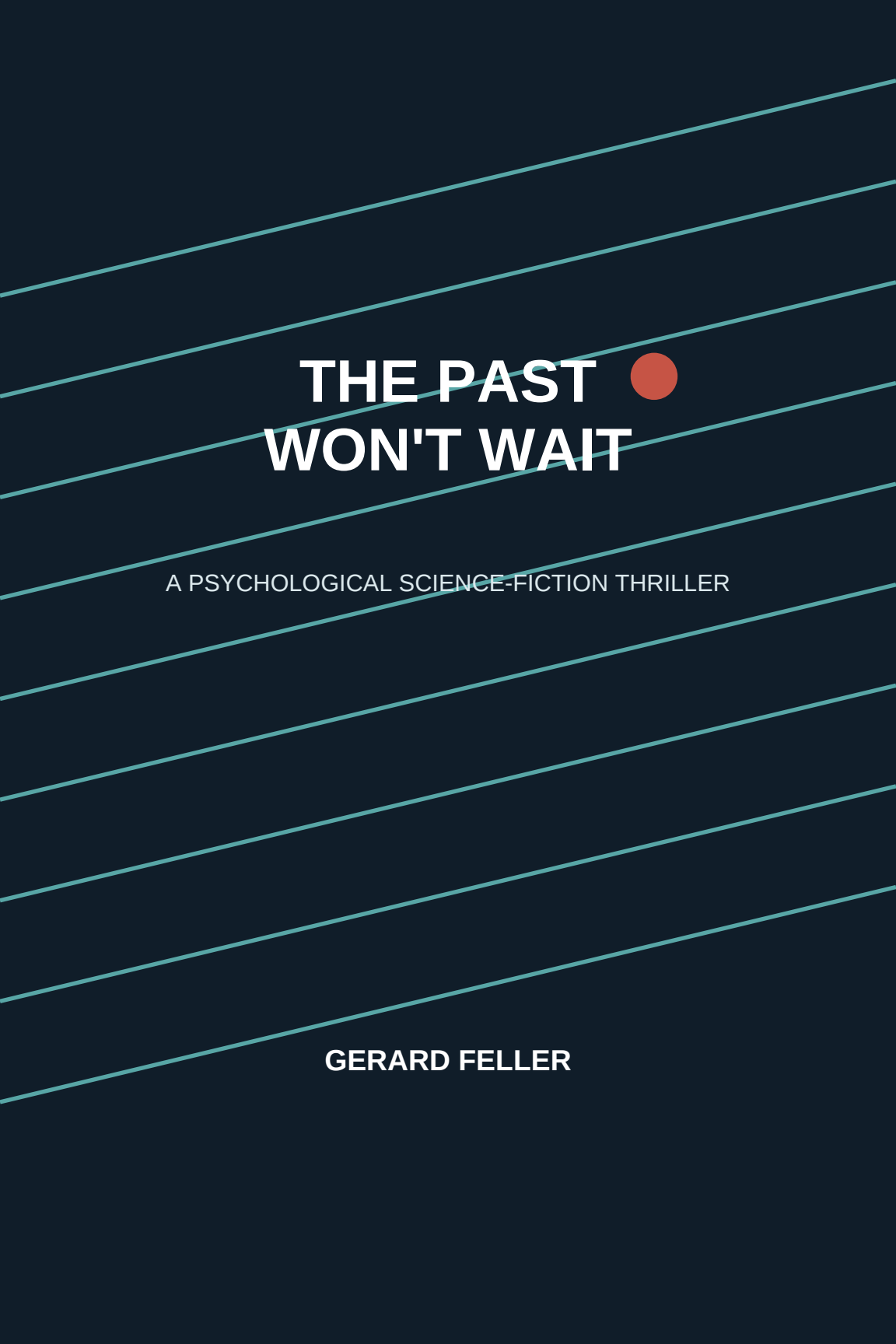


The background of the cover is a dark navy blue. It is decorated with several thin, parallel, diagonal teal lines that run from the top-left towards the bottom-right. A single, solid red circle is positioned to the right of the word 'PAST' in the title.

