

//Logos Literature

The Dark Side of Destiny

by Kaiter Enless February 27, 2022

by Dustin Grinnell

After several years of writing the obituary column for *The Boston Globe*, I longed for more interesting topics and significant stories. I wanted to mingle with sources, gain their trust, and write exposés that revealed injustices for the public good, like the investigative journalists I admired. I pitched many article ideas to my editor, but it wasn't until a chance encounter at a dinner party that I got the break I desired.

At the get-together, I sat next to a newly married man, who confessed his wife had tried many interventions to rid herself of a troubling problem. In times of stress, she would pick the skin around her fingertips until they were raw, leaving them damaged and hardened, sometimes bleeding. The issue seemed rather insignificant, but his wife had been disturbed that she couldn't control the behavior. She knew she shouldn't do it, yet she had found the habit irresistible.

Her primary care physician had referred her to cognitive behavioral therapy. There, she had focused on identifying the underlying thoughts and feelings fueling the problem. Regrettably, it had done nothing to change her behavior.

She had then gone to a psychoanalyst to understand the cause of her dermatillomania, also known as chronic skin-picking. Despite ten therapy sessions, nothing was ever found, and the habit had persisted.

"Hypnosis cured her," her husband claimed. "In fact, after one session, she was free of the burden."

His wife had been delighted to have put the quirk to rest. That is, until a few months later, when she developed a condition known as Raynaud's disease, which reduced blood flow to the fingers in cold temperatures.

"How does that affect your family?" I asked.

"She can't spend long periods in the cold," he admitted. "She spends most of our ski vacations in the lodge, huddled next to a warm fire with a book."

The cause of her Raynaud's disease was unknown, but he speculated that the hypnosis had caused his wife's new malady, having "crossed some wires" in her brain, perhaps. Regardless, they believed Raynaud's disease was a small price to pay to avoid the alarming sight of bloody fingertips.

The tale stuck with me for several days. Hypnosis had alleviated the intended problem but might have replaced it with another. Having undergone some psychoanalysis myself, I wondered if the woman's neurosis might have been the result of some underlying anxiety. Had hypnosis simply bypassed the unconscious forces at play, causing them to manifest elsewhere in her body?

Given the stigma against medical conditions being "all in one's head," I didn't dare suggest to the man that his wife might have been suffering from psychosomatic symptoms. However, I did wonder if exploring the dark recesses of her mind might have helped relieve her physical symptoms. Had she expressed some deep-seated anger or sadness, would she have been free of both health issues?

A quote by the English psychiatrist Henry Maudsley came to mind: "The sorrow which has no vent in tears may make other organs weep."

I felt darkly stimulated by the encounter one Saturday morning. Over coffee, I grabbed my phone and wrote a pitch for my editor about the "dark side" of medical interventions, in particular alternative therapies like hypnosis. During our one-on-one meeting on Monday, I voiced the idea, but it was met with lukewarm enthusiasm. Undeterred, I followed up with a more formal proposal via email.

"The idea has promise," her responding email said the next day. "You can begin research for one article."

I finished the three obituaries I had to do for the day in record time and began looking for centers in Greater Boston that offered alternative or integrative therapies.

My first call was to the Eureka Center in Williamstown. I told the naturopath I spoke with that I was a reporter looking for stories of individuals who might've resolved one health problem only to find themselves dealing with another.

When I mentioned the woman with Raynaud's, the naturopath said she knew of several similar cases. One had undergone hypnotherapy to quit smoking but then developed a chronic respiratory condition known as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Another had undergone acupuncture to get a handle on his migraines, but while the migraines were diminished, he developed severe acid reflux that inflamed his throat, causing it to constrict while he slept.

When I spoke with the man, he said a neurologist thought one of the acupuncture needles might've gone too deep and struck a bundle of nerve fibers in his neck or scalp. This may have caused the nerves in the esophagus to become hypersensitive and thus overreact with swelling when acid regurgitated from the stomach.

With this information, I wrote the story enthusiastically. It was published in the bottom right-hand corner of the front page. There was my name, Winston Solomon, beside my very own column, The Dark Side, with the catchy subtitle "What are the costs of our healing therapies?"

The one-thousand-word piece generated hundreds of letters from all over the state from people with similar experiences. Elated, I dove headlong into my work, writing obituaries during the day and the column at night.

For my next story, I interviewed a man who had undergone a year of existential psychotherapy, or philosophical counseling, to cure nihilism—a sense that life was insignificant. He thought life had no intrinsic meaning, so why should he go on living? The existential therapist, trained in dealing with such

hopelessness, argued that the innate meaninglessness of life shouldn't stop people from living. Why couldn't life's shortness itself inspire them to wisely choose how they spent their time?

After some time, the man finally found his antidote: the realization that the onus to manufacture a purpose in life was on him. He no longer searched for a meaning of life; rather, he understood that meaning was found in living.

What was the "dark side" of the story? The man discovered he'd spent his whole life working at a desk, enriching other people, and never learning his individuality. Realizing he hadn't lived his life, he quit his job, sold his belongings, and literally walked the earth.

The story was a sensation. Encouraged by the public's delighted response to my column, my editor urged me to continue exploring and writing. Deciding to pivot, I began to seek stories of unintended consequences in conventional medicine.

I spoke with an oncologist at a major hospital in Boston who specialized in managing the cardiovascular side effects of cancer therapies. Many of the doctor's patients had beaten cancer but now lived with life-threatening heart rhythm disturbances. I told her about my grandmother, who had succumbed to lung cancer years earlier after chemotherapy wreaked havoc on her body, scarring her heart and shredding her gastrointestinal system.

"Should we have taken her home when she was reasonably healthy," I asked, "so she could check a few items off her bucket list before her inevitable death? She had always wanted to visit Nantucket, yet she spent her last few days suffering in a hospital. Wouldn't beach walks have been their own form of medicine?"

"As a doctor, I have an obligation to do everything I can to save patients like your grandmother," the doctor replied. "But deep down, in my heart of hearts, I would agree with you. I wish more families would do just what you described."

As I dove deeper into conventional medicine, my column became unpopular among clinicians and researchers around Boston. No one liked having their livelihoods publicly criticized; many professionals saw my articles as blatant attacks on their fields. Hundreds of emails poured into my inbox, including a response to my exploration of the side effects of cancer therapies in which a physician insisted the drugs they used saved hundreds of lives every year.

"If you knew anything about medicine or pharmacology, you would know every drug has side effects."

I hesitated to reply that he had just proven the point of my column.

Though it certainly wasn't my intent, some of my stories put companies out of business. One story explored the effects of a nutritional supplement reported to extend people's life spans by "optimizing metabolic circuits." While some customers who had taken the supplement for years had more energy and sharper focus, many had suffered unusual symptoms, from malaise to nausea. One individual had developed a severe autoimmune disorder known as Still's disease and took a handful of pills each morning to control the chronic illness. A few folks had heart attacks. One even died from a massive stroke.

The story made the nightly news, and *60 Minutes* even began investigating it. The company that produced the supplement closed its doors a few months after the publication of my story.

