

THE MADNESS



OF
A

CLOUD

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Blue Velvet Review

The Madness of a Cloud
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The Legible Text

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Abstract: Cloud Strife spends a few days getting blackout drunk in 7th Heaven, vigorously discussing what he views as some of the central underpinnings of modern day Simulation Theory.

The Nice Man with his Wife's Last Name's Form of Annihilation
|| Tifa's Dream || Dinner & Drinks || Institutional Norms || The
Memory of Capitalism || Yellow Flower Gossip || New Co-Op
Cashier False Doppelganger Arguments

The Nice Man with his Wife's Last Name's
Form of Annihilation

Echoes: 1,859
Syllables: 2,546
Self-Similarity: .730

Cloud was sitting at Seventh Heaven
drinking a Fernet on the rocks
engaging in light conversation
with a cocksucker he'd never even met
about a Queen's Blood play-in game
that he'd—this particular cocksucker—
requested to be put on the TV at the bar.

Well, actually Cloud corrected,
for the record,
that he'd actually been reading
a few pages of Timaeus
prior to all this,
making a few disparate notes,
finding himself puzzled at
the sensory information
that continued to be relayed into his brain.

Cloud basically alleged he was flummoxed
about the sensory information that became,
in some way, relayed
to what he guessed was his brain?—
how any of that was corroborated,
but more so Cloud contemplated
the static nature of said images—
that's what he was specifically contemplating
when a guy with a round-ass face
leaned onto the bar,
seeking to close his tab,
obviously excited to tell the bartender
that he may need to show her his ID,
just because he took his wife's last name
and hadn't had a chance to change
his license yet?

The patron with the round-ass face
noted how nice the bartender was (Tifa!),
but what was her name again?
He could definitely display his ID
if she really needed,
just because, again,
his last name was different now—
taking his wife's name and all!

Of course, Cloud noted,
that it was clear that no one gave a fuck
about the printed name on a credit card in that bar,
and Tifa, for her part,
didn't exactly seem like she was ramping up
to suck this dude off
just because he was a radical feminist.

For Cloud's part he was still, you know,
attempting to get behind the blunt sensations
being smuggled relentlessly
into his so-called conscious existence.

Everything was an image to some extent,
right Aerith?

Touch itself was a fucking sensory image.
It was a quaint Spring evening
where Cloud felt more or less
destined to philosophize,
having started drinking wine
in preparation for a Friday night dinner,
only to have Tifa bail last minute,
because she needed to pick up a bar shift—
leaving him completely free
to continue this wine drinking

in a ritualistic way
that would be conducive
to philosophical ideas.

Yes, Cloud continued to Aerith,
it was basically only via drinking alone,
but in a ritualistic fashion,
that he'd achieved any sort
of philosophical inquiry.

You couldn't just sit at a desk
and "become philosophical",
at least not for Cloud!

Maybe some people could!

But, no, not Cloud.

He'd imagine that there were probably
a litany of possible ways
of becoming philosophical—
like, for instance,
for the round-faced albino chap,
perhaps telling Tifa
that he'd taken his wife's last name,
maybe that could be seen
as possibly ritualistic in a way,
a gateway to some sort of
becoming philosophical.

This was "actually science",
Cloud told her he thought at the bar,
successfully avoiding making any eye contact
with the round-faced man.

Was it necessarily strange at all
that once the Greeks went extinct
philosophy went more or less
completely and utterly downhill
and never looked back in the least,
that the last group to really reach
much of any philosophical success
made a sincere effort to conjoin
getting fucked up with
contemplating intelligible phenomena?—
that these Greeks attempted
to marry inebriation and rigorous dialectic?

That all thought since—
to paraphrase North Whitehead—
had been a minor footnote to Plato or whatever?

The thing was, according to Cloud,
you just couldn't willy nilly
"delve into metaphysics"
completely sober!

But that wasn't to say a person
should necessarily become some
degenerate alcoholic either,
because a degenerate drunk
would in no way make a great meta-physicist either—
that was basically impossible, because,
like Cloud said,
the solo mode of inebriation
should be done ritualistically,
in spurts, at certain times.

You couldn't just be like
hitting the bottle

as soon as you woke from a slumber!—
after said inebriation sessions
you'd require sobriety
to parse through whatever it was
that came to you
via said contemplation, no?