THE PAST ● WON'T WAIT

A PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE-FICTION THRILLER

GERARD FELLER

THE PAST WON'T WAIT

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PROLOGUE

Every morning, on September 14, 2038, Lucas woke up to the sound of rain against the attic window. In the kitchen, his mother dropped a spoon in the sink. Downstairs, his father slammed the front door. Then came the sound that Lucas had never forgotten: the quick rustle of a girl putting on her jacket.

His sister Mirjam looked over her shoulder. She was seventeen and wearing the red scarf that their mother had knitted for her. Her face was impatient, but her eyes laughed. "Then you'd better hurry." Lucas ran down the stairs, knowing what would happen if he let her go.

At 8:17 am Mirjam would reach the crossroads at the old sugar factory on her bike. A van would run through red. At 08:18 am her body would hit the wet asphalt. This time he could prevent it. Lucas grabbed her arm. "You can't go." Mirjam pulled away. "Don't be ridiculous." "The bridge is slippery. A van is coming." Her face changed. Not out of fear, but out of recognition. "You've been here before", she said. Lucas stiffened. Mirjam put her hand to his cheek. "How many times have you tried to save me?" Before he could answer, a crack appeared behind her in the kitchen wall.

The table, the rain, and Mirjam's face fell apart in digital fragments, and a woman's voice sounded through the kitchen. "Lucas, look at me." He closed his eyes. "It's September 14th." "No. Lucas, find my face." He opened his eyes, and the kitchen was gone. Before him sat a woman of about fifty, and she had silver-grey hair and was wearing a dark green sweater.

Behind her was a treatment room with soundproof walls. "Who are you?" asked Lucas. "I'm Dr. Sara van Loon. Your psychotherapist". "Where is Mirjam?" "Lucas, what year is it?" he looked at the date on the wall monitor: September 14, 2040.

"That's not true". "You had a brain injury two years ago". "Today".
"Two years ago". "The numbers meant nothing. He could read them,
but he didn't live in them. The year 2040 was an address where nobody
was at home. "Mirjam needs me", he said.

"Mirjam died nine years ago." On the other side of the mirror glass
someone started crying, Lucas didn't hear it. He was already in the
kitchen.

1. A MAN WITHOUT A PRESENT

The injury was not in one place. A metal beam had hit sleep during the collapse of the City Archives Lucas' right sleep. Small bleeding had damaged connections between the hippocampus, the medial prefrontal cortex, the thalamus and areas that place events in time and context. Lucas could still speak. He recognized faces.

He knew how to make coffee and open a door, and he could tell in detail what he had experienced as a child, but new experiences were no longer incorporated into an ongoing present, and doctors called it a serious anterograde context disorder with temporal disintegration, and sometimes Lucas kept loose facts, but not that he had learned them.

Every room felt like a place from its past, every new person got the face or role of someone he already knew, and his brain was a library where no new books could be placed after the accident. There was something strange. Lucas didn't just remember the past. He could walk around in it.

Before his accident, he had worked as chief developer on PALIMPSEST, a virtual heritage system. Historical buildings were reconstructed from photographs, construction drawings, sound archives, police files and personal recordings. With a brain-computer interface, PALIMPSEST could complement autobiographical memories.

The computer didn't build an exact copy of the past, but it probably built a three-dimensional model, and after the accident, researchers used the system to communicate with Lucas, and it was the only environment where he felt safe.

When Lucas behaved differently in a reconstruction, sometimes the data of the present changed, not just his feelings, the reality itself, the first time it was a watch, and in a memory Lucas saw his father sitting

at the kitchen table, his father took off the watch before he hit Lucas.

During a session Lucas took it off the table and hid it under a loose floorboard. The next morning his wife Elise found the watch during a renovation of their old house, under a floor that had been replaced twenty years earlier. The second time Lucas warned a colleague in 2031 about a faulty elevator cable.

Now, it turns out that this colleague has never had a spinal cord injury, and the researchers started by thinking about incorrect records, then changed photos, and witnesses remembered new events, scars disappeared, and only the computers at PALIMPSEST kept records of both versions, and Lucas didn't know anything about these discoveries.

Every time someone told him, he forgot again, but other people didn't.

2. TRADING IN MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

For six months, there was a line outside the clinic every morning, a mother who wanted to prevent her son from saying to her in a coma that he should never have been born, a divorced man who wanted to go back to the moment he cheated on his wife, a minister who wanted to have one recorded phone call disappear.