Weeks later, in a meeting with my editor, I mentioned my desire to take my column in a new direction. I thought it would be interesting to explore the potential dark side of basic scientific research. I had grown up reading dystopian novels like *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *Fahrenheit 451*, cautionary tales that explored the consequences of man's inventions. I also read science fiction, which explored future possibilities within fictional scenarios. In the film *Jurassic Park*, Dr. Ian Malcolm criticized the scientists who resurrected dinosaurs to create an amusement park for tourists.

"Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn't stop to think if they should."

This staggering line had never left me. It both haunted me and darkly inspired me to consider not whether we could but whether we should. I'd always felt there were certain types of people who would try anything, no matter how dangerous or morally complex, as long as it would get them the immediate results they desired. Maybe this was humanity's innate curiosity—our explorer spirit. Maybe it was rebellion: if certain people were told they couldn't do something, they wanted to do it even more.

Or maybe it was just that humans had trouble feeling the threat of something if the potential consequences wouldn't appear until far in the future. At best, this might be caused by wishful thinking: "That won't happen to me" or "Even if it does, we'll figure something out." At worst, it was caused by complete disregard for possible long-term consequences: "So what? I won't have to deal with the fallout."

I reached out to a biomedical research institute in Cambridge. According to its website, the institute comprised about two dozen labs dedicated to improving human health through curiosity-driven research to understand the biological mechanisms that drove intractable diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and Alzheimer's. Most of the principal investigators were world renowned in their scientific fields. Many had received the National Medal of Science and were members of the National Academy of Sciences, and two had a Nobel Prize each in physiology or medicine.

After researching the institute, I was most interested in speaking with a Dr. Oscar Black. I was intrigued by the mission of his laboratory. All the lab's inventions and medical devices—he claimed to have seventy inventions to his name—were inspired by nature.

For instance, research into the use of echolocation by bats had led to a potential cure for blindness, which was currently in phase II clinical trials. Another fascinating project, funded by the US Department of Defense, studied the mind-boggling speed with which hummingbirds flapped their wings. Though it seemed ridiculous, no doubt the military aimed to give soldiers the power of flight.

At the front desk, it was apparent the institute was a highly creative and intellectually vibrant environment. While I checked in, a woman with red hair and thick glasses passed by discussing an upcoming meeting with venture capitalists. Scientists walked by engaged in intense discussions that may as well have been in other languages. In the elevator, a pair of researchers discussed what sounded like a scientific experiment. They used strange terms, like *sestrin2*, *leucine sensor*, and *mTORC1*.

Once I'd entered Dr. Black's suite, the secretary confirmed the schedule and knocked on his door. A raspy voice shouted, "Come in!"

When the secretary eased open the door, Dr. Black was hunched over his desk, his fingers strumming over his keyboard. He didn't make eye contact. Instead, he took a bite of a sandwich and squinted at the computer screen through white-rimmed glasses. Unlike other investigators, who wore sports jackets or

suits in their online pictures, Dr. Black wore jeans and a dark-red flannel shirt. His office was cozy, and the walls were covered in photos of him at barbecues and beach parties. On the windowsill sat a picture of the cabin he'd built in New Hampshire (he mentioned it in his memoir, *Nature Is My Guide*).

"What do you want?" Dr. Black asked.

"I'm the reporter who called about the Dark Side column."

He scoffed. "So you're the one assassinating doctors and scientists around town."

"I assure you, that isn't my intention. In fact, my column protects people from the unintended consequences of the therapies they seek." As an example, I told him about a reader who had canceled her appointment to get breast implants after one of my articles profiled a patient who had experienced horrific side effects.

That seemed to disarm Dr. Black, who moved his sandwich to the side. "I'm well aware of the harm modern medicine can do, despite its lifesaving accomplishments," he offered. "My wife passed away a few years ago."

With some probing, I learned his wife had developed a brain tumor that had enveloped the major artery in her neck. It had been an impossible case, and most surgeons wouldn't touch her for fear of her dying on the table, no matter how skilled they were.

The only neurosurgeon brave enough to take on the case managed to extract the tumor, but Mrs. Black suffered a massive stroke during the ten minutes the artery had to be blocked. She was cancer-free, but the stroke impaired the function of her right arm and leg and left her with a speech impediment. Unable to form sentences well, she could no longer enjoy conversations with her husband as she had before. To make matters worse, the cancer returned five years later, and Dr. Black was left with the vague notion that the benefits of the risky operation may not have outweighed the costs.

"I have to finish this grant proposal before the end of the day," Dr. Black said, shaking off the memory. "Let's make this quick, Mr. Solomon."

"Do you mind if I record our conversation?"

Dr. Black agreed but asked me not to write about his lab. Disappointed, I set my tape recorder down on the table, promising never to write a word without the source's permission.

"Can you explain your work, Dr. Black?"

He nodded and pushed his chair back away from the desk. "As you're no doubt aware, my research is inspired by Mother Nature and all her magnificent creations." He pointed to a glass container on a nearby table. Inside, mounds of sand teemed with ants. "Among our many projects, we are currently studying the organizational complexity of ants. An ant colony is a perfect society."

He explained that they were organized into groups, almost like castes, and that each ant had a unique role within the hierarchy of power. The queen produced the eggs, while the workers performed various duties to maintain order. Some worker ants monitored the eggs, while others left the nest to find food.

"Every ant has a job to do," he mused. "Each is suited for a role in their colony, and each does it well. It's a happy republic—a utopia, in fact."

Dr. Black's explanation reminded me of my time playing football in high school, where a player's position was determined mostly by their physical characteristics. The linemen, who protected the quarterback, were almost always muscular and above average in size, often overweight but still athletic. On the other hand, wide receivers, who had to sprint for passes and evade defenders, were usually slender and fast runners. Having been stocky but quick on my feet and able to withstand collisions with powerful linemen, I had been put in the running back position.

Intrigued, I asked Dr. Black how studying ants had translated into useful knowledge for humanity. It was somewhat surprising to hear him suggest that *Homo sapiens* could learn a great deal from ants. He believed we could use the knowledge to perhaps organize a perfect, harmonious society.

"Look at the misery most people suffer because they are ill-suited for their roles. For example, a litigator who prefers legal research and writing briefs to performing in courtrooms or securing clients for the firm through constant networking. What about teachers who have no aptitude for working with kids? Or a senator—a public servant—who has no intention of serving the public, only themselves?"

Dr. Black explained that most people were mismatched. "Square pegs in round holes," he called them. "They fulfill roles in society inappropriate for their skills, temperament, intelligence, and personality."

"How would you solve the problem?"

"I have created a machine that can match an individual with a role best suited to them based on seventy-five unique factors."

Dr. Black pulled a book out of a drawer. "In *The Republic*, the Greek philosopher Plato imagines a perfect society in which each citizen satisfies the role they were born to fulfill. For example, large and strong men would be society's warriors and protect the public in the military. The pensive and philosophical would write society's laws. And the sensitive and empathetic would be healers in their communities.

"We are all born to do one thing," Dr. Black insisted. "How many individuals are unsatisfied because they don't like their place in the world? My machine, which I call Element—as in 'finding one's element'—solves that."

Dr. Black's grandiosity was startling. "Surely a person is more than their size, shape, intelligence, and temperament?"

"My technology accounts for *all* the unique components of a person."

I nodded slowly. "So, how did this idea develop?"