In fact, the actual science
was nothing beyond this parsing through
of inebriation sessions
of rigorous contemplation!

That was it—
what laid behind logic and metaphysics,
in Cloud's mind at least!

But inebriation could be anything really—
Cloud could enter a state of inebriation
in a car alone on a Tuesday AM,
without consuming a damn thing.

Aerith more or less agreed,
adding that on the one hand
a philosophical mind
should be able to analyze,
interpret, extrapolate,
all of that scientific stuff—but,
on the other,
if you fail to place yourself
in a position to receive anything to analyze,
interpret, or extrapolate
then you were basically screwed!

Cloud more or less agreed
but added that—sans this type of

“inspiration,” so to speak—
they’d be stuck sitting
at a table just noodling
around nonsensically,
vacillating back and forth
between two types of nothingness,
and then just probably knocking off
someone else’s work by accident.

But none of this was new!

It wasn’t like Cloud was breaking news
in any way.

At this point Aerith asked—you know,
was this albino douche bag,
he was an element of this analysis?

No, not really—according to Cloud—
maybe the guy was trying a tad too hard?—
to present himself
as a specific archetype
to the general public,
as a guy who decided
to spit in the face
of his own chromosome count,
which was something Cloud
"personally endorsed!"

Granted Cloud probably
wouldn’t do it by taking his wife’s last name,
because Cloud personally
was obviously more prone
to a type of isolated
and overly dramatic

self-annihilation
than a subservient
and disingenuously muted
feminist annihilation,
but he wasn't ipso facto
opposed to either!

Aerith agreed
one hundred percent!

But Cloud still would go
a little further,
noting that in the intelligible sphere,
as someone like,
say, Proclus would note,
that so-called forms
were somehow able
to participate in one another
without mixing,
whereas within the sensible realm
they participated in things
and subsequently got dirty.

But Cloud thought that it was worth
going one step further—
since they were discussing
annihilation and stuff anyway,
that the perceived mixing
between forms that took place
in the sensible arena
was itself just a projection
of mixture but not actual mixture.

The intelligible sphere,
being purely emanated,

participated within itself
without mixing itself,
while in the sensible sphere
it didn't seem like that was possible,
that by participating
within sensible things
they became essentially mixed
with them,
assuming they were categorically sensible.

Essentially nature was tainted,
which of course
Cloud and Aerith knew all too well!

Way too well!

Hence their shared acquiescence
toward occasional annihilation!

But even this sensible filth,
so to speak,
Cloud thought,
this perceived mixing up
in the participation of sensible things,
wasn't it also a projection?—
an emanation,
just as the participation
of the intelligible sphere
was also an emanation
of the primary unity of all things?

Which, yeah, brought Cloud back
to that albino round-faced fuck
at the bar,
taking his wife's last name—

because ultimately
the albino's vantage point
wasn't remarkably divergent
from Cloud's or Aerith's,
Cloud thought.

This albino was promoting
a certain type of annihilation
of their cultural-sensible realm,
thinking that the patriarchal lineage
of their society was basically
something objectionable,
something essentially tainted,
that should be annihilated
in the service of something more pure.

Okay, well, Cloud thought
that made a modicum of sense!

Maybe taking his wife's last name
was in a sense a greater form
of purity than locking a woman
in a kitchen and expecting
a blowjob every other evening,
Cloud thought.

Just as Proclus and Socrates
sensed that the intelligible sphere
participated with itself
yet not in a way
where it mixed with itself,
that this was distinct
from our further descended,
sensible sphere
where things participated with

one another but got mixed up
in the process—well,
maybe this albino man
was noting that the patriarchy
was a participatory mixing
that left unseemly cum stains—
"for lack of a better phrase!"—
on human experience.

Patriarchy, in the albino man's mind,
should be annihilated
because of this sensible mixing up,
this putrid tainting
of what would be better off pure.

And taking your nice wife's name
was a proper mode
of annihilation in response.

Aerith remarked that she knew
Cloud would inevitably bring
the discourse back to this poor chap
closing his tab,
but, just to be clear,
what Cloud was saying was that
this mixing that occurred
in the sensible realm was itself
just a separate projection—
just a lesser mode of projecting!

