

BOY IN A  
WHITE ROOM

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# CHAPTER 1

Where am I?

A white, cube-shaped room. No lights, but the walls seem to glow and I can make out the faint outline of their edges. No windows or doors, no furniture, no pictures on the walls. Nothing to tell me what there is outside these walls or how I got here. Total silence.

Who am I?

No name springs to mind, no sense of self, only concepts: I know what dice are, a tree, a dog, a computer. But none of that stuff connects to me. I can't relate it to any of my own experiences. I don't even know where the concepts come from. I remember *nothing*.

I stare at my hands in awe. They look like they're covered in thin plastic gloves that hide the fine lines and ridges of my fingertips. I'm wearing a glossy white jumpsuit and stroke the fabric, but feel nothing—my fingertips feel nothing and I can't feel the pressure of my hand against my leg. I hit myself hard but don't feel any

pain. I've lost my sense of touch. And I can't smell anything either.

I slowly go to a wall and reach out my hand, touch the flat surface, but again feel nothing. The wall is solid. I search along it for a hidden switch, a crack, anything that might reveal an opening, but there's no way out. I start to panic. What's happening? Who's locked me in and why? Did I do something wrong? I can't remember. My heart must be racing but I don't feel it. What's wrong with me?

I try kicking the wall but can't feel or hear the impact. It's like I don't exist.

Maybe I'm dreaming? But if this is a dream, then it's scarily real. The silence is oppressive, as though nothing exists outside this room. A terrifying thought.

"Hey! Let me out!" I yell. At least, I try to yell, but all that comes out of my mouth is a strange monotone that sounds like it's computer-generated.

"I don't understand the command." A woman's voice. She sounds just as fake as I do. Her voice seems to come from everywhere. Even so, I look back, half-hopeful, half-scared, that someone has magically appeared, that there's a way in and therefore a way out. But there's no one.

"What?" I ask.

"I don't understand the question," she says.

"Who . . . who are you?"

"My name is Alice," the voice replies. "It stands for Advanced Language Interpretation Counseling Extension."

“Where am I?”

“I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status.”

“Who am I?”

“You are the patient.”

The word triggers bleak images. “Am I in the hospital?”

“I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status.”

“So what are you authorized to do? What’s happening? Why am I here?”

“I am here to help you find out about your new environment.”

I don’t understand what’s going on. Is this some kind of sick joke? A scientific experiment? Or some new kind of therapy? Maybe I’m not in a regular hospital but in a mental clinic. Maybe they’ve given me drugs to wipe out my memory, numb my senses, and make my voice sound flat. Whatever’s going on, I want out. I have to get out!

“Please, let me out of here!”

“I don’t understand the command. Say ‘help’ to hear information about my basic functions.”

“Help.”

“Welcome. My name is Alice, which is an acronym for Advanced Language Interpretation Counseling Extension. I am here to help you find your way around your new environment. I respond to simple commands or answer questions. I recognize the commands ‘show me,’ ‘what is,’ ‘where is,’ ‘open,’ and ‘close.’”

“Open the door.”

“I don’t understand the command.”

“What is outside this room?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Damn it! Just tell me what happened to me!”

“I don’t understand the command. Say ‘help’ to hear information about my basic functions.”

Frustrated, I hit the wall with my fist. The fact that I don’t feel anything just makes things worse.

“Help!” I shout, confused. My voice is lifeless, and the computer gives its standard response.

I pace up and down my prison restlessly, like a tiger in a cage. Over time, the space seems to shrink, as though the glowing walls are closing in on me. I measure the room in equal-sized steps, over and over—it’s only five paces from one side to the other. Even though the distance doesn’t change, I still feel like there’s less and less space. The air seems to get thinner.

I can’t afford to freak out! I have to pull myself together, focus and be methodical if I want to find out what’s going on. *Deep breath.* I try to concentrate on my breathing, but can’t feel my lungs. I can’t breathe! My head spins and for a second I feel like I’m going to pass out, but nothing happens.

*Stay calm!* Wherever I am, there’s no immediate danger. There has to be an explanation for all this. I feel encouraged by that thought.

“How did I get here?” I ask the computer voice.

“I don’t understand the question.”

“What is this room?”

“This room is a computer simulation, what is known as virtual reality.”

Of course. Why didn’t I think of that? I know all about virtual worlds. A list of games springs to mind: *Minecraft*, *World of Warcraft*, *League of Legends*, *Team Defense*, *Assassin’s Creed*. I’ve probably played them often, even though I don’t remember much about them.

Maybe someone has put a VR headset on me and fed me drugs so that I forget who and where I am. But who would do that? And why?

I touch my face but can’t feel anything. I turn my head and see a different section of the room. I walk up and down, even jump on the spot, without creating any disturbances or time lags. And I don’t see any pixels. If I am wearing a VR headset, it must be really high spec.

“Is this a computer game?”

“A computer game is a software program that enables one or more users to play a game interactively according to set rules. Would you like more information?”