Dr. Black smiled wryly. "To be honest, Element never would've come about if not for my son's struggle to find his own place in the world." He pointed to a picture of a handsome man in a black gown holding a medical school diploma.

"Nathan spent many unhappy years as a primary care physician," Dr. Black explained. "He thought his patients complained too much, and most didn't get better. Worse, he felt he couldn't help them because many of their problems were stress related—usually psychological or emotional, not physiological."

Nathan had a vivid imagination and exceptional linguistic skills. For years, Dr. Black had told him he had enough talent to be like the great physicians who also wrote fiction. Nathan admired Michael Crichton, who had also attended Harvard Medical School, and had grown up on novels like *The*

Andromeda Strain and *The Terminal Man*. To expand his palate, Dr. Black had introduced him to the greats: Anton Chekhov, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Mikhail Bulgakov.

When the idea hadn't taken, Dr. Black built the prototype of Element for Nathan. "Testing showed that my son scored off the charts on verbal and written intelligence. He was also way above average on the creativity scale. This suggested that perhaps he was well suited for life as a writer."

To Dr. Black's delight, Nathan had accepted the results and began writing short stories about his clinical encounters, with the permission of those involved. As Dr. Black had expected, they were often derivatives of Crichton: thrilling, science-based tales, the first of which was about an infectious disease outbreak and was clearly modeled after *The Andromeda Strain*.

To Nathan's amazement, most of his stories were published in science fiction journals. While he didn't leave his clinical practice, Nathan was expressing his inborn talents, which made Dr. Black proud. That said, Nathan did admit to feeling guilty; as a doctor, he should focus on his patients' health rather than thinking about one day fictionalizing his experiences with them. Nevertheless, he continued writing and improving his craft.

I knew such details would add color to my story if Dr. Black agreed to go on the record, but now wasn't the time to pressure him. Instead, I asked more about how Element worked. It sounded a lot like a personality test, like the Myers-Briggs or other such services that companies subjected their employees to during company retreats.

"The Myers-Briggs is nowhere near as sophisticated as my machine." Dr. Black bit his lip. "Perhaps it would be best if you saw it."

We walked out of his office, through the suite, and down a hallway. He opened a door to the lab space, and we walked through a lobby with white walls and lab rooms on either side. He used a key card to open another door, revealing a cramped, dimly lit space. In the center of the room was the unmistakable donut shape of an MRI machine. The bulky cylinder had a hole in the middle, into which the bed slid.

We circled the machine as Dr. Black articulated that it was, indeed, a wide-bore 3 Tesla MRI scanner that could evaluate brain anatomy, neurochemistry, and a host of other physiological factors. It measured brain activity while a person responded to a proprietary list of behaviors, questionnaires, and cognitive tests. The prompts, questions, puzzles, word association tests, and brain games helped assess the patient's intellectual abilities, creative capacity, emotional intelligence, and what were known as the five broad personality traits: extroversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism.

"We can also do a full genetic analysis," he added, "including ancestry."

"How does that matter in the context of helping a person find their place in the world?"

"Well, for example," Dr. Black replied, "some individuals with the 'warrior gene' are more likely to show aggressive behavior and thus might do better as soldiers or athletes. We also account for the nature of work in the twenty-first century. We can use the data obtained by Element to predict a domain or area in which the subject could flourish."

With a kind of reverence, he ran his hand along the machine. "Astrologers and mystics have been trying to predict people's futures for centuries. Science has made that a reality at last."

Dr. Black walked me into an adjacent room, from which we could see Element through the window. “I believe every person knows, even if only subconsciously, what their talents are and what they should be doing with their life. It can take a long time to figure out what you’re good at. It can take even longer to figure out how to translate those faculties into a practical role in society.

“Element quickly identifies inborn talents and matches them with a vocation. It’s as simple and uncomplicated as that.”

I frowned. “But how does the machine account for someone’s values? I mean, say you’re good with numbers. Should you become an accountant or a mathematician? If you work in finance, should you work for a nonprofit or on Wall Street? For a small firm or large? Or perhaps you would be better suited for self-employment. Would you rather work on the sales side, with people, or the analytical side, with data?”

“We’re still working on that aspect, but we’re almost there,” Dr. Black shot back. “Indeed, values are nothing more than what arises from the combination of a person’s biology and psychology and the culture they live in, perhaps in combination with other factors, like socioeconomic background, race, gender, and others.”

Dr. Black appeared certain that if he knew these aspects of someone’s personhood, he would know what that person stood for. I remained skeptical until he probed into why I had chosen a career in journalism.

“My knack for words, I guess. I’ve always loved to read, and writing came naturally.”

Dr. Black nodded. “And why not choose advertising? You could’ve expressed such natural talent in that field.” He scoffed. “If we can even refer to advertising as a field.”

He had a point. It was, indeed, a question of values. To me, journalists held an essential role in society by keeping those in power accountable. “The job of the newspaper,” as the saying went, “is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

“It is something of a thrill to write the first drafts of history,” I admitted. “And I hope to write a first draft of your work, if you’ll let me.”

Upon returning to the newsroom, I told my editor about Dr. Black and his work. Intrigued, she pushed me to get the scientist’s consent to write about his work, but she also urged me to write about the science through the lens of my column: to find Element’s unintended cost.

At first, none came to mind. In fact, the technology seemed to provide a good deal of benefit. I had read somewhere that only 15 percent of people were engaged at work. Who wouldn’t want to identify their place in the world with such speed and efficiency?

My editor didn’t care about the perceived benefits, though. “Go dark on Element. And for God’s sake, get the man’s consent to write about him.”

That night, I went home and sat on the back porch with a beer. I pressed play on my recorder and listened to my conversation with Dr. Black. I started typing and had a thousand words within half an hour.

Dr. Black's main philosophy appeared to be that most people's talents were squandered, their gifts untapped, leading to untold misery. Element, it seemed, could be a boon to humanity. Nevertheless, I had to "go dark" on the machine, which centered on whether the technology did indeed do what Dr. Black said it did.

Of course, I was putting the cart before the horse by writing a story without Dr. Black's consent. With a first draft almost finished, I called him that night, buzzed from three beers.

"The American public needs to know about Element," I told him. "I promise, I'll write a balanced article about your work."

"I'll think about it," he replied, before hanging up. I was sure my story would never see the light of day.

The next morning, though, Dr. Black called me and said I could publish. "The world would be a better place if more people learned about my work and took it seriously."

"Mind if I spend some time in your lab to learn more about Element and your philosophy?"

I spent a week doing just that. Dr. Black even had me undergo the testing, which was quite enjoyable. Reclined, with my head and neck covered by the machine, I performed a series of word games and memory tests and free-associated while looking at beautiful and grotesque photographs. When the testing was over, Dr. Black handed me a twenty-page document of results.

Unsurprisingly, it noted I was well suited for my chosen career. It detailed my linguistic aptitude versus mathematical skills. The results suggested: "Subject shall thrive in the field of communications, particularly as a producer of content versus more administrative roles." Another page said: "High idealism suggests a strong match for the betterment of the public, i.e., journalism."

Element had shown I was well matched for my career, an outlier in Dr. Black's mind. "Most people are lost," he reminded me. "You are not, Winston."