So while the material world
may have disgusted them,
perhaps moving the two toward
some sort of all-encompassing
conceptual annihilation,

and as much as the patriarchy
might have seemed putrid
to the albino husband at the bar
who looked to annihilate himself
by taking his nice wife's last name,
it could be wise to consider
that these disgusting aggregates
were themselves simply derivative projections,
that they weren't actual mixtures,
that they were just derivative emanations
as opposed to tattoos
of what they thought they despised.

Aerith was aware—
she wasn't distressed about it,
but she knew this poor albino guy
would in time
take the brunt of it from Cloud.
Cloud questioned whether he didn't deserve it?

Plus like they'd already implied—
they must to proceed
from the immanent
to the transcendent, no?

Tifa's Dream

Echoes: 2,174
Syllables: 3,037
Self-Similarity: .716

Cloud found it a tad befuddling,
just because
Tifa said she'd had an odd dream
about him the previous night,
and he'd replied bluntly
that he "didn't usually have dreams
about people he knew",
somehow completely purging the fact
from his mind that,
just that night,
he'd had a vivid dream
involving one of his first girlfriends
and her current
(to the best of Cloud's knowledge) spouse.

How could that have possibly
slipped his memory,
given the vivacity of the dream itself?

Barrett didn't have a clue either, really.

His ex and her husband
were living with Cloud
and his fictional wife
in a modest condo
they'd been leasing
in Upper Midgar,
yet he told Tifa he "never dreamt"
about people he knew,
yet perhaps the most befuddling aspect
of it was that when he'd said that
to her he actually believed it!

Cloud's ex-girlfriend
and his fictional wife

had become somewhat friendly
in the dream, in the condo,
and the whole ordeal—in Cloud's dream—
struck him as totally fine initially.

His fictional wife was obscured,
a pure mirage,
while his ex was an image
of how he'd known her in the past,
not how she was now
(not that he knew how she was now!),
but eventually Cloud began to come
to the realization that this was his
ex-romantic interest,
and that his current wife
and ex-girlfriend becoming friends
was an absolutely
"cataclysmic development"
for him socially,
that it was probably
the worst thing that could possibly
happen to his marriage.

He wondered what the husband
of his ex was thinking—
Cloud was wondering
how it was exactly
that he got roped into this whole thing
as he was exiting
this apartment into
an Upper Midgar that, of course,
wasn't exactly Upper Midgar at all!—
yet only hours later when
Tifa told Cloud she'd had a dream
with him in it that night

he claimed to never dream
about people he knew.

Odd! Barrett noted that he just did, though,
right? That his statement to Tifa
was false, no?

Um, yeah, that's exactly
what Cloud just said!

Cloud reiterated that it was
"literally that night"
that he'd had the dream,
further emphasizing the absurdity
of his statement to Tifa.

Maybe, Cloud thought,
it was closer to a coincidence
than an acute misremembering
or forgetting? Was that possible?

Memory was elliptical sometimes.

But in any case,
he told Barrett he'd had another
dream recently—if Barrett was
by any chance interested
in listening to more
"bullshit about his dream states?"—
where Cloud had discovered a glowing,
fluorescent insect
in one of the drawers
on a screened-in patio
that didn't exist in so-called "real life",
and Cloud tossed the fucking thing

outside onto the grass,
kind of disgusted by it to be honest,
only to discover
that same insect
just a few moments later—
but now appearing in a humanoid form,
standing outside the screened-in patio,
hoping to be let in.

Now, in the dream
there was a little get-together
on this patio,
so Cloud was a little wary
of letting this being—
who was female, to be clear—
into the party, but curiously
everyone else at the pow-wow
seemed totally incapable
of perceiving her, even after
Cloud allowed her in?

Yes, Cloud allowed her in
and the form of communication
between himself and the entity
was simply a series of
"vague feelings",
perhaps, he thought,
this was some kind of reminder
that you couldn't just, you know,
create things—
that refreshing syntheses
are the best we could do?

With that said,
they started copulating on the patio.

Barrett wanted to clarify
that it was the butterfly woman
that Cloud was fucking?

Or whatever she was?

Well, Cloud noted, only
when she became a human being,
of some sort,
that that was when
the copulation occurred, obviously!

But, with that said,
it was actually (kind of?)
intriguing to Barrett, to be honest?

But, more importantly,
Cloud really wanted to know
how Seventh Heaven
was last night,
because Barrett stopped by there, didn't he?

How was it?

Well. Let's see.

