The biologists in the lab thought my nightly vomiting a symptom of alcohol poisoning. I would have shared the hypothesis, except I regurgitated human eyeballs.

I didn’t recall swallowing eyeballs, mind you. With optic nerves like dangling spaghetti.

And twitching. I generally vomited into a toilet and flushed the eyeballs before the painful horror set in, but after a midnight joust with a bottle of gin, I found myself retching into an orange, plastic bucket in my closet, where the eyeballs flopped like dying fish struggling for the water. When I regained consciousness in the morning, they had died attempting to escape under the door.

I elected not to take them to the lab, my reputation already strained, so I turned to the meager equipment of my apartment. According to my bathroom scale, I had not lost much weight, but the weight of the eyeballs was in excess of five pounds. I must have conjured them from my stomach.

For a few weeks, I could not look at liquor without imagining the eyeballs I should surely vomit.

Then a spontaneous rendezvous with a fifth of whiskey forced my hand. I puked six eyes and a pair of lips into the bucket. The lips squirmed like two drowned worms into the shape of a mouth.

“We gotta talk, Arnold.”

I slammed the closet.

After staging a coup on a few more shots, I mindlessly returned to the bucket. Two more eyeballs, three more mouths. My last gastronomical spasm threw an ear onto the pile.

“Can I call you Arnie?” asked a pair of lips.

“Please, don’t talk.”

“Your universe isn’t fully developed, so this might be hard to understand. Trust me, the eyeballs were the quickest way to communicate to you.”

“Oh god, I’m smashed.”

“Hey, lucky guess. Our universes are on a collision course.” I moved to close the door, but the lips interrupted. “Pick up an ear, it’s hard for me to hear you.”

“Please, no.”

“Into the ear, Arnie. C’mon.”
I brought the ear to my mouth. “Go away. I don’t want this.”

“You need my help. I won’t get into details, it involves a lot of trans-dimensional mathematics, and you Stage One guys aren’t hot on that. Can you even make Quantum Foam?”

“What?”

“Okay, time for a crash course. Not literally, I hope,” the lips murmured. “Universes are bubbles. Our bubbles are about to smash together. This ain’t my first rodeo, but I think you guys are gonna pop.”

“Who are you?”

“Look, you’re bright enough, I’ll level with you. I’m not a person. I’m a reality. The whole thing. Consciousness is mostly illusion, so lots of realities develop self-awareness. We call that Stage Two. Whole ecosystem out there, Arnie.”

“Uh...”

“Yeah, trippy, huh? There we go: call me Trip.”

“Trip.”

“Quick learner. Anyway, you guys won’t survive Stage One if you pop now, okay? Gotta work with me here, alright?”

“This is too much.” I slumped on the carpet. The world blurred in my vision.

“I’m not as mobile as I used to be, but your reality is pretty spry. If you pass me the reins to your universe for a bit, I can jettison some of your space-vacuum. Push you guys out of harm’s way. Dig?”

“How do I... How can you take control? What do you mean?”

“You’ll need your universe’s address. Know it off your head?”

I shook the whiskey. Only a tablespoon remained in the bottle. “...Can’t say I do.”

“You know Physics?”

“A little. I’m a chemist. I mostly study alcohols.”

“Find a Physicist. They’ll know if anyone does.”

---

The next morning, I fumbled my way to the physics department.

“Not today, I just…” I pushed my wire glasses up my nose. “You don’t happen to know the universe’s address, do you?”

“…The what?” They squinted at me from behind their desks. “Little early to be hittin’ the sauce, Arnie.”

---

The night’s bourbon made me feel like gifting Trip a load of facial features. “Sorry, they don’t know what you mean, either.”

“Hey, no prob, it was a long shot. I didn’t know mine in Stage One either.” He bit his lips in thought, somehow, at the bottom of the bucket. “There’s an equation for it, but you can only really solve it at Stage Two or Three…”

“...I can do equations.” I felt bile rising in my throat. “What’s the equation?”

“Nah, nah, Arnie, it’s too complicated. You guys don’t even have Quantum Foam, no way you have the computing power. Hey, you’re lookin’ a little green, Arnie, you gonna chunder?”

“I can hold it down.”

“Then have another drink. I can’t calculate your address from here, I gotta send you a Neuron Pod. Be careful with it, I’ve only got about eighty-six billion. These are Stage Three tech, Arnie.”

The brown bottle’s last drops trickled from its neck to mine. Even the smell made me gag.

“What’s a Neuron Pod?”