The story turned out to be my longest yet, so my editor published it as a three-part series. The article went viral, and it didn't take long before everyone in Boston was discussing Dr. Black's invention.

Two days after publication, I traded emails with Dr. Black. The institute's technology transfer office had arranged meetings with biotech companies that had agreed to commercialize Element. Dr. Black said he didn't care for this level of attention—"fame and tranquility are not good bedfellows"—but he eventually agreed to conduct a clinical trial on a dozen undergraduate students at Harvard University. I pleaded with my editor to let me follow his clinical research. She agreed but reminded me the newspaper was paying me to write obituaries and maintain the Dark Side column.

The Harvard students were eager to participate in the trial, claiming such technology was a godsend. Who wouldn't want a machine to reveal their best traits? With all the pressure they were under to find their "thing"—and fast—Element could cut down the uncertainty.

In a *Harvard Crimson* article, one student said she was "insanely envious" of individuals who'd realized their passions at a young age. Another student agreed, joking that he wished he would experience a natural disaster or illness, as it would probably give his life laser focus.

"In a world where Element exists," one parent was quoted to have said, "I won't have to watch my child flit from job to job in his twenties."

The study revealed that nearly all twelve students were headed for careers that didn't align with their skills, temperaments, or intelligence. Most changed majors after breaking down the results with their parents and friends.

Cassie, a biology major, discovered she had little to no aptitude for science or mathematics. Instead, she became a dance major, having scored off the charts in kinesthetic abilities. Incidentally, she had always loved to dance. In a follow-up *Crimson* article about the study, she claimed, "It feels like I have to move to think."

Beatrice, a culinary arts major, had been inspired by the movie *Burnt* to become a pastry chef. She thought being a chef was badass, but she had little passion for food ("my friends ate tapas in Spain; I found the closest Subway"). Beatrice also had inferior taste buds and low creativity scores. She scored high on mathematical abilities, however, saying in the *Crimson* that numbers had always come easy to her. When she was a little girl, she had played with equations while her friends played with dolls. So she became a math major.

Another student, Wells, opposed Dr. Black and his machine, publicly rejecting his results. He believed all the machine did was make him feel bad about being different. "I will follow my intuition," he proclaimed. "If I take some wrong turns, so be it. That's part of life."

Every student except Wells aligned their futures in accordance with Element's predictions.

After the clinical trial, my editor and I decided I had to move on from Dr. Black. I continued the Dark Side column for a few years and wrote many feature stories, one of which earned me a Pulitzer for Feature Writing. Not long after, I was tapped by a major newspaper to be a senior reporter. A couple of years later, I became the managing editor of *Boston Magazine*.

Dr. Black made bold career moves too. Several years after the Harvard study, he founded his own company, The Black Center for Human Advancement, which sold his machines to the public.

By then, Element had made its way into schools across the country. Parents anxious about their children's futures had them tested by the thousands. Guidance counselors had little to do in the age of Element; they simply sent students to the nearest machine for testing.

To reduce turnover and absenteeism, many employers throughout the United States began requesting applicants' Element results. Others would sponsor testing for attractive candidates, and entire departments paid for the testing as part of annual retreats.

Commercials ran on TV with slick lines like "Do you love your place in the world?" or "Do you feel lost in your career, unengaged at work, or unhappy in life?" Dr. Black was on the cover of countless magazines, including *The New Yorker*, which featured a cartoon of a silhouetted figure falling backward off a building, at the bottom of which stood the doctor holding a safety net.

A decade after meeting Dr. Black, I had mostly forgotten about him. I was in the middle of a pitch meeting when one of my reporters talked about a retired physician who had attempted suicide. He pitched a piece on burnout among healthcare providers in the age of industrialized medicine, which I thought was a good idea.

"What's the doctor's name?"

"Nathan Black."

I paused, not expecting the name to be familiar. “As in the son of Oscar Black?”

The reporter nodded.

“Pursue the story. I’ll interview Nathan Black to get his side.”

Wasting no time, I visited the hospital where Nathan Black had been admitted, and a social worker led me to his room. When I entered, Nathan sat on the edge of the bed with his knees against his chest. He was pale, and his eyes were wild with fear. I introduced myself, saying I knew his father.

“I know who you are,” Nathan assured me. “You made my father famous. Made him *obsessed*.” He shivered. “I haven’t spoken with him in over a year because all he ever talks about is Element and the impact it’s having on society.”

His voice dropped to a whisper. “But Element is cursed.”

“Can you elaborate on that?”

“Leaving medicine to start writing was a terrible idea. Sure, my patients weren’t always easy to deal with, but at least the hours were steady and I was a respected member of society. People looked up to me, admired me.”

But his father’s machine had “infected” him with the notion that his destiny was to become a writer. And while Nathan might have had a natural facility with words, Element hadn’t accounted for certain intangibles Nathan would need to tolerate the rigors of a creative life.

“It’s shameful to admit, but I don’t have the guts for writing. It’s like driving down a winding road at night with just one working headlight—or even no headlights and with the car in need of an oil change too. But I’m someone who needs two headlights. Hell, I’d much rather drive during the day, anyway.”

It took a certain level of courage to sit down every day and “feel one’s way” through a narrative and then prune it to give the reader the impression the story could only have turned out the way the author designed it.

As a journalist, I could relate. One of the hardest things to accomplish as a writer was to build a piece that was clear and hung together. I considered my favorite authors who discussed how they had managed the uncertainty that accompanied the early stages of a writing project. Though I hadn’t written fiction, I knew fictional stories often began with almost infinite possibilities, yet they ended in what appeared to be the only way fathomable.

“Kurt Vonnegut,” I told Nathan, “wrote numerous versions of his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* before he finished, even abandoning it countless times.”

Nathan smiled. “After writing the first two parts of *Siddhartha*, Hermann Hesse realized he had no way to conclude the book’s third section, and it took him years of soul-searching to return to it.”

He shook his head. “What patience! It drives me crazy just not knowing where a short story is going. Too much uncertainty, and I implode.”

Had Element missed an important aspect of Nathan’s personality? And what part of him were we talking about? Was courage, grit, or guts assessed by his father’s machine? Was it temperament? What about one’s nature or essence?

Element predicted a path that suited cognitive strengths, but it seemed it might be incompatible with various indefinable aspects of character. And despite being a talented writer—his short story about a rheumatologist who cured his own autoimmune disorder with laughter by prescribing himself funny movies was fantastic—Nathan was unhappy. Clinically depressed, even.

“Have you given up medicine?”

“I cut my clinic hours a few years ago to commit myself to writing fiction full-time, even though I’d only published a few short stories and my unpublished novel had been declined by dozens of agents. I bought a small office space in Concord, not far from Walden Pond, and would go there to write all morning.”

After receiving mostly rejections, Nathan had realized it would probably take him another decade to excel at fiction writing, and he had had no intention of making that level of commitment.

“I’m good at writing, but it takes a hell of a lot more than talent to have a career.”

Indeed, I had seen many people with similar problems: one might have an aptitude for something yet still not make money from it or be recognized for it.

Nathan supposed those Harvard kids had wanted his father’s machine to guarantee them successful futures. They might want to be rich and famous, but for the most part, they just wanted security.

