

You had your chance and you missed it...

...and now you're stuck.

DON'T WORRY  
I'M HERE TOO

(right here with you)

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It was the only universe. / There is no  
such thing. / Only these verses. / Sing  
along.

It was the only universe. / There is no  
such thing. / Only these verses. / Sing  
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CHAPTER 33<sup>1/3</sup>:

Noo

Well, it was bound to happen, I guess. To end up back here, talking to you. How presumptuous of me to have written these words to you before we even agreed on communicating through this medium though. Sorry! Oh, I mean. Sorry. I'm sorry. Anyways...

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...This is now a different page. Do you see how those dots form the connective tissue between this page and the previous page? Do you see how the pages progress in numeral order? What does that even mean? (please show your work)

Hi there. I think we have some newcomers to this party, so you longtime readers of this here book, please bare with me as I say things that maybe are not designed for your particular reading devices. Anyway, my name is Apple Hippopotamus. I'm a hard-boiled egg of sorts. I solve mysteries. All my life has been a transition and now here I am, spilling all over the page like some rusty bicycle. [send tweet]

But seriously folks, such a journey or two I've been on probably. And here we are in a new chapter (sorry, I speak primarily in metaphor) not quite sure how we got here, but definitely, definitely here (where we are). Anyway, sometimes these words will be true. Sometimes they will mean something that they do not mean. This is impossible, yet here we are nonetheless. Please forward this story in a direction that you want it to go in. Thanks for your input!

The spotlight moves over head as noooooooooooooooooooooo...  
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“Hey there. Long time, no s—”

“Don't say it, Cousin.”

Wait a second. There are cousins in this story? Did anyone want to let the omniscient narrator know? Oh, now I remember. This is the scene that takes place on the outskirts of a forest. Oh sorry for interrupting.

“...We don't want to hear about some mind-blowing *stew*, [insert name of Zorba Cathexis's cousin]. I'm sure Apple would much rather—”

Apple punched Zorba in the arm. [Zorba's Cousin] bit her lip (her own lip; Zorba's Cousin's pronouns are she/her) and sharply contained a smile that Apple caught just little enough of to form the distinct belief that [Zorba's Cousin] *might* be really really pleased on like a gut level by the thought of doing sexual relations with Apple while at the same time really having no clue whatsoever as to what was actually going on. That is, Apple still had no clue whatsoever what was going on at this point of the story. It is not as if she had already solved all of the mysteries yet. No, she

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was, truth be told, hot on the trail of a mystery at that very moment. Well, at least she *was* until they made that wrong turn at Albertquirky Junction and started to wonder about where they might want to sleep. And while Apple would have liked to pursue this tangential rabbit down its favorite hole, she didn't quite know enough of the specific intricacies of Zorba's relationship with his cousin to risk upsetting the mood of this uncannily fortuitous meeting that certainly none of them had *planned* for. Just then, Apple caught just little enough of her peripheral vision to see a sort of rippling at the edges of reality. She pocketed that thought away and smiled at [Zorba's Cousin]. "Which cousin did you say you were?" she asked. "I don't recall meeting you, unless..."

"No, I grew up on an entirely different planet. From this one," she added, pointing back at Zorba with her thumb. "And I'm sure I would have remembered you."

"Well," said Apple. "I feel like I was pretty forgettable for a while there. But anyway," Apple whistled a little tune. "Can we make you lunch?"

"Hey! What do you think you're doing there!"

"Oh no, it's the forest gods," said Zorba's cousin. "We'll

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“Holy shit. Are you alright?”

Apple caught her bearing surprisingly fast. “Oh, yeah, I

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think maybe a branch fell on me. Wicked witch is dead I guess. Ha ha. Joke's on me." She smiled awkwardly. Apple waited a beat. "This seems like a good place for lunch, eh?"

"How long you two been travelling?" [Zorba's Cousin] asked them, mouth slightly open in respectful astonishment.

And just then

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CHAPTER 34: JUST WHAT YOU ALWAYS WANTED

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CHAPTER 35: WELL, HOW WAS IT? she asked.

They say that time is some thing. But little did they know just how true that it was. Before I solved all of the mysteries, I used to ponder things. Late at night. Alone in the dark. Sipping from a glass of whatever liquid happened to be left in whatever bottle I was able to procure from my surroundings. Late at night, I would ponder. Mysteries. It's funny, they say. Knowing what I know now, from this point of view which I guess is not so different from yours, I chuckle. Sometimes. It's true. Sometimes, I chuckle. Funny that. Knowing what I know now, I now know that everything fits exactly into a particular pattern. You might notice that it does not matter what nonsense I try to throw on the page. Because of my placement in *time*, I know for a fact that everything I say has already come true.

"No! That's not correct. You ruined it!"

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“Uhhhhhhh.” A look of perpetual horror began to take root upon Zorba’s face.

“Do you feel that? Zorba?”

