app on my phone chimed at another incoming fare. Caught me off guard not merely because I was already in the middle of a trip (through the Twilight Zone?), but because I was in the grips of what could only be described as an existential crisis.

“Pick it up,” he said. “You need the money.”

If I lingered for a moment, it was a short one. The way the Uber app works is you have but a few seconds to decide on taking an incoming fare before it goes back into the queue or is picked up by someone else. So, I clicked it. I could already feel Occam smiling before looking back to see him doing it. *Feel it...* Osmosis is a word I’ve always liked. It’s described in most sources I’ve read as a gradual though unconscious synthesis of things, be they ideas or knowledge or, in the biological sense, the diffusion of solvents through a membrane. If it could be felt or experienced consciously, then my connection to Occam’s mannerisms and gestures was becoming just like that. An event of osmosis, curiouiser and curiouiser by the moment.

It wasn’t even five minutes later when I realized that the GPS had already begun redirecting me on the path of this new destination with Occam still in the car. *Wasn’t... he a fare? Was I - am I? - losing my mind after all?*

—

I COULD ALREADY SEE THAT SHE WAS ATTRACTIVE by the time I turned onto her street. *Attractive*, that is, as an understatement. In my depressive past, I’d developed a habit of understating pretty much everything. Especially my response to women all across the spectrum of beauty. Somewhat attractive and drop dead gorgeous cued the same titillation -a storm of curiosity, desire, and self-loathing.

But as I got closer, I could see her better. She stood about 5’4” and was wearing a black skirt and an ecru floral crop blouse made of chiffon.

I’d forgotten already the specter in my back seat but as the girl entered the vehicle, I saw that he was smiling at her while

she seemed oblivious of him. That's when her name popped up on my phone screen. Loretta.

"Good afternoon," I said.

"Hi," she offered, full of enthusiasm, I mused, for life.

"3551 Thomas Ave.?"

"Yeah, that's right. You can take any route, I'm not in a rush or anything."

"Ok."

Loretta smelled like lilacs, and she smiled again. That smile would stay with me for a long time. The natural color of her hair was black but bore golden highlights, her eyes were violet and their rarity cast swords of intimidation into me -hypnosis too, if that made sense.

It seemed that every time I even remotely experienced attraction, I would begin to eulogize myself. I would think not only of what I was before depression and anxiety took a foothold in my life, but also of what I might have become if they hadn't.

This time however, instead, since I was about two weeks medicated, there was Occam again in my periphery. I was certain that he wasn't actually there in the physical, since Loretta hadn't regarded him. But Occam was definitely regarding her.

I was resigned to spend the entire trip without saying a word, but that is when Occam opened his mouth instead. Loretta was suddenly, magically, aware of him sitting next to her. And I might as well had turned into an object as inanimate as the car we were all sitting in.

"Would it be presumptuous of me," he began, 'foolish, or some combination of the two to assume that you are from Venezuela?"

She looked at him, dubiously.

"Maybe it is something about your eyes," he continued, "and the stories that their composition are whispering through to mine. Maybe it's your outfit. Venezuelan women in my experience are snazzy dressers. Or maybe it's your Chavez pendant."

Loretta laughed. Again, music-like. I quivered a little. But I think it was jealousy that made me grip the steering wheel tighter.

The traffic was picking up. I moved over to the center lane so was no longer behind the raggedy off-black pickup truck, which, by the way, bore one of those desecrated American Flag decals with the blue stripe and not one but three trump 2020 stickers, and a Confederate flag for good measure. *A cultist...*

"You've got a good eye," Loretta offered, "But maybe, sure, a little bit of presumptuousness to go with it... Yeah though, it's a Chavez pendant. A gift from my late father."

"Rest his soul. Look, I'll admit that I noticed the pendant... by accident." If an inflection could wink..

"What do you..?," she noticed his subtle glance down at the... *pendant* when he said that, "oh.. you're bad."

"Absolutely! But I should own it every bit as much as a woman owns her beauty. This I learned, as a matter of fact, from the works of Azalea Quiñones."

"Quiñones?" I could tell she was surprised and further impressed by Occam's intellect, "Didn't she do nude self-portraits?"

"That she did. But also, she observed the concept of '*desdoblamiento*', dual identities. I personally see life as.. gnomonic in nature, so I appreciate Quiñones very much. Her observance of double identities is the yardstick of civilization, I think. Incidentally, I'm a bit curious about yours. Your identities, that is."

“What is your name?” her voice softened.

“Occam, like the razor.”