Who didn’t?

“I was thinking about all this—going too deep into my thoughts—when my mood started to dip. The antidepressants helped for a year before they lost their effect.”

All the alone time and introspection needed for writing well had messed up his neurochemistry. His father had him admitted to a psychiatric institution when Nathan confessed he’d been fantasizing about not being around anymore.

“That was the appeal of suicide,” Nathan said. “The second the lights went out, all my worries, all my problems, all my silly ambitions just went away. I would be able to ‘rest in peace,’ as the saying goes.”

As I drove home from the hospital, I grew increasingly disturbed by my meeting with Nathan Black. It was a shame to see such a bright young man fall so hard. Plenty of people never climbed out of such a hole, and I wondered if he would ever recover. Should he have stayed in medicine? He hadn’t been as passionate about medicine as he had about writing, but at least he hadn’t been suicidal.

My mind drifted back to my old Dark Side column, which had launched my journalism career. Was this the “dark side” of Dr. Black’s machine?

Thousands of individuals now designed their lives in accordance with Element’s predictions. And everyone seemed to be thriving. Some even claimed their lives consisted of two parts: life before Element and life after Element. They didn’t have to experiment with various jobs or careers. They didn’t have to hire career coaches or read business books to navigate the complexities of building a brilliant career.

What misery it must have been to drift from job to job, to get a graduate degree to secure a career in a field that was only of slight interest, only to never find one’s calling and toil in a job that made one unhappy. That was a life of floundering.

With Element, people had a purposeful existence.

Yet were there others like Nathan?

That night, I searched online through articles about the first batch of Harvard students who had undergone testing. First, I looked up Cassie, who had begun Harvard as a biology major but switched to dance. It turned out she owned a dance company in Marlborough, about forty-five minutes from my apartment in Brighton.

The next morning, I drove to the address listed for her business. I walked through the main entrance and saw maybe a dozen young girls twirling on the hardwood floor. In front of a large mirror, a woman I guessed to be Cassie was barking orders. I was surprised, though. She appeared much older than her photos online. She was trim, but she was no longer the vivacious dancer I'd seen in my research. She looked haggard, and gray streaked her brunette hair.

I introduced myself and asked if we could talk someplace quiet. As she led me down a hallway to her office, we passed large posters that showed her in starring roles in Broadway productions. She walked with a slight hobble, favoring her right leg. An injury, I guessed.

Once in the office, Cassie closed the door, grabbed a glass, and began making herself a drink. "Do you want one?" The clock on the wall read half past eleven in the morning. I shook my head, and she poured herself a whiskey. "So, what do you want to know?"

"I'm trying to track down subjects from Dr. Black's original study of Harvard students to see how their lives have unfolded since then."

Cassie scoffed. "Look, without that machine, I'd probably be teaching high school biology somewhere, and I'm grateful for the life Element has given me. But I might not have taken the test knowing what it would lead to."

When I tilted my head questioningly, she took a sip of her drink and pointed to a poster of her performing a pirouette. "Look, I was the hottest dancer on Broadway, highly sought after by the best producers and choreographers in the business. For a while, it was lifestyles of the rich and famous."

"So why do you seem conflicted?"

"Because I was successful, but fame and money were all I had. I got everything I ever wanted, but I would've liked to share it with someone, to have a witness."

"Did you never get married?"

"I got close a few times, but my relationships couldn't bear the weight of my responsibilities. Just like this knee." She stuck out her right leg and shook her head in disappointment.

"What do you really want to do with your life?"

She took a swig, finishing her drink. "I'd trade all the money and fame just to be able to bring a child into this world. Element gave me a great career, but all I really wanted was a baby. Maybe I'm not beyond my fertile years, but I feel like that ship has sailed."

I had to get back to the office to run the magazine, but I was compelled to track down the other subjects of Dr. Black's first study.

The next was Beatrice, the undergraduate who'd wanted to be a chef but switched her major to math. After exchanging several emails with me, Beatrice agreed to meet me in Boston Common. After we exchanged greetings, she walked to a bench and eased herself onto it, gingerly holding her swollen belly. I sat down beside her and pulled out a notepad, while she kept an eye on her two children.

Never one to beat around the bush, I dove right in. "So, I'm wondering what you've been doing since you graduated."

"I've become a real baby factory." She was currently on maternity leave, pregnant with her third child. With her husband on a business trip, she was delighted to be talking to an adult for the first time in a few days.

She'd gotten married in her mid-twenties, and her husband, who had just received an MBA from Harvard, helped her get a job at his father's accounting firm. "The math comes easily, but I mostly just move little symbols around on the computer screen all day."

"Do you wish you were doing something else?"

"I'd rather be doing something purer, like teaching math or doing research at a university. Not using my math skills to help rich people get richer."

Beatrice yelled at her son to stop running after pigeons and then turned back to me with a shrug. "To be honest, I'm bored as hell on the job. My boss doesn't give me enough assignments, so I spend a lot of time shopping online. My friends complain about burnout, but no one ever talks about 'bored out.'"

Beatrice insisted that 'bored-out syndrome' was common among white-collar office workers and believed it was more soul deadening than being overworked. She hated office life too: the politics, the colleagues jockeying for power, the gossip, the backstabbing.

"What do you think of Element?"

She chuckled. "I'm happy to have a job I'm good at, so I shouldn't complain. But I wish that machine could've warned me about my inability to tolerate the modern workplace."

As I returned home, I couldn't help but think of the one student from Dr. Black's study who hadn't followed Element's results. It didn't take long to find Wells online. His website said he was a motorcycle mechanic in Northampton. His profile picture showed a handsome man with a warm, easy smile.

It was a lovely Saturday afternoon, so instead of calling Wells, I decided to drive an hour and a half to the address listed on his website. Reaching my destination, I found a charming cabin nestled in the forest. To reach the front door, I passed over a shoulder-wide bridge that crossed a brook. When I rang the doorbell, no one came to the door, and I peeked through a window to find no one inside.

Stepping off the porch, I walked around the cabin toward a small shop, perhaps two hundred square feet in size. As I got closer, I heard metal clanking against metal. The door was up, and I saw a man lying with his head and shoulders underneath an old motorcycle.

"Hello," I began, trying not to scare him.

The man pushed himself out from under the motorcycle, stood up, and said hello. It was Wells. He was lean and tall, with brown hair swirled with gray. He invited me inside his shop, using a rag to wipe the grime from his hands. After we shook hands, Wells went to the refrigerator, grabbed two bottles of beer, popped off their caps, and handed me one. I accepted it happily, and he struck mine with the top of his before taking a sip.

“So, what brings a city slicker like yourself out to the sticks?”

I cleared my throat. “I’m following up with students from the original Element study.”

Wells laughed. “Dr. Black’s ‘destiny machine.’ If only a person could find their purpose so easily. Forty-five minutes in a big donut and presto: all your existential questions are answered.”

I pulled a tape recorder from my pocket. “Do you mind if I record our conversation?”

“No problem.” Once I had the tape recorder set up, Wells continued. “The trouble is people can’t stand not knowing their fate. Element absolves them from the agonizing work of finding one’s vocation.” He was a Harvard grad, a philosophy major, yet he tinkered on old British motorcycles for a living. “You won’t see a profile piece about me in *Forbes*, but I couldn’t be happier with the way my life has turned out.”

