

The Craziest Thought

by Annie Sidransky

Episode One:

“i have literally no original thoughts only internal scream” @lia_andari_

Harper didn't think anything of it at first. It was an intrusive thought, a hallucination. It didn't bleed into reality, whatever it was. It stayed firmly locked behind the confines of her skull, detached from the happenings of the café around her. Sensation versus perception, Harper remembered learning in a psychology course some years ago — the difference between what the five senses pick up and what the brain makes of them. She wasn't sure which one this was, this thing so outside of her that yet seemed to spring forth into existence from within herself in the middle of a lunch date on a hot Tuesday afternoon in June. It was interesting, definitely creative. Harper spun it around tentatively inside her mind, examining it like a fragile specimen that could crumble at the wrong touch.

Addie laughed across the table and Harper nearly gasped out with her hands to try to hold on to the idea that scattered like a flock of birds with the sound. But Addie was speaking, and whatever visual there had been slipped through Harper's fingers, water dripping between the cracks.

“I just had the craziest thought.”

Still reeling from whatever it was she had just experienced, Harper felt her eyebrows bunch together as she studied Addie's far-off gaze. She was only half-present as she asked the polite question; she was half still trying to reconstruct what she herself had been thinking just a moment ago. “What?”

But Addie didn't respond. Harper fidgeted in her seat as a static silence settled over them. Addie's smile that had held such amusement and mirth just moments ago was beginning to drop. Neither woman knew what to say, neither having yet fully breached the surface of the water they were lost under.

It was in that silence that Harper noticed the quietness that had befallen the entire café. Some people were still moving — a waitress shakily set down the cup of coffee she'd been pouring at the bar, a man at the table over continued the mechanized cutting of his waffle — but conversation had stopped.

Harper found Addie's eyes, voice wavering slightly. "I also just had a crazy thought."

Addie seemed to come back into herself or, probably more accurately, to come back into the world. There was still the silence — the silence Harper would later have wished she'd reveled in — but in that moment, before everything came crashing down, Harper's statement seemed innocuous enough. "What was yours?"

Harper let out a breath, something like a laugh. "It's hard to explain," she was speaking quieter than she'd intended. She was a little bit embarrassed. "But I just had this really specific feeling come over me... that the aliens are coming."

She could feel the movement of the air as every head in the vicinity turned in her direction.

And that was when the silence broke.

Episode Two:

"me in my prophet era" @vivalaluthor

It took maybe ten minutes for social media to become flooded with posts about the communication — that's what people had taken to calling it — though in Harper's mind it was

still “the thought.” It was a devolution. It started with people making funny posts about a crazy vision they’d had. It didn’t take long for everyone else to realize they’d had the exact same thought at the exact same time. It probably would have seemed like a joke to an outsider, but there were no outsiders. It was twenty minutes before the news picked it up. Thirty before the president made a statement.

There were the fanatics of course, Harper supposed there always would be — conspiracy theorists blaming the government, partisans blaming other countries’ governments, people in the government with something to gain. There were also those “genuinely just excited” to meet the aliens, as one Channel 4 anchor had said. Harper wasn’t paying close enough attention to know if they’d been referring to the people in the new cult or not.

The only thing Harper was totally sure about were the people screaming outside. That reaction seemed pretty straightforward to her, whatever exactly it meant. She could hear them all the way from her fourth-floor apartment. Maybe if the landlord had gone for the double paned windows this would have been a different story, but now wasn’t the time to think about that. Marty wasn’t answering his phone anyway.

A lot of people were shaken by the screaming, naturally, but no one could hear what they were saying over all the noise.

Episode Three:

“on GOD the aliens are coming” @pedro_whyyy

It was four days before Harper left her apartment. She’d always appreciated working from home, but it made it a little too easy for her to stay isolated if the times called for it. There’d been another era, some years ago, that the times had called for it. This was different though — mostly.