Trip surprised me by licking his lips. The tongue seemed to come from underneath the pile of eyeballs. “You ever study biology? Get to mitochondria?”

“Yeah.” I doubled over the bucket and opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Saliva built around my teeth.

“They’re like that. Sub-realities, distinct from me. Gotta delegate, that’s Stage Three. Outsource your computation. Find some Stage Zero podunk reality, convert its mass to brain matter. One Neuron
Pod is like a septendecillion human brains. Smart human brains, too, like yours, Arnie. Alright, here it comes.”

Huge, like a cantaloupe. It shouldn’t have fit in my mouth, let alone my throat. The eyeballs turned to see it fall into the bucket. The lips seemed pleased.

A brain. Instead of a corpus callosum, there was a hagfish mouth, needle-teeth chattering.

“Trip--What do I do with this?”

“It’s looking for your address right now. Just keep it safe.”

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Friday night. Party night. In a dark alleyway, I popped the cork on two-dollar wine. A little grape foam spilled into the dirt.

I put the Neuron Pod on a trash can lid and stood across from it. The needle-teeth were the worst part, like a sex toy from hell. “Can you talk?”

The needle teeth chattered.

“Answer questions?”

More chattering.

“So… What’s Quantum Foam?”

The brain’s needle-teeth shifted and clattered, filling the alley with heinous clicking. Almost… speech. After a quick drink of wine--like fermented olive oil--I held the Neuron Pod to my ear.

“Tiny… Universes.” The queer, snapping voice had a thick accent from somewhere European.

“Can you elaborate?”

“To create Quantum Foam is to generate the primal fabric of the multiverse... Each bubble of foam is a universe. Beginning in Stage Zero, the absence of conscious thought…”

When I lowered the wine bottle, it was two-thirds empty. “I’m not drunk enough for this. All this stuff about our universes colliding, it’s all real? We’re going to pop?”

“…Indeed. You are left with an ultimatum: be annihilated by the ballistic force of a careening reality, or entrust my Master with your universe.”
“Well… You’ve known him for a while, is Trip trustworthy?”

“My Master is… Stage Four.”

“Four? What does that mean?”

The brain pulsated, squirming on the lid of the trash can. “…Stage Zero universes have no conscious thought. Stage One universes contain conscious beings. Stage Two universes have attained consciousness themselves… Stage Three is marked by the assimilation of Stage Zero universes. Stage Four is… the enslavement of Stage Three universes.” The hagfish mouth was silent, not a single of its thousand teeth clicking or snapping.

“Enslaving universes? Sentient universes?” I looked at the brain. “When Trip said that you were ‘Stage Three technology,’ he meant--You mean to tell me that Trip has enslaved eighty-six billion sentient realities, and you’re one of them?”

“Yes…” The Neuron Pod squirmed off of the trashcan, landing on the ground. It almost burst at the seams, brain-folds expanding with juices. “Yes…” The hagfish mouth puckered. “Please, kill me.”

I poured the rest of the wine down my throat.

“Please...”

I smashed the bottle against a brick wall.

“Kill me...”

I held the shattered rim near the Neuron Pod.

“Please...”

“I… I can’t.” I dropped the glass shards. “I need your help. I’m not giving Trip control of my universe, you need to help me.”

The brain took a deep breath, its folds inflating.

“I need to know how to make Quantum Foam.”

---

I poured a shot of Scotch. “Need a drink?” The Neuron Pod twisted slightly, which I interpreted as a ‘no.’ I downed the Scotch. “Okay. Okay.”
When I opened the closet, lips, ears, and eyes spilled from behind the door. Trip’s shifting eyeballs had toppled the bucket. “Hey, hey, Arnie, What’s the good word? That old Neuron Pod got your address yet? Might take a while depending on the cosmological constants in your reality.”

I put the Neuron Pod onto the floor. “What do we do next?”

“Well, ordinarily you’d hafta swallow that thing, but our universes are close enough I think I can toss you a Synapse Cable. You feeling like hurling, Arnie?”

“I’m pretty sober right now.”

“Well, either you’re gonna hafta swallow that Pod, or you’re gonna hafta start drinking so I can get you this Cable.”

Ignoring the shot glass, I sipped from the liquor bottle. The nausea set in immediately. With one, animal-like retch, I felt a strand jump up my throat, catching on my teeth. I pulled at it until a rope of meat and fat dangled from my jaw. The Synapse Cable was two inches thick, filling my esophagus.

“Plug it in.”

I waved the meat rope near the Neuron Pod. The hagfish mouth slurped the frayed ends like spaghetti, locking on with needle-teeth.