A former military officer wanted to warn a village before his unit took a shot at it, some wanted reconciliation, others wanted acquittal, others wanted a past where their victims no longer existed. The government took over PALIMPSEST and founded the Bureau for Historical Correction.

Officially, Lucas was only allowed to change small relationship events -- no wars, no elections, no births, no deaths -- but no one knew what was small -- an apology could save a marriage, that marriage could produce a child -- that child could develop a drug thirty years later, or commit murder.

Every change spread like a crack through glass. Sara resisted the program. 'Lucas is not an instrument,' she said during a hearing. 'He is a patient without reliable permission. Moreover, you confuse reconstruction with history.' Director Jonas Vermeer looked at her cool.

"The results are measurable." "The consequences are not." "Ask that to the man who can walk again." "And to the woman who suddenly remembers a marriage that did not exist yesterday?" That woman was Elise. In the original timeline they had been married for twelve years. After a correction Elise remembered that Lucas had left her before their marriage.

Legal documents confirmed the divorce, but the enclosed database contained thousands of photos of them together. Elise had two lives.

One she still loved him, the other she had learned to live without him.
"We can take people's greatest regrets", Jonas said.

'Or their responsibility.' 'What difference does it make if the damage never happened?' Sarah looked at Lucas, who was talking to an invisible Mirjam. 'The difference is who we become when no one else has to live with the consequences of their choices.'

3. THE FIRST NEW DAY

Sara refused to send Lucas back alone any longer, and she designed a treatment based on neuroplastic experiences, and damaged brain networks could not be easily repaired, but other connections could partially take over functions, and for that, Lucas' brain had to repeatedly learn the difference between then and now.

Each session started with five anchors: what you see, what you feel under your feet, who's sitting in front of you, where are you, and when are we? Lucas read the map that he wrote each session himself: I'm Lucas the White. I'm 42 years old. It's 2040. My brain sometimes puts new experiences in the past.

After that, Sara activated the Context Room, which combined visual reconstruction with physical and social signals, and when Lucas slipped back to a memory, he had to experience the event from different perspectives: from himself, from the other, from a witness, and ultimately from the "merciful" perspective.

"Do you mean God?" asked Lucas. "I cannot program God's perspective." "Why does the system call it that?" "Because you put that word in the original software. That's why we use the function differently. Don't pretend you're God.

Well, explore what changes when you try to look with truth, justice, and love at the same time". On the monitor, areas of Lucas' brain lit up, his amygdala responded strongly to threats, the hippocampus produced details, but placed them poorly in time.

The medial prefrontal cortex barely managed to link in autobiographical information to the actual self, yet after weeks of exercising a thin new path of activity from the right orbitofrontal areas to the anterior cingulate cortex appeared. 'Neuroplasticity,' Sara said. 'Your brain is looking for a diversion.' Lucas looked at the scan.

'How long have we been doing this?' 'Seven months.' 'This is my first session.' 'It feels like this to you.' 'Then you've been talking to a wall for seven months.' 'No,' she said. 'A wall doesn't change.'

4. THE MAN IN THE GREY SUIT

During the next session, Lucas returned to the morning of Mirjam's death. He stood again in the kitchen. Mirjam put on her red scarf. "You can't go", he said. "Why not?" "Because you're dying". "You say that every time". In the doorway was a man in a gray coat. Lucas had never seen him before.

"Who are you?" "Who are you?" "Who are you?" "You don't belong here." "That goes for you." Mirjam walked out. Lucas wanted to follow her, but the man blocked the door." "If you save her, another one dies. The van is falling apart. He drives up the sidewalk.

A mother and her baby". Footage shot through Lucas: a stroller under a wheel, a woman screaming, and Mirjam standing unharmed against a lantern. "It didn't happen". "No more". Lucas ran out. At the crossroads he saw the vans approaching.

[illegible]

Finally, there was someone he could blame. "Stop simulation!" cried Sara. The street disappeared. Lucas was sitting with bleeding bones in the treatment room. A nurse was lying on the floor in front of him. He hadn't hit a virtual man. He had accidentally attacked a real employee.

"There was no man in the simulation", Lucas looked at the mirror, and for a moment he saw the man again, on the other side, smiling.