There was a consistency to it at least, that regardless of the state of civilization, Harper spent her days in front of her laptop, eating cereal straight from the box, typing transcriptions of whatever people wanted transcriptions of. It wasn't hard work, writing out other people's words. A bit mindless, but Harper liked getting to set her own hours.

It took some self convincing for Harper to get herself to go outside again. She told herself that it wasn't just the need for food driving her out — though she *had* run out of Cheery-Os last night — but that she actually wanted to reenter society, whatever that meant at the moment. She didn't think she was scared, she'd just been stewing in her own thoughts a lot recently... and in the thoughts of people on Twitter. It was to be expected, really. A psychologist on the TV had said as much.

“This is a lot to deal with.”

Harper thought that was obvious, but at least it was true. She definitely preferred it to what the other woman on the late night show had said.

“I think what we're seeing right now is a kind of philosophical metaphysics, right?” (The host nodded.) *“But, if we're conscious of that gap, this kind of break in what we're looking at versus what's actually going on below the surface, I think that's where most people will be able to find the space to enter into the conversation and really uncover the meaning that's there.”*

That was, frankly, one of the most meaningless things Harper had ever heard. But if it helped someone feel better about something... who was she to judge?¹

Harper thought she'd mostly come to terms with the fact that in two weeks, extraterrestrials would be stopping on Earth to say hi — yes, just to say hi, if they were telling the truth. Miraculously, it seemed like most people had accepted this fact. But people sure still found a way to argue about it.

¹ ...ok, she judged a little bit, but she didn't say that to anyone

Everyone had gotten the same communication projected right into their head, but somehow, nobody interpreted it in quite the same way.

“I swear I saw a gun! It was a declaration of war!”

“Are you kidding? It was soft.”

“But it was loud.”

“But that was us.”

“I heard the words.”

“There were no words.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re coming.”

Harper didn’t understand much of the snippets of conversation she heard on her way to the grocery store, but she didn’t think that the people speaking really knew what they were talking about either. It seemed impossible to coalesce into words exactly what “the thought” had contained. Harper, at least, just knew. It was entirely internal, and though she tried to shove it off, something about that bothered her. It was like a mirror reflecting back the light, and it showed her things she didn’t think she was meant to see.

She called Addie. It went straight to voicemail.

Harper slipped her phone back into her pocket with a shaky hand. She felt the worry first; she hoped that Addie was doing okay. She felt the guilt next; she realized that she shouldn’t have waited four days to call her friend. Addie had called twice on Wednesday, and Harper had let the phone ring. It felt justified at the time.

She pulled out her phone again to text Addie, to say something about being sorry, to ask Addie if she’s alright. She typed out these sentences, but she didn’t like the way they looked. It was awkward. She put her phone away.

The next time she pulled it out, she typed out those same texts again on autopilot, though with absolutely no intention of sending them. She was just trying to look busy so that she wouldn't have to interact with the man yelling on the street corner. She typed slowly, tucked her chin into her chest and felt the sweat sticking against her neck, tuned out the words "mind control" being yelled into the viscous air. She didn't even know what that was.

She only unfolded once she reached the grocery store, blooming at the prospect of food.

But they were out of Cheery-Os. They were out of everything.

The shelves were all

Episode Four:

“The writer wishes he could paint and the painter wishes he could write.” @NewMagicalPC

“The thought” was fading into the realm of memory. A picture of a picture.

“Representations of representations.”² Harper wasn’t sure she could remember it clearly anymore. She worried she’d been on Twitter too much. She kept getting ads for telescopes.

She tried to journal, but she didn’t know what to write. So she tried to draw. But all she came up with was



² Chang, Victoria. “Form.” Poem. In *Obit*, 37. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2020.

Episode Five:

“I’m like. Losing my mind.” @_blumaroo

The academics were fighting with the academics again.

The academics were also fighting with the politicians, but nobody was interested in those conversations.

Harper was glad she was just an observer on the other side of the screen. It was an impossible debate: how to communicate with the Beings (which is what the academics had taken to calling them³) when they arrived.