“I’m Loretta,” she offered her hand for a light shake. Then Occam said,

“Your curious smile reminds me of something that Miyó Vestrini said. ‘The fire,’ she wrote, ‘is no surprise to the poets. The fire is part of those who, day to day, gamble their lives on the horror of solitude.’”

“What does such a well put together man know about fire and solitude?” she asked. Occam’s laughter at that, it was like a fulminant note from the great Yardbird Charlie Parker’s horn.

“You hear that, Wade?!”

He addressed me, and nodded at me in the mirror, just this once before setting his eyes back on Loretta and taking her hand in his again.

“Oh, I can tell you stories, Loretta. Many. Perhaps you’ll let me.”



THERE’S A GAP IN MY MEMORY AFTER THAT. The next thing I recall is the heavy sweat and deep breathing. I recall the excitement of sex. And a truism; that your imagination is much stronger than your will power. Mine is such that it would seem I had no will at all to resist the intensity of my, Occam’s, body thrusting into Loretta’s. Her cries formed a rapturous crescendo that boomed against the chorus of our loud, wet tussle.

Her bare breasts had the violent buoyancy of water in a storm, and she had to hold them as the sex grew fierier. I marveled. I marveled the soft texture of her skin, that lilac scent amplified by her pheromones, the unexpected power of my own sexuality either a side-effect of the antidepressant or excitement in panic over Occam and I sharing the same body.

Making love to Loretta was like being in school and not wanting class to end. She'd done gymnastics as a kid in addition to soccer, and it showed in her flexibility and strong muscle-dense quadriceps when lying down on her back and opening her legs in a perfect split to receive me.

I couldn't believe the state of my virility, but didn't question it. Instead I held myself suspended before her.

And in my mind it was like being atop the highest mountain in Parque Nacional Canaima and diving head first into the Caroni River. The gradual slide in was the Angel Falls rushing past me as I cut through the nexus of wind on my way into the water. The hydraulic force of my passion for her and hers for me, that was the splash-in set on repeat. I swam with tarpon and grey snappers, I harvested oyster in the depths of the mangrove. And she felt me, she shivered and dug her fingers into my back, buttocks, thighs.

"Oh god, harder," she yelled, "Don't stop!" And I obliged. Or perhaps it was Occam, making love to this stranger as I would have if I weren't a man damaged by years of disrepair, and weren't bearing the coarse nurture of many generations of struggle, subjugation, brutality, and the bone deep indoctrination of a society that hates my black skin to the core.

ONE COULD SAY THAT I WAS UNLEASHED, but then I woke up. I was deeply disappointed to find myself alone in my bed. The unfledged brightness of the sun shown its light in my eyes as I turned away from its indictment. I managed to lift all seven hundred bags of rock that my body felt like up from the bed before noticing that I still had an erection. A painful one. I wondered about that.

A full, powerful erection is not a miraculous thing. But depression, a default state I'd grown used to, can lead a man to believe that it is. After long enough, that man can be convinced of a mythology of

impotence, despite there being no underlying physical pathology or presence. This boogeyman come to life, it hides not only under the bed and in the closet, but in the mind, the bones, and behind the eyes - casting its tint on everything he sees.

But not that morning. Instead I saw Occam leaning on my dresser. Ever dapper, apparently his own default setting, he was dressed in a brown turtleneck sweater that was muscle fit ribbed, over designer dark blue jeans. His arms were folded, and on his wrists were an assortment of anzhongli mala beads and lava bracelets fitted with healing stones. On the pinky of his right hand was a golden tiger eye ring.

"Women are the true heroes of this world," Occam said instead of 'good morning'. He was smiling while I was still struggling to focus my vision. My entire body ached but in a good way, the kind of pain one feels during the recovery time after vigorous exercise. "But that's not a feminist statement," he continued. "Consider! Science has proven, well, certain reputable practitioners of medicine who, it just so happens, studied at Harvard University, have found that, on average, a man needs to have sex about 22 times a month in order to avoid the risks of prostate cancer."

I sat up, looking at Occam sideways. He was amused, not in a puerile sense but in the way that a professor is regaled by the blossoming of a student's mind as an idea is planted into it.

"Does that surprise you, Wade, having been reared here in the prim and stodgy West? Well it's an idea that originated in Kumasi, Ghana. Formulated by African urologists and herbal doctors." He pointed then at the skin on the back on his own hand, when he belabored, "*The homeland.*" and then paused for further emphasis before continuing.

"Anyway, 22 times. A month. Sounds like a lot but is nothing really. 'Miscere', root word of 'promiscuous', meaning

'to mix', is an old 17th century Latin word, eventually coming to hold the meaning of what we know today as promiscuous. It is an implied criticism of a man freely sowing his oats. Nothing but prudish nonsense and definitely not from Africa!"

