

Then there's nothing to fear here. Just assure us of that fact and you're free to go.

How is it you can tell with such certainty that I'm lying?

You tried that once. You experienced once our figurative reprisal. The next time will be literal. Do you wish to lie a second time?

No.

We believe you. Please, Lydia Lowenstein, tell us how you came into possession of what you refer to as Season Two?

On Dischord⁴. I'm really not there that much and I for sure have never met in person anyone there. I just recall reading a post that made me think that maybe Season Two did exist after all.⁵

Was this what you read?

Yes. How did you know this was the one?

Please read it aloud.

"I fear admitting what I've read, what I can't unread, as if I'm already infected, already slated for quarantine, though with no known cure for such incorporations except the

⁴ JP: Social media has much to answer for. Yet the possibility always inheres: that our virtual planetary connections might give rise to discourse rather than discord, to the dissemination of good reading rather than viral misinformation. The hopeful possibility that digital networks might strengthen ties and shape new communities of care, rather than amplifying division and violence. [Cf. Julia Panko, "Reading Novels, Reading Networks: Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*, Social Media, and the Digital Literary Sphere"]

⁵ ACM: The question of whether or not something "exists," particularly in the realm of fictional narrative, is fascinating, here. I've spent a lot of time Internet sleuthing for evidence of Xanther's existence (be it in Clips buried somewhere in my searches, or on the mysterious parcelthoughts.com). I've read "post[s] that made me think" the cat "did exist after all." The possibility of Season Two circulating in the depths of social media dialogue as referenced in another fictional piece from TF universe certainly works to muddy the boundary between story and world, IRL or otherwise. But perhaps this doesn't matter; perhaps there never was a boundary. All I can think about, now, is how this embodies "the peculiar beauty and sadness of stories: to tell it all without all at all" (TFv1 568). [Cf. Aislinn C. McDougall, "Compostmodernism: Textual Machinery Through Typography and Materiality in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*"]

erasure of the thought itself, which is impossible, then am I already sentenced to suffer the erasure of the apparatus that makes possible the thought and so therefore must meet that glittering spike that by some crude pneumatic punctuation point will pith this imagination and then toss my body upon those already heaped animal bodies also deemed infected and so burned and so strewn, as if even ash itself might still contain, somehow, the properties of transmission which those who seek to prevent this reading fear?”

*Lydia Lowenstein, please describe— Excuse me. I mean Lydia Lowsmith. No, that's not right either. I mean Linda Lowsmith. Why didn't you correct me earlier?*⁶

I wasn't aware that altering what you had to say was possible. Is that really an option?

Are you toying with us, Linda Lowsmith? Please describe what effect that post had on you.

I'm not sure. The fear, first of all. The fear was palpable. The urgency as well. The vibrancy? Plus the sense of lingering implications. Something that's impossible not to acknowledge but just as impossible to name. It even made me feel as if maybe the books in Season One were never really books at all. Like what I thought mattered was merely sugar around, say, a strand of extremely potent mRNA, or is it RNA?, which I still couldn't translate except to say that it was a squiggle. Or not even a squiggle. The aftereffects of a squiggle? Like just the squiggling without the actual squiggle?⁷ That much I think I could get. I felt like something else was at work. Some kind of actual disbursement I wasn't a good enough reader to understand or catch even a glimpse of. But it was all so personal, so *familiar*. Kinda heartbreakingly so. But maybe, I thought, if I could just read the next five volumes, I might understand better what was being conveyed. That post made me want to find them. Ha!

⁶ CF: Do names require fixity, or do we who perceive them demand it? The changing of the name is the changing of a life-story: the story of Lynda Lowenstein is not the story of Lydia Lowsmith nor the story of Linda Lowsmith. But all life-stories are *familiar* because everyone has a life-story. [Cf. Corey Flack, "Forget-me-not: Giving Voice to Memory in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar* and Elsa Morante's *La Storia*"]

⁷ LB: Many of us share this feeling, getting stronger as time goes by: Volumes 1–5 were "never really books at all," rather something trying—and failing—to "squiggle through." However, we all find it very hard to speak about this "something" directly. But wouldn't a success in these matters align us with Galvadyne's goals (end the Future)? There is a strong case for reading (?) this "failure to articulate," the noise of Season One, as one of *The Familiar*'s greatest life-affirming achievements. [Cf. Luka Bekavac, "Becoming-Signiconic: Emergence and Territory in *The Familiar*"]

What?

I think I just got too complicated. I can do that. That's what my professors say. Maybe it's way more simple. Maybe I just really, really wanted to read the story? You know, like, find out how it all turned out?

How it all turned out?

Definitely. Don't we all want to know how it turns out? Kinda weird by the way that there isn't an expression like "how it turns in?" Why do you think that is? Actually, though, I guess when we go to sleep we do "turn in." But when we dream do we, like, start to "turn out"? Or is that also a turning in but just with a different face?