5. WHAT THE CONSCIENCE PRESERVES

After the violence, Lucas refused to speak, his conscience was the only function that didn't seem to take time, he didn't remember hitting the nurse, yet his body crumbled as soon as the man entered the room, his skin felt guilt for which his consciousness had no event, and Sara showed him the camera footage.

'It's not me,' he said. 'It's your body.' 'The man in the gray jacket forced me.' 'A damaged brain may reduce your responsibility. It didn't automatically knock her out.' 'What do you want me to do?

Repent of something that never happened to me?' 'I want you to realize what you're doing to him now.' 'So I'm a bad person.' 'I didn't say that.' 'My conscience says it.' 'A conscience can sue, twist or get punched. It's not an infallible recording of God's voice.' Sara removed the god's perspective function from the program.

No all-seeing camera angle. No algorithm that calculated the morally best scenario. 'What's left?' asked Lucas. 'People with limited perspective.' The nurse's name was Amir. He told what he had experienced: the fear, the pain and the fear that Lucas no longer saw him as a human being.

"Listen first", said Sara. Lucas felt his brain searching for a known moment in which he himself had been a victim. It found his father. The kitchen. The fist. The shame. "Stay here", said Sara. He pressed his feet against the rubber floor. 2040. Amir. Not his father.

Then Lucas saw the fear in Amir's eyes without immediately changing it into his own past. "I hurt you", he said. "Yes". "I don't remember". "I know". "I'm sorry". Amir nodded, but he didn't immediately forgive him. That was important. The past didn't change.

6. THE MARKET FOR THE PAST

The Bureau began secret corrections without Sara's permission, allowed wealthy clients to link to Lucas' memories, a changed conversation led to another business decision, a compromising photo never taken, the past turned into a luxury product, a woman prevented her husband from meeting his first lover.

A businessman sent a child witness to another school. A politician prevented the birth of a journalist by disrupting the first meeting of his parents. No one was killed. Someone simply never became someone. Sara discovered it through a photo. On her desk was a recording of her son Daniel.

In her memory, he was drowned at the age of 12. But in the photo, there was a grown man standing next to her. She found his number. A man recorded it. "Mom?" His voice was older than she knew, but the way he uttered the word was the same.

'Stop treating Lucas,' he said. 'Leave him in the past. That's where he works.' 'You used Daniel.' 'I gave him back. You now understand what we can offer others.' 'And who was to die in his place?' Jonas muttered. 'His name.' 'Milan the Count.' Sara knew that name. Amir had a son. Until a week ago.

Now Amir claimed he never had children.

7. THE THERAPIST

Lucas woke up in Sara's office, and for the first time he recognized the room before he called her something from his past. On the table was a file: SESSION 741 RETURN OF HEDENCONTECT: 18 PERCENT. "Where is Sara?" he asked. An unknown therapist looked at him. "Who?" Lucas walked to the mirror and hit it with a chair.

On the other side was Jonas. Next to him was Sara tied to a treatment chair. "Now you remember", Jonas said. "Interesting". "Let her go". "She sabotaged your treatment. You have one choice: save your sister. Then I'll let Sara go". Jonas activated PALIMPSEST. The room turned into a church from Lucas' childhood.

Mirjam was sitting in front with her red scarf. "You can save me", she said. "You just have to ride with me first". Lucas hugged her. The touch felt real. "Look at me", Mirjam whispered. Her face changed for a moment. A look that didn't belong to her. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Your sister". "What did you say the morning before you died?" "You know that yourself". The church bells flicked. Mirjam smiled with the smile of Jonas. "You've never been Mirjam". All the church benches turned to him at once.

On each couch sat another Lucas: a child, a husband, a violent man, a patient, and an old man he had never been. "We are all Lucas", they said.

The man in the grey suit had not been an intruder, but a version of himself from a timeline in which he had saved Mirjam and the mother and baby had died, and through hundreds of corrections, the remains of alternate identities had been left behind in PALIMPSEST, and each correction had formed a new Lucas, some friendly, some violent.

And one of them had learned to pretend to be Sarah, and Lucas looked at the tied woman behind the glass and said, "How do I know she's real?"