Occam laughed then. He loved the sound of his own voice. I sat up and groaned, feeling the weight of my legs.

"Listen close, broham. If it is true what those urologists in Ghana are talking, and it is, then it means that women, from a biological standpoint, do not only bring men into the world but keep them in it by motivating them to fuck!"

"Heroes?"

"That's right. It's you with the dick but it's her wielding the proverbial sword. Their innate, biotic inclination towards being sexy, the come-hither bat of the eye, the natural sway of their hips when they walk, the estrogen that makes their skin soft and alluring, sun dresses, short flirty skirts, tight workout attire, the way they cross their legs when they sit, the fragrances they wear, the jiggle of their anatomy when they move and whatever they unconsciously do to accentuate those rhythms, it's all heroic on down to the cellular level. When they do what they do to entice you, every time -and whether they know it or not! - they're doing it all in an attempt to save your life. Will you let them?"

Instead of offering him an answer, I groaned again. "Why does my dick hurt?"

"Because last night wasn't a dream, Wade. Earl of wading in the shallow waters of his own life."

"What are you..." But instead of getting the words out, the memory of sex with Loretta washed up to the front of my mind. Occam, by.. osmosis, was aware of it.

"Yeeees," he celebrated.

"What? But.. ho- "

“Check your phone if you still don’t believe it.” Occam tossed me my phone from off the desk, abruptly and without warning. It’s miraculous that I caught it!

When I opened it, I saw an unread text from LORETTA:

**Tonight was incredible.
Call me in the morning. xoxo**

When I looked up from the phone, Occam was peeling a mandarin. I don’t know where it came from. But ever in love with the music of his own voice and facility with language, he intoned,

“Though you don’t quite trust it yet, you are innately aware of what is happening. You are not looking in a mirror right now, but you know that you might as well be.”

Then he took one of the mandarin pieces into his mouth and outstretched his arms when he continued, “So take a good look! You see how clean my hair is, the swagger and confidence not only in my step but as well in the tenor of my voice.”

He threw a few more pieces of mandarin into his mouth, and it was then that I knew for certain, seeing with my own eyes, that he was indeed a being a supernatural quality; his clothes fell away as if on thought, evaporating like ash from a fire,

“Look at me!” he said. “I am the animate portrait of you, fully engorged and without a shy inch of me!” I didn’t want to look down at his erection, but I caught it in my peripheral. I began to turn away, instinctively, full of sudden discomfort, when he added, “And don’t you turn away like some homophobic imbecile! It is your own body that you are looking at, after all! Your own strength! Who except for a fool or a broken man cringes at his own reflection?!”

Occam stepped towards me and back into my line of vision. Suddenly the absurdity of it dawned on me. Of course! He is right. This man is but a projection of my own suppressed self-

image minus the fog and influence of over twenty years of depression! I looked towards him again with a bit of, let's call it, *intellectual curiosity*; my own manhood in an unspotted mirror.

Seeing it in my shoulders, Occam could tell that some of my discomfort had gone away. But still when he spoke again, his voice softened some as if he were an adult attempting in earnest to relay an important bit of knowledge to a child.

"It's nothing but all those years, those bad memories and depressive programming that has rendered you demure to your own body. Imagine that, Wade, your education itself as a contagion."

He paused again to take the erection in his hand, and that fast my discomfort returned. "You'll agree that this, your manhood, is beautiful." I stood then to hide it and to avoid staring, but when I looked back at him, he had vanished. I looked instinctively to my left and found him again, fully clothed again and leaned against the wall by the bedroom door.

"Beautiful," he repeated, "the chrysopoeia of all that is you."

"Come on, man," I laughed, "Is my inner self insane? My dick is my philosopher's stone?"

"No to the first question. But yes, to the second. Stop being pathologically reticent about what you are. And recognize the vast difference between what you are looking at now, and the sorry false projective image of self that you've gotten used to seeing! It is a liar, Wade. Your depression. It has been lying to you for the better part of your adult life."

Occam was right. He knew it, but took no comfort in the reminder. I realized suddenly that it was time for my medicine. I walked past Occam to the dresser for the pill bottle. Popped one of the dry pills and washed it down with the lukewarm water set on the dresser next to the bottle. Then I exited my bedroom.