“Oh? And what does *happiness* mean to you?”

He chuckled. “Happiness? What does that word even mean? I’m not interested in happiness. Well-being or fulfillment is more important than happiness.”

“Then what would you say happiness *isn’t*?”

“I’ll tell you: Happiness isn’t sitting in a tightly packed, temperature-controlled office with twenty other primates, staring at a screen for eight hours a day.” He leaned against the motorcycle and took a sip of beer. “Happiness isn’t opening and closing Word documents all day. It isn’t flooding the internet with an organization’s digital products. And it’s definitely not going home every day wondering why I’m exhausted when I barely moved my body.

“To me, happiness is working with my hands. It’s diagnosing a problem on an old motorcycle.” He patted the surface of the machine beside him. “It’s rebuilding the engine of this old Nighthawk.

“Happiness is the manipulation of *things* versus ideas. It’s having the time and space to think, to read, to write—to do nothing, if I please. It’s unstructured time to play. It’s solitude.

“Happiness is agency. It’s being who I am in a world that tries to make us into anything but ourselves.”

“Does it feel weird being a graduate of one of the best universities in the world and not being, well, more...”

“Successful? My classmates have such a narrow definition of success. They all want to be the next Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk. I mean, don’t get me wrong; I wanted that too, and I played the game early on. I got a high-status job at Fidelity after graduating, and my boss said I’d be a vice president in five years if I kept my head down, worked hard, and paid my dues.

“But I’d rather have a hole in my head than float in the shark-infested waters of corporate America. In my opinion, most of my white-collar friends wear golden handcuffs. They’re soulless careerists climbing ladders that lean against the wrong buildings.”

“Do you earn enough money to survive?”

Wells laughed. “Okay, maybe I feel a twinge of jealousy when I see what they make in a year, but whenever I do, I just lie down for a bit and the feeling goes away fast. A couple of friends mock me for doing manual labor, but fixing these vintage bikes is just as demanding as developing a marketing strategy or writing a legal brief.”

To Wells, discovering the cause of a mechanical issue was exhilarating. “It took me four hours yesterday to learn why this bike wasn’t idling. When I finally figured it out, it felt like I’d discovered King Solomon’s mine.”

“How did you find your way?” I asked, referring to both his job and his life.

“I experimented, took risks, and listened to my gut. I took a job, didn’t like it, and took another. I lived in a few different states. I dated and found someone whose company I enjoyed. Eventually, I decided to come back and call Massachusetts home; I’m originally from Beverly. It wasn’t easy, though. I quit a job, was fired from another—well, another two.” He laughed. “The smart phone app I tried to develop never got off the ground, and my law school application essay is still sitting on my hard drive.”

“You followed your intuition,” I offered.

Wells took a sip of beer and nodded. “The media calls Dr. Black’s machine ‘elegant in its simplicity,’ like one of Einstein’s equations or something. Personally, I think you should be deeply skeptical of someone who claims to be able to simplify a problem as complex as deciding what to do with your life.”

On my way home, I contemplated Wells’s criticism of Dr. Black’s machine. How many people did I know who were quite talented in their professions and made obscene amounts of money yet were miserable? Or perhaps the right word was *unfulfilled*.

I thought of a friend who taught kindergarten. She wasn’t always joyful teaching five-year-olds, but she was nonetheless fulfilled. Over beers, she would often lament she was too intelligent to be a caretaker of young children, that it somehow wasted her intelligence. Yet she was gifted in interpreting the emotional lives of children, and her facility with children made her the best teacher in the school, praised by parents. When she quoted funny things the kids said and shared how she’d brought joy to a young mind, it was obvious that teaching was her calling.

Once home, I went to my bookshelves and found *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. Lifting it off the shelf, I began flipping through. An author and psychotherapist, Frankl had a lot to say about what made humans happy and gave their lives meaning. He knew humans weren’t just machines, not just packets of chemicals; each individual was a unique animal with a mind, body, and spirit—or whatever one might call the immaterial aspect of the human being we cannot deny exists.

As a Holocaust survivor himself, Frankl observed that the survivors of concentration camps had one thing in common: they had something to live for. For some, it was the thought of loved ones that gave their lives meaning or hope. The survivors of that nightmare were those who chose a positive attitude, even when they had every reason to despair.

Such observations formed the foundation of Frankl's conception of what drove humans. People needed meaning in their lives. They needed a purpose to get out of bed in the morning. It gave them a way to orient themselves, a place to channel their energy each day.

Could Dr. Black's machine know what gave a person's life meaning? Did it assess one's values? I began to wonder if Element overlooked these harder-to-define aspects of humanhood.

I walked out onto my deck, sat in my favorite chair, and kicked my legs up on a stool. It also wasn't clear how Dr. Black's machine accounted for the changes that occurred in people's personalities over time. Indeed, sometimes it felt like my own personality fluctuated every month, maybe even every day. The student who had taken a Myers-Briggs personality test in high school was not the same individual of today.

For instance, I was much more aware of my emotions now than I was in my twenties, likely a result of years of the self-examination I'd done in therapy. As I'd gotten older, my taste in entertainment had shifted too. I now preferred classical music over rock, comedies over dramas, and philosophy over self-help. In fact, looking at pictures from my twenties was almost like looking at an entirely different person.

Yet Element's predictions were supposed to last a lifetime?

One friend of mine had been a newspaper man for a decade until he "just grew out of it." Over the years, he had become disenchanted with the media's penchant for sensationalism. After a vacation in Maine, he gave his two weeks' notice and told our editor he would write fiction from then on. He was now a *New York Times* best-selling author of horror novels.

My gut instinct was that Element wouldn't have been able to account for the sea of change in my friend's heart. Obviously, I had questions, and there was only one man who could answer them.

The next morning, I called The Black Center for Human Advancement to arrange a meeting with Dr. Black. Years prior, I had been able to simply walk in the front door of the institute he worked at and take the elevator to his office. Now, Dr. Black's calendar was full for two weeks.

While waiting for the appointment, I read everything I could find on the man the media had deemed an eccentric genius. Dr. Black permitted interviews only to perform demonstrations of Element. He was quite the showman; he would walk journalists, investors, and politicians through his labs and dazzle them with laboratories full of hardworking scientists and high-tech equipment.

Every reporter asked to see the inner workings of Element—how it worked. Though he would discuss the machine's panel of seventy-five personality factors, Dr. Black always replied that his technology was proprietary. When asked if he dated, he answered that he was like every other entrepreneur he'd ever met: married to his business. Legend had it, he slept four hours a night.

The Black Center was about fifteen minutes northwest of Boston. The perimeter was lined with high-voltage security fences. The Dr. Black I met that day was a different man than the one I'd met in a cramped, windowless office at his old institute. His new office was almost the size of a tennis court, with finished hardwood floors and a wall of massive windows behind his desk. He wore a turquoise suit tailored to fit his body. He smiled when his secretary opened the office door and shook my hand.

“Glad to see you, Winston. You look well. I was thrilled to see you’re running a magazine now. Well deserved.” He led me to the chair in front of his desk. “I hope you’re not here on assignment like last time,” he joked.