8. SEEING WITHOUT PLAYING GOD

The church collapsed. Lucas fell through generations of memories. He saw his father beat him up. Then he saw the scene from his father's perspective: a man who had himself been abused as a child and disguised his fear as authority. He saw it from his mother's perspective: her stubbornness and her decision not to do anything.

He saw it from Mirjam's perspective, a sister who wanted to intervene but was afraid. Then Lucas stood above everyone in the old religious perspective. Under him all behaviors were patterns and causes. No one was completely guilty. No one was completely free. Every act could be explained by another act.

Only consequences. "This is not how God sees", said Lucas. The man in the grey suit appeared. "How then? What does God see there?" Lucas looked at his father's fist raised. "Unfair". "And in you?" He saw the child who would later kick Amir. "The ability to do the same". "And what else does God see?" Lucas saw dismay under his father's anger.

"A man who is responsible, not just his worst deed". The man took off his jacket, and underneath it was Lucas's hospital gown. "And me?" "I see what you did. I don't let you decide who we are". The other Lucas grabbed him by the throat.

"You think you're better because you're letting the consequences exist." "No." "You don't deserve the past." "The past is not mine." Lucas didn't push him away. He held him. The man wrestled, beat and then started crying. One by one the other versions came closer.

Lucas felt their memories: shameful fantasies, revenge, lust, violence, cowardice, and the delight of power. Some scenarios he had only thought of. Others he had actually executed in timelines that no longer existed. His conscience accused him with a thousand voices:

This is you. Then came another thought. Not loud. Not out of the system.

Where are you? No: what have you done? No: which version is real? But the same question with which God had sought the hidden man. "Here", said Lucas. The church disappeared.

9. THE FACE

Lucas opened his eyes. Sara was sitting in front of him. Not behind glass. Not on a screen. "Are you real?" asked Lucas. "Yes". "Prove it". "I can't fully do that". Lucas felt the rubber floor and the chair under his body. "What happened?" "Jonas linked you to an unsecured correction three days ago. Then everything changed.

The Bureau never existed, according to the files, Jonas died seven years ago, but you remember him, Palimpst protected our neural data during the shift, and Amir, he doesn't exist, his son is gone, and we have to go back to save Milan.

And then who dies?' 'That's what we'll find out.' 'That's what Jonah said.' Lucas understood that Sarah was hoping that he would save her son Daniel again. Among all her lessons lived the same hunger for the past. 'You used me,' he said. 'Was it you who programmed the first correction with the watch?' 'Yes.' 'Why this project?' Her face broke.

"Because Daniel was dead". Sarah had used his wound to bring about the death of her son. "How many times have you saved him?" "Sixteen times". "And how many times have you lost him again?" "Fifteen". "Who disappeared before that?" "I don't know anymore". "Don't you want to know that either?" Sarah began to cry. "Look at me", said Lucas. It was her own words.

She looked up. "You were happy when Daniel was alive, but you stopped looking at who had to disappear before that. That's not joy. That's possession". "I know". "No. You know it as a fact. Can you tolerate it as a human being?" "I don't know". "Then we'll stay here".

10. PRACTISING JOY

They took out PALIMPSEST, not for an hour, but for a while, and the first few months were terrible, and Lucas forgot all the conversation, and he got lost, and sometimes he saw Mirjam in a nurse, and a date card wasn't enough, so they didn't build a new virtual world, but a small community, and Amir came back.

Elise visited Lucas every Tuesday. In some timelines she had been his wife, in others she hadn't. She decided not to tell him what marriage was real. 'What are we?' asked Lucas. 'Two people drinking coffee together today.' Sara made every meeting a neuroplastic exercise.

Not just repeating facts, but experiencing relational context, someone came in, mentioned his name, and waited until Lucas found his face, and after tension, they consciously returned to rest, and Lucas did not learn the present as a date, and learned it as a return, and the new connections in his brain slowly grew stronger.

The hippocampus continued to be damaged, but the frontal and parietal networks took over parts of the context function, and his brain linked new events to voice, posture, rhythm, and facial expression.

When Amir came in, he didn't just say, "I am Amir." He also showed, "I'm glad you're here." Even when Lucas forgot his name, his nervous system recognized the safe look. With Sara, he read Bible parts about the face of God. No text should become an artificial memory. No prayer was an order to change the past.