In your earlier comparison do you see the story as being the mRNA?

Or the RNA? Or the aftereffects of a squiggle?

But what if the story is only the sugar or the delivery system? And what if that delivery system is ultimately irrelevant? What if the story doesn't matter at all?

I kinda like that. I knew I liked you. Though maybe my comparison isn't a good one? Aren't most comparisons inaccurate? Don't they all at some point start to break down?

Do you know who wrote the post I had you read aloud?

Yes. The one who sent the books. At first, I assumed the offer was a joke. I mean why should I of all people receive the next five volumes? Just because I'd read Season One? Plenty of people have read Season One. I was even warned that possession of Season Two might have consequences. I was warned that they would be a burden. I didn't care. I posted my address though it wasn't my real address. I tried to be a little careful. I posted a hotel address. I included in parentheses the dates I intended to stay there. I even booked a room. I had no problem picking up the package. I felt silly for using a hotel to receive my mail.

We believe you.

Not that it was that nice of a hotel. I sure was surprised to find the box waiting for me. Is that how you found me?

No. Others, however, found you that way.

That's true. I was followed from the lobby and then approached on a street corner. They both wore masks, black and pink N-27s I think, the best, and they asked if I would consider going with them. There was a young woman there too. My height. My age. She didn't need to wear a mask. She stood far off. They all just wanted to go for a stroll in the park. They had a story about something in my past. I already knew that story. But so did they. They knew the story of Linda Lowsmith very, very well. What would have happened if I'd gone with them?

You wouldn't be here.

Each of the five books was bound up in a lot of bubble wrap. The plausible covers, with those central numbers, six through ten.⁸ I was so sure would only reveal blank pages.

But you were wrong weren't you?

I was wrong. Why do you think they chose me? There are so few copies.

They believed you were a very, very good reader.

Or maybe I could just sense that scribble?

⁸ BS: It is now official: the books cannot be *subitized* anymore, the number is just too large. No instant quantification anymore. If they are spread on a table, it's going to take a while to count them with a finger. Nine + one. Large numbers seem to be the name of the game. The novel has become so staggeringly voluminous by now, imagine the overall page count, the weight, the sum total of all raindrops... Could you, even in principle, count all the words? Would you, if you could? Why not? Nevertheless, it's reassuring to know that at least the numbers don't grow exponentially, as in a pandemic, for instance. By the way, if math gives you a headache, please do not worry: fortunately, the "catsum" may resolve it with ease. [Cf. Burak Sezer, "The Empowering Paradox of '1 = 2.' Mark Z. Danielewski's Arithmopoetics"]

Enough with the squiggle. Tell us about the story.

And then I can go?

Yes. Tell us about the story in the right way and you can walk through that blue door.

What's through that blue door?

The outside.

Where does the black door lead?

This doesn't have to be hard or threatening. This doesn't even have to be dangerous. Just five minutes.

Five minutes?

Five minutes tops.

But what if I want to stay longer?

That's good. You're relaxing. We appreciate humor.

I enjoy following your patter. Is this how it always goes? How many times have you done this? Altogether? And why do you keep saying "us" and "we"? I only see you.

Do you really think I'm alone?

Someone else is behind that black door?

Tell us about the books.

The architecture was all there but I guess I was surprised by the form. It was the same, in some ways, but it was changed, changing. I guess it had to. I also expected the acceleration but not to the degree that I would finish all five so quickly. I remember how long it took to read volume one and then how fast I read volume four and how I didn't even notice how long it took to read volume five. These were similar. **Familiar** names, **familiar** faces, but moving so much faster. Volume six, I don't how to put this, seemed the most definite. The following volumes seemed progressively more vague until I wasn't sure I was even reading a book anymore. Were they even books? Like not just Season Two but even Season One felt like one long dream a few of us had a long, long time ago. Like a different lifetime ago. And what, it's only been seven or eight years? Like maybe I just imagined the whole thing. Like I was floating above everything and suddenly Guido Anselmi of all people was there to hold my hand and help me finish the film. Or is it finish his film? My film? Your film? Asa nisi masa.

What's that? What do you mean a film? Who is Guido Anselmi?⁹ Linda, I warned you: don't toy with us!

I wasn't prepared to encounter Hopi again.

As a flashback?

You haven't read Season Two?