Why was I visiting? I was curious to know more about his machine, but maybe I just wanted to see how he was doing.

“How does it feel to have achieved worldwide acclaim, Dr. Black?”

“Please, Winston, we’re old friends.” He patted me on the shoulder. “Call me Oscar.”

“Okay, Oscar.” I smirked. “So, how’s it feel to be rich and famous?”

Dr. Black laughed. “I’m an accidental billionaire. I think I preferred the life of obscurity, when I could tinker quietly and worry about trivial matters, like whether my ants have been fed for the day. Now, there are television and radio interviews, commencement speeches, TED Talks, and on-camera interviews for documentaries. I can’t understand how celebrities deal with having cameras follow them around.”

I reminded him of the words he once shared with me: “Fame and tranquility are not good bedfellows.”

He nodded ponderously. “So true.”

After some more pleasantries, Dr. Black showed me a new ant colony that was three times the size of his original. Watching the ants scurry in and out of their nests, I mentioned my meetings with some of the subjects from the original Harvard study. Dr. Black seemed surprised, even concerned, which piqued my curiosity. When I promised not to write a thing, he seemed to calm down.

“That original Harvard study seems like a lifetime ago. How are all those students doing now? Running the world, I imagine.”

“Well, while many of them seem well matched for their current stations, they’re not as content as the press lets on.”

Dr. Black squinted. “Oh no, are you going back to that dull Dark Side column?” He lifted his hands and mimed framing words. “I can see the headline now: ‘Wildly Successful, Deeply Unhappy.’”

I laughed, thinking that was a decent headline, though I didn’t tell him I might prefer something like “Why Are Oscar Black’s Patients Miserable?”

Dr. Black pressed for an example of someone’s discontent. I brought up Cassie, the dancer who felt like she had missed her biological window to procreate (not to mention, she might’ve been an alcoholic). Then there was Beatrice, the math whiz who seemed to be dying of boredom as a knowledge worker.

“Then there’s Wells out in Western Mass. He turned his back on corporate life and seems content fixing motorcycles in his shop. I find it curious that he ignored Element’s data, yet he seems happier than anyone.”

“Element doesn’t guarantee happiness. Anyway, I bet if you dug a little deeper, you’d find this rebel isn’t as happy as he seems.”

With so much to do at the magazine, I had to return to my duties. But Wells remained in my thoughts for days. And I couldn't shake the sense that something was off with Dr. Black, the Black Center, and Element. I had always had a nose for a good story, and I felt compelled to explore the matter further, but I didn't know where to begin.

Throughout my career, whenever I felt stuck with a story, I would stop new reporting and reexamine old material, maybe even return to a subject to interview them again. As such, I called the hospital looking for Nathan, only to learn he'd been released.

When I knocked on the door of his house, a woman greeted me with a toddler in her arms. She introduced herself as Nathan's wife and welcomed me in after I explained why I was visiting.

"So many folks have stopped by to visit Nathan since he left the hospital," she said as she took me to his office. "It was great to see Oscar yesterday. He's been so focused these past few years, we hardly ever see him."

Before opening the door to Nathan's office, she mentioned he didn't like to be interrupted while working, but he'd probably make an exception for another writer.

When I entered, Nathan was slouched in a chair at his desk. He was holding a pen and staring at a pad of yellow paper that only had a few lines scribbled on the first page. He glanced over his shoulder, then spun around and shook my hand. He explained he'd been trying to write at least one thousand words a day, but for some reason, the words weren't coming today. He invited me to sit on the couch.

"I visited your father yesterday."

"So he said. You were poking around for a story again? Or 'probing,' as he put it?"

"I feel like he's holding something back. Maybe you could provide some insight?"

Nathan shrugged. "My father came to apologize. He said my fall—my depression—was his fault."

"Why do you think you've struggled with the career Element assigned you?"

He stared at the floor. "One of my favorite songs is 'Bohemian Rhapsody.' The line at the end resonates with me—that nothing matters. I realized that even if I wrote fifty novels in my lifetime, what difference would it make when you consider my work and life from a cosmic perspective?"

"That's what Element never gave me or anyone else: *significance*. When I understood that anything I produced would ultimately mean nothing in the grand scheme of things, I tumbled into a deep depression, out of which I'm still trying to climb."

That evening, as I edited a feature article, I explored the website of Dr. Black's company. In the leadership section, I scanned the bios of the people on his illustrious board of directors. Two were Nobel Prize-winning biologists. They also had a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, a former national security advisor, and a retired four-star general. The most startling member, however, was Wells. In the displayed headshot, he wore a suit and tie and was cleanly shaven—a far cry from the bearded, grease-covered man in a flannel shirt I had met a few weeks ago.

The following weekend, I drove out to see Wells at his home. I found him revving the engine of an old motorcycle with Bruce Springsteen blaring on the radio. He smiled at me in greeting.

“This bike is a 1966 CB77 Super Hawk, the same kind ridden by Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The owner of this beautiful machine put about two quarts of oil too much into the engine, and now everything’s gummed up.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t fix.”

He laughed and nodded. “Too many riders are like this guy. He’ll never get his hands dirty with repairs. If something breaks, he wants nothing to do with it. He brings it to me and goes to a bookstore for a few hours, knowing it’ll work fine when he returns.”

“Listen, Wells, I noticed you are on the board of directors for The Black Center for Human Advancement. I’d like to talk more about that, if you don’t mind?” When he agreed, I asked how he’d gotten to know Dr. Black and come to serve on his company’s board.

“When I rejected the results of my test, Dr. Black reached out to me. He told me it took guts not to follow the herd. Said he admired my spirit. Felt I had what so few people had: gumption. He wanted to stay in touch, and we did. I was a rising star at Fidelity when he asked me to join his illustrious board.”

Wells chuckled dryly. “I was quite outspoken during board meetings, a thorn in everyone’s side. Eventually, Dr. Black rounded up the board and forced them to kick me off.” He shrugged. “I always suspected Dr. Black didn’t want a part-time motorcycle mechanic on his precious board. But that wasn’t the actual reason I was ousted.”

He invited me into his house for a steak dinner. Afterward, we sat out on the porch, overlooking a pond, and he finally whispered, “I’ll tell you what I think you want to hear.”

I was astonished by what he proceeded to tell me.

Two hours later, I sat in my car in the Black Center’s parking lot. I pressed record on my digital tape recorder and slid it into my jacket pocket. My heart racing, I checked in with the security guard in the main lobby. It was eleven at night when I walked into Dr. Black’s office. Despite his secretary’s efforts to stop me, I walked in to see Dr. Black typing at his computer in almost the same crouched position he had been in when I first met him.

“Winston,” he greeted in a guarded tone. “Back again so soon? Now, what’s so urgent that it couldn’t be taken care of over the phone?”

“Is there something you want to tell me, Oscar? Anything at all? About you, the Black Center, or perhaps your machine?”

Dr. Black’s face scrunched up in confusion. “What are you getting at? If you have a point, make it.”

I told him about my illuminating conversation with one of his former board members.

“That’s what this is about?” Dr. Black cackled. “Wells? That radical? He was removed from the board rather dramatically. Though I am sorry to hear it hasn’t yet been reflected on the center’s website.”