"What does God see when He looks at me?" asked Lucas. "What do you think?" "Everything". "And what else?" "Not just what I was. Who I am now as He looks at me". One afternoon, he laughed during a conversation. "What?" asked Sarah. "You have two different shoes on". She looked down. One black and one dark blue shoe. Lucas laughed louder.

Amir came to watch and started laughing too, and Elise took a picture, and the scanner recorded simultaneous activity in Lucas' right prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulum, hippocampal rest areas, and social recognition networks, but no one was looking at the scan.

For the first time in two years, Lucas was happy about something that existed only in the present.

11. THE FINAL CORRECTION

A year later, PALIMPSEST was reactivated. The system started itself. On all screens the kitchen appeared on September 14, 2038. Mirjam stood at the door with her red scarf. HISTORIC CONSOLIDATION ABOUT 10:00 MINUTES. A late version of Lucas had a final correction programmed.

When the counter reached zero, Mirjam would be saved and all later timelines would be merged into one history. The consequences were unknown. Sara pulled the network cables off. The counter continued. 'The system is in the implants,' said Amir. Lucas felt the memory coming. The smell of rain. Mirjam's voice.

"Wait for me". He was standing in the clinic and in the past at the same time. Mirjam opened the door. Behind her stood all the people who wanted to change the past: parents, lovers, perpetrators, victims, politicians and children. "Save her", someone said. "Save my marriage. Prevent my crime.

Let my child be born". Their desires flowed through Lucas. Some were loving. Some were shameless. Some were violent. They all felt urgent. The man in the grey suit appeared. "One choice.

After that, no one has to doubt.' 'What kind of history will continue to exist?' 'The history in which most people get what they want.' 'That's not the same as good.' 'Who determines what is good?' 'Not me.' 'Then you choose at random.' 'No. I choose that people don't become gods about each other's past.' The man grabbed the door.

"If you don't do anything, you'll let her die". "I can't make up for her death by taking the lives of others". Mirjam stepped out. Lucas could follow her. He didn't do anything. Not because her life was unimportant, but because it was too important to make her the center of all other lives. "I'm sorry", he said.

"Why?" "Because I've used you so many times not to have to live in the present". "I'm a memory, Lucas". "I know, but you were real, too". "Then let me be someone who lived, not a door that keeps you disappearing".

Not to stop him, but to let him know where he was. 'Lucas,' said Elise. 'Here,' he answered. 'Lucas,' said Amir. 'Here.' 'Lucas,' said Sarah. 'The counter reached zero. 'Here.' All the screens turned white.

EPILOGUE

Three months later, Lucas was sitting in the clinic's garden, and he didn't remember everything, and some days he lost hours, and sometimes he stood at a door and didn't know why he opened it, but now he had something that had been impossible for two years, yesterday, not just the word.

A real, yet fragile experience of something that happened after his accident and before today. Yesterday Amir had taught him chess. Lucas didn't know who had won, but he remembered that they had laughed. Sara sat next to him. She wore two different shoes again. "Do you do that on purpose?" he asked.

"Maybe." "How is Daniel?" After the last consolidation, her son had died again. This time she had not changed history. "I miss him." "Are you sorry you didn't save him?" "Every day." "And are you glad that he existed?" Sara nodded. The two feelings turned out to be able to live side by side. Elise came along in the distance.

As soon as Lucas saw her, his attitude changed, and the scanner recorded increased synchronization between recognition, emotion and context networks, but more importantly, his face was clear, and Elise saw it, and her face answered. "Who is that?" asked Sara. Lucas looked for the name. He didn't find her immediately.

"I don't know her name", he said. "But I know I'm glad she's coming". Elise sat down in front of him. "I'm Elise". "Elise", he repeated. She grabbed his hand. Lucas looked at her face and then at Sara and Amir.

None of them could give him a perfect present. No therapy could restore all the damaged connections. No perspective could encompass the whole truth. Yet he experienced something more powerful than a perfect memory. He was seen. Not by a camera above the stage. Not by

an algorithm that calculated good and evil.

He was seen by people who knew his name, didn't know his responsibility, and yet were happy when he appeared, and that's when Lucas began to understand something about God's face.

Not a glance that observed everything from a distance, but a presence that searched for him in truth and exclaimed with joy, "Where are you?" Lucas clasped Elise's hand. "Here", he said.