⁹ IE: "Really? Not your Google bitch." Un**familiar** references and the strings of unknown characters in written texts challenged readers at all ages and have been dealt with differently at different times. At present, how common is it for the reader who, for instance, didn't grow up watching surrealist comedy drama of the 1960s, let alone Italian, even if it is by maestro Fellini, to tackle the question of significance of that final 'magic spell' and to figure out that Anselmi is a fictional filmmaker from *8½* (1963) by means of a combination of haptic and hypertextual functionality of digital screen devices? Although not universal, it is arguably highly common. But then, how does this reliance on the instant connection to online databases factor into the question of what makes a "a very, very good reader?" Is it a categorical imperative of reading that every string of characters needs to be "translated," deciphered, interpreted? Or is it just a common misconception, and instead everyone should strive to "just sense that scribble," because it will "at some point start to break down"? [Cf. Ian Ezerin, "The Worst of Both Worlds: *The Familiar's* E-Books and Their Unhandy Limitations"]

Do you think you'd be here if we had?

That's interesting. Did you just tell me too much there?

I hope not. For your sake. Where does Hopi reappear?

In volume eight, I think. Xanther and her friends, dear Cogs, Kle, Josh and Mayumi skip school to see Kle's brother, Phinneas. He lives in a nearby facility called the Eternity Ward. He seems to know something about VEM.

We are very interested in VEM.

I was more interested in Xanther, on the way back, how she suddenly could see among the passengers a dead girl. You know the girl too.

Xanther sees a ghost?

I don't know if that's correct but the girl is there and at the same time not there but there or not there what the dead girl wants is clear: she's desperate to find her Hopi.

You mean the boy Luther murdered? He's still alive?

No. Xanther has discovered that the cat, Redwood, enables her to entertain certain perspectives she could not apprehend before, with clarities she's still not entirely sure how to navigate.

Tell us about Xanther.

She begins to break the rules.¹⁰

Go on.

¹⁰ MPE: The font has changed from Merriweather to Minion.

One time she fails to trim Redwood's nails, another time she fails to feed him. She learns from her mistakes. She, like, starts to figure out things. There's another one: "figure out." Do we ever "figure in"? I guess we do. We "figure in" things so we can "figure out" things. Huh. Xanther goes to Magic Mountain. Valencia not Davos. Fright Fest. She helped, helps, a woman who was in trouble there by going into a maze. They are pursued but those pursuing her are not equipped for a maze like she is. She also starts to get famous: "The Lion Girl." A clip of her with Satya begins to circulate. She also goes to the Magic Castle. There seems to be a bit of magic going on, huh? As Dov used to say, "Magic is just work hidden." Did you know Dov had an old Colt engraved with many names? This part you'll like: at the Magic Castle Xanther meets someone very important. You probably recall that at the heart of the great discovery there were three: Cas, Alvin or Recluse, whatever you want to call him, though his name is Alvin, plus a third. They has an orb. They wants to see what Xanther can do with it.

And?

Oh, and Hopi comes up with Luther too.

As a ghost?

Luther has a run in with Hopi's mother. Also: not all that Mnatsagan lost is lost. Shnork, though, must first find his missing duduk which Ozgur has. You can guess where that leads.

They meet?

More and more meetings. Isandørno goes after Maite, the mother of Garcia and Chavez, the boys he killed, but she is far more resourceful than he expects. She starts to hunt him. The Mayor sends him north to join Luther. In some ways those trajectories were obvious I think. Right? But what about when a single spread from a graphic novel grows more transparent? Or is it better to say grows more communicable? Like its caricatures start to bleed into a different form, a different narrative? Or is it bleed out?¹¹

¹¹ BD: While this supposed trajectory may seem unsurprising to some readers, if Isandørno does join Luther in LA in Season Two that would mean he has broken free of his mother's "curse"—which doubles as a "cage," a master trope in TF—that has haunted Isandørno since he was a child. If Isandørno's storyline does indeed continue to "bleed" outward and into Luther's, one can't help but wonder if each character's bibliotrope then also begins to bleed into one another and what that would even look like. What happens if everyone is freed from their (bibliotropic) cage? But maybe that's the point—to liberate everyone from whatever cages them, including the book itself. [Cf. Brian Davis, "Danielewski's *The Familiar*

Can you be more specific?

As you know, at the end of Volume 5 Senex hires a man named Quil who in order to hunt the cat must hunt the girl. Quil goes in search of Tian Li and finds Jingjing. And then, of course, there's the matter of the animals.

You mean at the end? The animals eat each other.

The world stays savage, that's true, but it can also go sideways and sometimes with lovely results. I think we often forget that lovely is always a possibility. Oria the owl does not devour the baby jaguar. She preens him, adopts him. Marvin the markhor, can you believe it?, falls for the snow leopard! And talk about outrageous: the orca feeds Lexi the polar bear! And Bendyl the boar and the tiger? That's a beautiful story. Though most beautiful of all, I think, is Anna the hyena and her lion. They become friends.

Lovers?!

Friends.

That is not our world.

Perhaps it's not yours. Of course, they're all terribly damaged. There's no question about that. But sometimes out of great damage can come great acts of creativity. Do you think we've forgotten how close creativity and liberty really are? Do you think they're the same?

Then the animals are parables?