“Ah, Perfect. I’m getting your address right now…”

A few seconds passed, leaving me choking on the Synapse Cable. The Neuron Pod contorted and flexed in concentration.

“Hey, you’ve got a cool little reality… No wonder you’re still Stage One, with quantum particles like this. These photons are worthless… And your Planck Temperature! How do you get anything done?”

I nodded. It was all I could do.

“You know, it’s a good thing you did this, Arnie, your universe was almost a splat on my windshield. Just gonna get you outta the way…”

A pause.

“You…” The eyeballs all turned to me. “Is this a Stage Zero?”

Silence.
“Hey, did you give me the wrong address!”

The lips flipped around on the floor, eyeballs bursting into spurts of blood.

“Aaaaaaugh! God, no, what did youuuuuooaaaaaugh!”

The Synapse Cable retracted down my throat, pulled into my stomach. The Neuron Pod detached, letting the meat rope whip through my esophagus.

“Are you trying to kill me?! What did you do?!”

“Sorry, Trip.”

“Aaaaaaugh! I can’t--”

“We made Quantum Foam, Trip,” I said, massaging my neck. It felt like I’d been explosively decompressed. “We made new universes.”

“It was trivial to check the infinite realities... for one whose cosmological properties made it a perfect snare,” clicked the Neuron Pod. “Of course... if you intended to merely jettison vacuum, as you expressed... your connection to the entrapping universe would be harmless... Your pain indicates, as we suspected, that you intended to subsume this universe into your own... Or perhaps enslave it, as you did with me and my compatriots...”

“Now you’re being slurped up like a noodle in soup,” I muttered, lying on my carpet.

Eyeballs, lips, and ears split open, ripped apart, shredded, as if caught in a storm of razor blades.

Without lips, Trip’s voice echoed from my throat like shouts from a deep cave.

“Arnie, Arnie, c’mon, I’m sorruuughhh make it stop Arnie please I’m begging you--”

I covered my ears. “I can’t, I can’t--”

“Your address! Give me your address, let me escape, before it’s too late!”

“Not even if I could.”

“Then--then--”

Nausea pumped my guts.

Fingers pried my teeth open from the inside.

A forearm stretched through my mouth.
“If you yak me into this universe, I can survive. You need to vomit right now, harder than ever before, Arnie, right now.”

The hand grabbed the Scotch.

“I’m close enough, Arnie, if you vomit right now, I can survive in your universe, but it has to be right now—”

The wrist twisted while the arm sank back into my stomach. Before I realized why, the neck of the bottle stuck down my throat, pouring liquor into me. I tried to scream.

“Now, Sunderland! Now now now!”

I couldn’t pull the bottle from my lips, as the hand in my throat held the bottle firmly in place. I flipped on my belly so the bottle was upright, not pouring down my neck.

“No!”

Two arms forced their way through my jaws, spreading them wide. One pushed the floor and flipped me onto my back, the other grabbed the Scotch bottle and aligned it to spill down my throat.

I groped the floor for something, anything.

A glass beaker.

I smashed the bottle with the beaker. Scotched soaked the carpet.

“No no no no…”

The arms in my mouth patted the damp floor.

“No no no!”

Irrevocably snared by our decoy universe, the arms slid into my mouth until the fingertips brushed past my tongue.

“No no no…”

I struggled to my knees, teeth clenched, salivating, desperately holding my torso.

---

For twenty minutes, I puked. No eyeballs, no limbs, just ordinary bile and stomach contents. I spent the night cleaning vomit and broken glass.
“Hey. How are you feeling now?”

The Neuron Pod deflated, its folds growing closer together. “I am well... Thank you.”

“You sure?”

“My old Master is gone. My torment is at an end... The enslaved Stage Three realities have been released. It is over.”

I threw the vomit and glass into the trash. “...And the Quantum Foam...”

I opened my drawer.

Milky sand so fine and smooth it could have been liquid, like cream on coffee. Each infinitesimal speck a universe.

One grain had swelled like a pearl, shining and pure.

“That’s the one he’s trapped in, huh?”

“Correct... My old Master used the technique to do away with bothersome realities.” The Neuron Pod observed the sand, the Quantum Foam, with its eyeless gaze. “I am impressed with your ability to synthesize Quantum Foam in this universe. You had a talent for it.”

“It wasn’t that hard,” I said, “since you gave me the directions. It was just chemistry.”

The hagfish mouth contorted into a toothy smile. “Chemistry is the first step to a healthy Stage Two universe.”