THE FIRST FLOOR, ONE BEDROOM apartment I lived in wasn't in any way what you would call run down or cheap, but the condition I often kept it in would suggest otherwise to the uninitiated eye. I rarely cleaned, so there was strewn clothing, random trash, and the refuse of my comings and goings scattered about -virtually everywhere. The living room couch and much of my other furniture were castoff from friends of what seemed like another lifetime, discarded by them when making lateral changes in their lives and moving into better apartments or houses. The couch had two recliners on its ends, one of which was broken and so the legs were forever outstretched. I managed to position it near a corner in a way that made it look as if the break were an artistic embellishment - but I doubt it fooled anyone.

For my part, I usually kept the kitchen relatively clean. But the "silverware", I call the many plastics that as a matter of convenience, lacked any sense of artistry or color/design coordination; just.. stuff to eat off of and with. There was a solarium space in front of the kitchen that was more like a small, modest den with a large window that I kept covered with a blanket. In it was a beat down heavy bag and some weights. The area fell so often into disuse during my depressive waves that it took on an almost grayish quality in comparison to the rest of the apartment layout. One wall had a poster of Bruce Lee on it and the wall adjacent had one of Jim Kelly. Indeed!, an entire half of my personality seemed right out of a comic book. The other, he spent many a sleepless night dreaming of such an honor. A quote suddenly came to mind. From where did I hear it?

"Hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action."

Anyway, my morning ritual was to scan the living room as a way of saying 'good morning' to it, do a few quick yoga-like stretches (a new habit, actually, encouraged by a lady friend I sometimes fancied being in love with), and then head into the bathroom for a shower.

I passed Occam on my way back into the hall. He was seated at my old, glass kitchen table, reading a book (**Invisible Man** by Ralph Ellison), and sipping a coffee that he'd manifested out of nowhere. Ralph Ellison, I thought to myself, of course! That's where the quote is from, **Invisible Man**!

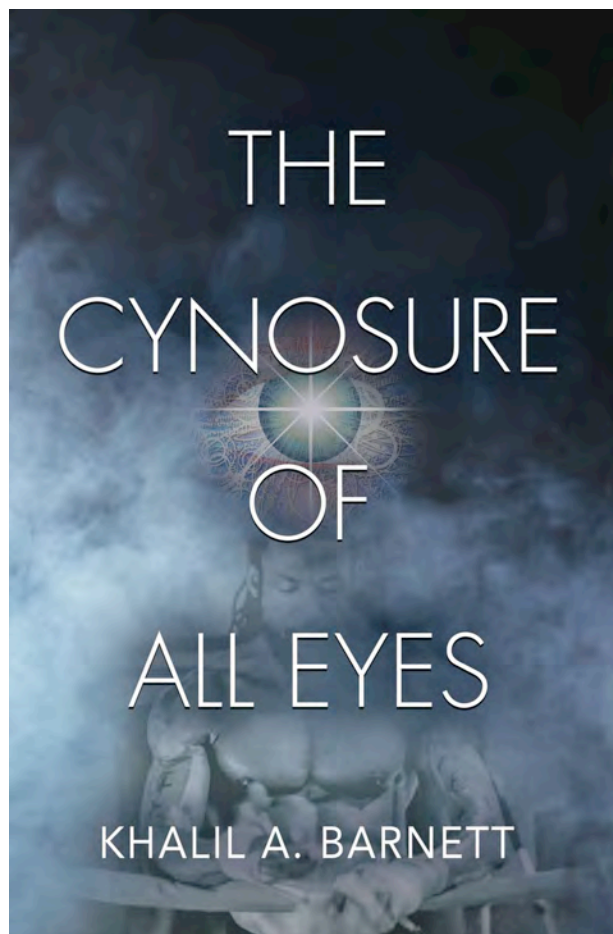
"Hop to it, broham," Occam said matter-of-factly, "we've got errands."

When I stopped and looked back over my shoulder, he added, "First, to find a new barbershop. Black owned. Today you stop living like an émigré."

I continued on my walk to the bathroom, and another quote popped into my head. Must have been from the page Occam was on.

"When I discover who I am," the echo of Ellison spoke in my mind's ear, *"then I'll be free."*

GETTING USED TO LUKEWARM SHOWERS was a new rediscovery for me. A little context; over the past twenty years, I'd gotten used to either showering too cold to numb myself to pain, or showering too hot, the spigot focused specifically in the groin area, to punish myself over psychological disillusionment -a circle of self-flagellation and withdrawal. So now, in the midst of treatment, I was practicing the soothing art of the lukewarm shower.



Wade Occam Cooper is on a journey not dissimilar to the millions suffering depression who lose themselves in the fog. But his mind creates an alter ego who offers him a path out of the darkness, one paved with sexual exploits and philosophic musings. However, another alter will try to pull him back down.

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