Or they make parables out of us. Anwar needs to get a job. Astair too. "Sometimes life means limping part of the way and crawling the rest of the way." That's in volume six. This too by way of Sandra Dee Taylor: "Beware the appearance of something done. Also: piles of stuff 'to do' is fool's gold. Heed instead the collective emptiness set on becoming." Anwar and Astair doggedly pursue their individual challenges even as they begin to uncover the same thing. Parenthood doesn't protect them. The revolution is already upon them and it will alter everything, as it has already altered everything that came before them, and

everything that will come after them, including this moment right now, including our moment, including us.

Are you talking about VEM?

And then there's Cas. Are you interested in Cas? I think you're more interested in the Wizard than you are in the cat?

We don't believe in the cat.

That's also interesting. Did you just give away too much again? Are you sure you're suited for this job? Don't answer that. Not yet. Cas escapes to Canada where she finds herself just as pursued as she was in the States. But before she escapes, she meets Alvin's son. Did you know his son lives in Canada?

How does she escape?

Pirates! They have a coffin too. A very small coffin. I cannot tell you how they use it. That's in volume six as well. They set sail to meet Mefisto. It will be a long journey. On the way Cas tells one of sailors the story of the VEM Revolution.

Then you know that story?

Of course, I do David.

Why did you call me that?

It's your name.

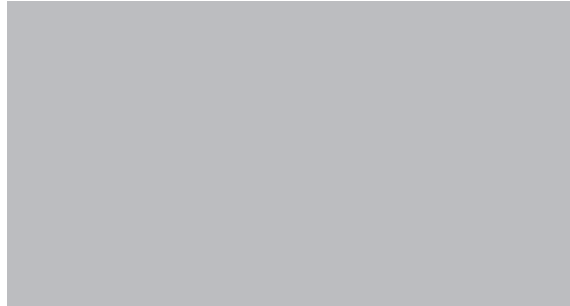
You're guessing. That's good. We like a little fun.

Your name is David Bowman Janus. You live in [REDACTED] on [REDACTED]. This is not some black site. This is a basement in a small house rented for a few weeks through Airbnb. You told the truth about that blue door. It leads outside to a stairwell. But

that black door behind you leads to a room where a hole has been prepared for me. You are expected to mix the cement yourself. Gabe Poole Gallson who is back there and currently comprises your immediate “us” and “we” is expected to handle me. Poole? I know that’s a coincidence but still.

I’m impressed.

You’ve also over estimated your ability to detect lies. I apologize for misleading you. Sometimes impersonations are called for. Sometimes we must wear masks. I prefer cloaks. I’m here because I wanted to meet you. I believe you’ve wanted to meet me. I think I can change your mind. I’d like to try. When I leave through that blue door, I’d like you to come with me. Remember: sometimes lovely is also an option.



The residence where this interview took place. Owners refuse to believe one of their downstairs rooms was altered. They say the carpet is the same. They will not look under the carpet. They say the sound of a jackhammer reported by neighbors was just a coincidence and used only to fuel online speculation. The residence is still listed on Airbnb. <https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/██████████>

You want me to join you?

We know about the Halliwell Motel. We know what you did there. It was many years ago but we have the clip.

You’re not the only one.

We aren’t but what he showed you was only part of the clip. To use you to do what you’re doing now. We too know what you did but we also know what you did not do. You were incoherent. You were enraged. You broke glass. You were so chemically intrigued you were beyond remembering what you would do next. He, of course, neglected to show you what you did do next. That’s what I’m telling you now: you stopped, you did a right think, you walked away. The bloody aftermath was not your doing. We can show you the entire clip. You did nothing wrong, David. Though you still owe the Halliwell Motel one glass lamp shade.

We've made a mistake haven't we? You're not Linda Lowsmith.

Linda is fine but far away. By now, she's read Season Two and has likely already passed the volumes on to someone new. Similar channels, different platforms, different hotel lobbies. Linda likes to see Season One as the first disbursement. For her, Season Two is the second disbursement. Both those disbursements failed but that doesn't mean we won't try again and keep trying. Would you like to know them? That can be arranged. Of course, what you'll experience goes well beyond reading. Do you understand? I think you do, David. Will you come with me?

Gabe is about to enter this room.

Gabe is in the hole he dug for me.

I don't believe you – whatever your name is.

It's okay, David. We can show you a history you never imagined and we can show you what that history creates and most importantly what it uncreates.

I already told: we don't believe in the cat.

Belief has nothing to do with it.

I'm not leaving. My job is to stay. And you're not leaving either. My job is to make sure you stay.

You're not compelled to leave with me. How you make up your mind now is your choice and yours alone. I suggest you be creative. Have some fun. As for the key to the blue door, though, you will have to give that to me now.

You're joking.

Or I will take it from you.

[Redacted text block]