I wonder whose idea it was to call this dumb program “advanced.” “Am I in a computer game?”

“I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status.”

If this is a game, then my task must be to find a way out of this

room. But how? There don't seem to be any kind of unlocking mechanisms, so my only option is to talk to Alice. Maybe I need to find a code word that opens the door or something.

I try a direct approach. "Tell me the code word."

"I don't understand the command."

Asking questions doesn't seem to get me anywhere. What were the commands Alice understood? "Show me," "open," "close."

I take a punt and say: "Show me elephants!" Surprisingly, Alice actually understands. Three columns and four lines of elephant videos appear on the walls. Most of them seem to come from webcams inside elephant enclosures at zoos. It's easy to spot the pixelated structure and streaks that are typical of a video stream downloading via a low-bandwidth internet connection. I tap one of the pictures with my index finger and it expands to fill most of the wall while the other pictures shrink and move down to the bottom.

There's a location name at the top of the picture—the elephant enclosure is in a Dutch zoo—and there's a time stamp too: 10:15, April 27, 2017. Some of the other cameras show location and time details too, so I can tell the videos are being streamed. I still don't know where I am but at least I know the date. As though that's any help.

Still, I seem to have an internet connection. This sheds a whole new light on the other commands Alice understands.

"Open Google!"

The elephant pictures disappear and the walls turn white. The



wall in front of me now shows a web browser with the search engine's home page. I tap the search field and a cursor blinks. The walls are giant touch screens but there's no virtual keyboard.

"Elephant," I say loudly. The word immediately shows up in the Google search field. I tap the search button and, as expected, a list of search results, pictures, and information appears.

I'm in a simulated room with virtual touch screens that give me access to the internet. What's the point of all this? And how come I know how Google works but don't remember ever having used the search engine?

"Open Google Earth."

The wall shows a satellite picture. The dark strip of a river trails across the gray-green surface from top left to bottom right. In the center of the screen, the river forks, then joins up again, forming an onion-shaped island. The image around the river is made of gray pixels, as though someone has sprayed ash everywhere. I know this place, even without the white writing in the middle of the picture—but I don't know why. Google determines a location using an IP address, then shows the corresponding satellite image. I know this too, though I don't know how. But it really helps narrow down my location.

"Am I in Hamburg?" I ask.

"I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status," Alice replies without emotion.

"Show me Hamburg," I instruct Alice.

The map and search screen disappear and are replaced by

dozens of webcams. They show different areas of the city: the Inner Alster with its fountains, the jetties, the Port of Hamburg, the Elbe Philharmonic, the station, the airport, lots of streets that I don't immediately recognize. Cars whiz across the screen, people walk around purposefully. I so badly want to be in their shoes, being filmed by cameras instead of here in this virtual room watching an image of a world that's out of reach.

Who am I? Where am I? Why am I here? My questions become more urgent by the second.

Maybe one of the camera pictures will trigger a memory. Even though I recognize a lot of the distinctive buildings and places, it feels like I've only ever watched a film about Hamburg without actually having been there myself. My attention is drawn to one of the video streams. There's nothing special to see—a tarmac bike path in a residential street next to a park—but the camera angle is unusual: the image moves down the street, more or less at eye level, turning sometimes left, sometimes right, as though filmed by a drunk cameraman whizzing past trees, pedestrians, and parked cars. In the top right-hand corner of the video there's a logo for an internet company: Eyestream.

The image suddenly veers downward and I see the tip of a skateboard racing along the cycle path. The camera must be attached to a skateboarder's head.

“Alice, open Eyestream!”

The webcam pictures disappear and a sleek website opens. It shows a number of videos with a similar sort of perspective, except

they're moving a lot more slowly—they must come from cameras being carried by people walking. The streamers' names and locations are shown: Carol in Amsterdam, George in Trondheim, Ralf in Pisa, Maria in Regensburg.

A short description explains how Eyestream “lets the world share your life by livestreaming everything you see.” But only if you want to, of course—and strictly in compliance with data protection regulation. The service already has over three hundred thousand members, but only a little over one thousand cameras are currently active. I was just watching one.

I enter “Hamburg” into the search field and get four more matches. When I click the top one, the site asks me to register. Great. Username? I have no idea what my name is. I enter “Boy in a White Room.” My email address? I can't remember. So I open Google and get myself a new one: boyinawhiteroom@gmail.com.

Once I've completed registration, I pick a stream and it fills the screen. It belongs to Mike, a twenty-one-year-old student who is strolling down Mönckeberg Street toward city hall. I can hear muffled street sounds through his microphone: voices, a busker.

Just as I'm about to click to another stream, I hear loud, harsh voices. Mike turns his head and I see an elderly man wearing shabby clothes sitting in a doorway with his decrepit-looking dog. Two young men wearing leather jackets stand in front of him. I can't make out what they're saying but it's obvious they're swearing and giving the man a hard time.