“Ouch! Why are you hitting me with that tiny hammer?” he asked, all of a sudden aware of a thing that he probably should have been aware of more sooner.

“Just testing your reflexes, hun.” replied Apple after staring him back down into reality. Zorba stuck out his tongue. Apple rolled her eyes. They both turned away and smiled to themselves.

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CHAPTER 36: AND IN ME, A GIANT NETWORK,  
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“No, that is *too* good. No one would ever believe that an actual person could produce such beauty.”

“Yeah, but, I mean. Apple. I mean. But. It exists. How could it. I mean.”

“It’s like reaching equilibrium with the machine. It eats your soul. It devours all praxis. It’s a dead end.”

“Yeah, but.”

“Sometimes, that’s all you get. Anyway, it’s not going to make it into the official report.”

“But Apple. This *is* the official report.”

Apple stopped sewing the tear in her umbrella and looked up into Zorba’s eyes. There was some sort of lack, some sort of yearning. Some intense desire to connect. “Who do you think we’re working for?” she asked her beautiful friend, as all pretense dropped from their conversa-

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## CHAPTER 37: BUT ENOUGH ABOUT ME

Apple Hippopotamus awoke from her deep slumber, or maybe snapped out of a four hour long movie watching marathon, and found herself unmistakably conscious, sitting pretzel style on her living room floor. *Not again*, she thought. *Why do I always end up back here?* Her eyeballs scanned her oddly bright and colorful rooms. PROCESSING. PROCESSING. *You know*, she thought to her imaginary audience, *a job is fine, but it takes up too much of your time*. Her attention focused into that nook behind the bookshelf. “Now where did *that* come from?” she wondered, aloud. She hacked up a bit of phlegm and reached for her tobacco with one hand and her notebook with the other. Voices were intruding into her windows. She was clearly back in the thick of it, whatever *it* was, which, well, we’re still not sure, except for that, you know, it sure was

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thick. Probably. But enough about me...

Zorba Cathexis sat, deep in thought, staring at his device. His digits flicked across his screen. He looked up out of the corner of his eye, paused, and stretched into the morning. *Hmmm. Was this a potential encounter heading his way?* he thought to himself as if some professional voice actor was narrating his story. Which, is *clearly* ridiculous, but we don't make the rules, folks. Wait, what's this? Was Zorba about to open his mouth and speak?

"So, what brings a pretty guy like you to a place like this?"

The curly headed stranger gave Zorba a bit of the old incredulous side-eye. Possible response matrices scanned across his mechanism, although it appeared as if Zorba's opening gambit had caused a slight glitch in his system. "Well," he started eventually, catching Zorba's eye, "I suppose that's a bit of a tale. Shall I start at the beginning?"

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## CHAPTER 38: THE BEGINNING BEGINS

Once upon a time, in an alternate universe juuust a bit outside, lived a battle of good versus evil, which, obviously, we won't bore you with, and not just because you have probably stopped reading this story in earnest *moons* ago, due to its inability to tell itself straight. I mean, sure, this is all interesting in *theory*, but sometimes you just want to get lost in the, you know, whatever. Point is, we're not going to bore some mystical tunnel through your very core, because, frankly honey, there are some things you just have to do for yourself. But I digress. Once upon a time, there was a boy.

"No, you can't say that. It's just not true."

"Oh come on. You've a degree in Communication. You know just as I that *nothing* we say is true."

She rolled her eyes at that. "You know my feelings on—"

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He waved that thought away. "I know. My point is, is, oh."

"Oh," she said.

They both turned towards the child. And received a true lesson about the transmission of messages.

As the child grew, they became

"Gods! that feels good." Lettuce Bamboo pushed through the stiffness that inhabited her upper extremities, as a wave of pleasurable ache shot up through her heart and out through her head in all directions. She was surrounded by humans. And a smattering of friendly-acting machine elves and adorably playful imaginary constructs. "Oh, hello there," she said to one of the humans that caught her attention. Across the room (they were in a room, apparently), Lettuce Bamboo watched this human's face alter due to the very recognizable process of all-of-a-sudden feeling like someone might actually be responding to the thought patterns bouncing through your head. The human looked around briefly before their eyes settled on Lettuce, who was looking right back at them. The human's eyes widened and then a smile started to emerge, and then they quickly

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turned away. Slowly, shyly, they looked back again towards Lettuce, who was now munching on some food substance she had picked up off of a table (there were tables in the room).

“Wait. What happened to the rest of it?”

“I’m sorry, what?” said the storyteller, a bit confused.

“Surely there’s more to tell,” said an exasperated Zorba. “I mean, you left this giant gap. And the transition. Just, so abrupt. Where’s the narrative flow? The meaningful juxtaposition?”

“Um,” said the curly-headed young man to this very critical stranger with whom he shared a table. “Narrative... flow?”

Just then, Zorba remembered...something. A dream? Was it a dream? Was he still...dreaming?

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