For all anyone knew, the Beings could only communicate through their brain projection thing. That was fine and dandy for them, but no one on Earth had figured out how the humans were supposed to talk back. What if the Beings didn’t have eyes or ears, noses or tongues, any sense of feel? Nobody had any idea what their planet was like or if our understanding of life itself was incomplete. Did they even have bodies? Were they just an idea? Their communication hadn’t included any sort of visual of them.

Linguists didn’t have a clear answer, but dozens of them had already volunteered to be there for the interaction, on the off chance that they could help. Most of them were just excited for the research opportunity.

Biologists explained one possibility of the encounter using the metaphor of an ant releasing pheromones for a human, except that in this example, the humans were the ants. This image made some people very uncomfortable.

Philosophers seemed to think that the Beings wouldn’t have bothered reaching out to us if they didn’t think we were intelligent enough to communicate back. That word — “intelligent” — caused a whole other debate.

³ Something about *Frankenstein*... which made no sense to Harper

Computer scientists kept talking about Y2K for some reason. No one was quite sure of its relevance.

Historians weren't doing much to calm anyone down. They seemed a little too sure of the inevitability of societal collapse.

Environmental scientists were focused on the potential of any technologies the Beings would introduce to the world. The phrase "green spaceships" summed up that conversation pretty well.

And astronomers... astronomers were just having a field day.

Episode Six:

"What will you be wearing for Casual Apocalypse Friday?" @rudegal1969

Ultimately, life went on. Not everyone could dedicate their days to theorizing and speculating. People went back to work, the Earth kept turning. They never stopped talking about the approaching encounter on the news, but they're always talking about something on the news. They're also always making memes on the internet. Harper saw one about E.T. that morning.

Addie had finally returned Harper's call. They skipped the catching up part of the conversation and jumped straight to scheduling another lunch date for next week. They agreed to try a new café, neither having to give a reason for the desired change.

Marty still hadn't gotten back to Harper about the double paned windows, but Harper didn't really need them anymore. Things had quieted down in that regard. At least for now.

June had never cooled off, and something about the humidity today felt extra oppressive. It was Friday, and Harper had the vague notion that at one point in her life she would have been excited by that fact. That excited girl felt so far away. All this Harper could focus on was the feeling of the concrete beneath her feet. She'd taken a great interest in the ground lately, made

ago, and Harper had the sudden realization that there were people who'd had to explain all of this to children. She became acutely grateful of the fact that she was not one of those people. Being the youngest in her family had never given her the chance to grow accustomed to talking to kids.

She knew she had been a kid once, and had been fluent in their language. She couldn't remember when she had ceased to be. She wasn't sure if she was fluent in any language anymore.

Her feet stopped. Her brain told her she was fragmenting apart, falling into pieces. She remembered reading a book like this once. It had been sci-fi, which she supposed was fitting.⁴

Maybe the Beings would be "new friends." That would be nice. Harper tried to tune back into the boy's little speech but found that he had gone silent. She spotted him a few feet away, neck craned upward. That's when she noticed the standstill the whole crowd had come to. Harper had never seen so many upturned heads, phone cameras pointed toward the heavens. She wasn't sure how she hadn't noticed it immediately, or if she herself had stopped walking in mindless reaction to the movement of the group. She shook off the discomfort that thought generated and turned her own gaze toward the sky.

She saw a speck in the distance. It was bright, but that seemed to be caused by its reflection of the sunlight. It was silver in the way that a mirror is silver. In that moment it could have been an airplane, or a drone — something manmade and metallic. Harper tried to imagine that it was a balloon and that the circus was coming. She tried to imagine that it was a stork coming to deliver a tiny bundle of joy. But her eyes were burning with the scorching June sun as the minutes passed, and the thing began to take up more and more of the sky.

⁴ The book was *Dark Matter* by Blake Crouch. It was honestly a stretch to call it related to Harper's situation...

Harper couldn't tear her glistening eyes away, not even as she heard a woman begin to weep, not even as she heard a man begin to run.

The silence broke. The world tilted.

Harper was as ready as she'd ever be.

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