“It doesn’t work, Oscar.” When he didn’t seem to understand, I added, “Your destiny machine: *Element*. It’s fake. It doesn’t work, never did.”

Dr. Black balled his hands up into fists. “It’s obvious you’re on another smear campaign. I’d kindly ask you to leave my—”

“Why did you lie? Was this your way of proving to everyone you’re the hero scientist you imagine yourself to be after years of being marginalized and mocked?” I questioned if he had falsified Element’s data for the money, or perhaps the fame so his name would be remembered.

Glaring at me, he pressed something on the side of his desk, likely calling for security. “You have no idea how much good my machine has done—is doing!—in the world.” He pointed a finger at me. “Right now, thousands of Americans are pursuing careers that highlight their strengths, that allow them to reach their full potential, perhaps even reach a state of self-actualization.”

“Ah, yes,” I drawled sarcastically, “A perfect society. Like your organized ant colony or Plato’s perfect republic, hmm? This might have been a noble pursuit had Element been effective, but your machine’s no better than any other imperfect personality test. Did it ever work?”

He sat motionless, searching for words. He glanced at the door, perhaps hoping the guards would burst in and carry me off the premises.

“It didn’t, right?” I pressed. “Yet you packaged it up and rolled it out into the world.” I shook my head. “Did you fake the data from the Harvard study?”

Dr. Black exploded. “I’m sorry. Is that dancer—what’s her name? *Cassie*?—Is she or is she not world famous? The people who listen to Element are some of the highest performers in their fields. That wouldn’t have happened if their gifts hadn’t been identified. Element put them on the path to reaching their full potential.”

As Dr. Black screamed at me, his face red with rage, I thought of *Cassie*, who just wanted a baby, and *Beatrice*, who was restless in her job. Then *Wells* came to mind.

“Indeed, while many of your ‘loyal subjects’ were quite well matched for their vocations, that didn’t make them happy. Following Element’s predictions didn’t give their lives significance. And isn’t that what people *really* want: meaning?”

It was clear Dr. Black wasn’t going to confess to fabricating his data, so I tried a different tactic. “What about *Nathan*? Your first patient, your son. He’s miserable.”

Dr. Black became somber. “I built Element for my son. When *Nathan* was in junior high, he took a personality test; the results recommended he become a physician. That day, he came home from school and said he was going to be a doctor. He fixated on it through high school and college. For over a decade, every decision he made—studying for the MCATs, becoming an EMT—revolved around medicine. All because of a stupid personality test. And it turned out to be wrong! How could someone decide their entire future after answering ninety questions? He turned out to be a mediocre doctor who detested clinical practice. I gave him a new life.”

“That’s right,” I said. “*You* gave him a new place in the world, *not* your machine. *Wells* discovered your secret—that you meddled with patients’ data when you realized your machine didn’t work.”

“Element will work, I can assure you,” Dr. Black declared. “We just need more time for research.”

I had him in his lie now.

“So you’re admitting your machine doesn’t work, then? That you doctored thousands of people’s results. That it was *you* who chose those people’s futures?”

Dr. Black stood up, stomped around his desk, and pointed a finger in my face. “It’s the media’s fault. *Your* fault. The technology wasn’t ready, but the opportunity was there for a sensational story, hmm? Competitive journalists like you fell all over yourselves for the story of the decade, putting me at the top of the nightly news and on the cover of every magazine. My story made your career!”

He pointed to the bust of Plato on his desk. “This is why Plato banished writers from his ideal society. Their powerful lies can capture the public’s imagination and manipulate them to believe whatever they desire. You were part of the machine that built me into some mythical figure in a story of heroes and villains, and now you’re salivating at the opportunity to destroy me.”

I didn’t need Dr. Black’s lecture. Plato had banished writers because he thought they were propagandists. Indeed, a story of Dr. Black’s fall would make me a household name; I would be interviewed on talk shows, news segments, and documentaries. I’d be offered a book deal and perhaps even awarded another Pulitzer for my investigative journalism.

But it was no longer the pursuit of fame that drove me. In *my* interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*, the writer had a mandate to tell the truth, and in that regard, Element had matched my personality with the perfect career. In Dr. Black’s republic, I was fulfilling the role I was destined for—doing my duty—by exposing his invention and showing society that the emperor had no clothes.

I lifted the tape recorder from my pocket and pointed to the red light indicating it was recording. Knowing he was caught, Dr. Black uttered a growl of frustration. “Element would have been ready by the time it went to market, but we just didn’t have enough time. The vision for the machine was ahead of the existing technology.”

“You lied,” I said. “Wells has agreed to blow the whistle, and if my instincts are right, Nathan will go on the record too.”

Dr. Black hesitated, and tears filled his eyes. “Tell on his own father?”

“He thinks Element ruined his life.” I shook my head. “It won’t be tomorrow or even next week, but the public will know you’re a fraud, Oscar.”

“Don’t do this,” he pleaded. “We just need more time! Most people were adrift before they came to us. They only cared about wealth and fame before we gave them another vision for their future. The forecasts weren’t outright lies. They were educated guesses, and not everyone is unhappy with their results.”

Dr. Black held out his hands pleadingly. “Take you, Winston. I was right on the money with you.”

“Except I already knew my place in the world before Element. You didn’t get it right; I did. And for all those other folks who underwent testing, you didn’t give them direction. You didn’t help them decide their fate. You stole it.”

At that moment, two security guards stormed into the room, and I raised my hands in surrender. As they pushed me toward the door, Dr. Black dropped his face in his hands and wept.

As I stepped into my car, I pressed stop on the recorder. Then I pressed record and spoke an insight I’d just had.

“What was the biggest draw to Dr. Black’s machine? That it could show a person a path to their life’s meaning. Yet finding meaning in one’s life isn’t so simple, and it varies for each of us. Like Wells, like me, we must find our own way in life. We must find our own reasons for living, our own meaning, our own destiny.”

A couple of days later, I interviewed Nathan. I then spent three days vigorously writing an investigative article that would expose his father’s criminal behavior to the public. When the story was published, numerous media outlets piled on and took Dr. Black apart. The avalanche of reporting led to an FBI investigation, and all testing with Element was quickly stopped. The Black Center was dissolved, and Dr. Black was banned from ever doing science again. Eventually, the disgraced researcher went to prison.

Not long after the article was published, I left the magazine to work as an independent investigative journalist devoted to telling stories about the unintended consequences of people’s actions. By exploring the dark side of humanity, I believed we could sidestep the pitfalls before us and keep our civilization from destroying itself.

At the core, I was an idealist. I wished things weren’t broken and inefficient. I wished a technology like Dr. Black’s could solve all our problems and make our lives and society better, safer, more just. But it wasn’t that simple. Reality was more complicated than that. Making the world a better place took people who were willing to look at the worst to get to the better.

So I would continue peering into the darkness so we could reach the light.

Dustin Grinnell is an essayist and fiction writer based in Boston. His creative writing has appeared in many popular and literary publications, including The Boston Globe, The Washington Post, New Scientist, Salon, VICE, and Writer’s Digest, among others. He’s the author of The Genius Dilemma, Without Limits, and The Empathy Academy. He earned his MFA in fiction from the Solstice MFA Program, and his MS in physiology from Penn State.

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