Barrett definitely
felt the purity of the booze expand
within his chest upon his first sip,
and while the bartender
(obviously not Tifa,
but he didn't catch her name)
was slightly more affable
than when he went there with Cloud,

but she didn't actually ask
what fruit he wanted in the drink.

Sitting alone at Seventh Heaven
Barrett took note of himself
tossing the single orange slice
onto his thin, now immediately moist
napkin and manually extracting
the single seed
that had been expelled
from the orange into the liquor
from the glass,
and in doing so,
he noted
that all that he'd accounted for at the bar—
the affability, the fruit, the seed—
that extracting those ideas
out of the air was basically the same
as the "coordinate-tracking"
reported by remote viewers.

He glanced back at the bar
and took brief note of the bartender
chugging a shot of booze
with a customer
and was violently
smacked in the face
with an acute memory
of ripping similar shots
with a specific bartender
from his past,
which was basically
just another set of coordinates,
but these particular coordinates
returned to him,

he didn't pluck them
out of the air.

He didn't pluck these ripping shots
with a bartender coordinates
from a rapid rush of information—
no, said coordinates returned to him
as he sat in solitude
at the bar totally involuntarily,
violently smacking Barret
in the fucking face
and somewhat rudely
collapsing time itself in the process,
right as Barrett sat at that tiny table
alone, innocently sipping his drink
in Seventh Heaven.

Barrett then went on to tell Cloud how,
before the bar,
he'd seen a bunch of people
with Mako poisoning
that he hadn't seen in months,
and Cloud noted
that's how they knew Spring
was approaching, right?!

Yet, on that note,
it was kind of funny because Cloud
was actually thinking to himself
the other day—
what was the
"exact definition of sobriety"
anyway—like how could they actually
"distinguish sobriety from intoxication?"

Barrett perked up a bit.
Cloud made it clear that, no,
he wasn't necessarily
like talking about smoking crack,
or exposing yourself
to high intensity mako shards
for decades on end,
but maybe just drinking white wine
or something?

Because Cloud was crossing
the Washington Street bridge
contemplating a particular vision
of indivisible Oneness
the other night,
as Barrett knew too well
that Cloud was apt to do
from time to time,
and believe it or not
he was actually discovering
a decent amount of enjoyment
in the material world at the time!—
drinking a mini water bottle
filled with Mezcal,
but also attempting to gauge
whether he'd have the time to grab
just one more beer before
Tifa was supposed to be at his apartment.

Cloud was contemplating
the nature of an indivisible Oneness,
but he was also comforted
by the material realm
while coldly calculating
his odds of being able

to chug another beer
while still making it back
to his apartment before
Tifa was supposed to arrive.

And as Cloud was contemplating
this nature of an indivisible Oneness,
crossing a Washington Street bridge,
drinking Mezcal from a mini water bottle
Cloud remarked to Barrett
how he'd started to question
this very definition of sobriety.

But it was here Barrett began to question—
well—what did Cloud actually mean by that?

Well, what Cloud was trying to get at,
Barrett, was that sobriety itself
was supposed to be a baseline of sorts, no?

Of course it was!

Yet how could
they measure this baseline
exactly?—was there a
measurement at all?—
was sobriety to be defined
by a lack of passion,
or a vague sense of the “even-keeled”?

But the problem was,
in Cloud's mind at least,
that there was no universal
emotional baseline
with which to define sobriety.

Some people—he meant,
even Cloud himself
could be totally unhinged
emotionally on occasion
while quote-unquote
“completely sober”!

Furthermore, even if they—
Barrett and Cloud—could define
some baseline emotional status
as axiomatic,
then they would still have to combat
philosophically with external substances
that weren't considered
intoxicants
that would obviously shift
this emotional baseline.

What did Cloud mean?

Well, like, a lack of food
could alter mood.

The same could be said
of caffeine!

Consuming dirt
would probably shift someone's
emotional state.

Historically, according to Cloud,
people ate fucking plants
with small doses of
psychedelics embedded within them
and probably thought

very little about
"intoxication" proper!"

People used to fucking sanitize water
with alcohol!

Smoking tobacco altered mood.

Basically, Barrett,
"anything we ingest
alters our latent state
of existence and therefore
changes us in some form
or another, which in most all cases
probably filters into our mood."

Cloud noted,
for him personally,
a shift in his diet could do wonders
for his intellectual disposition—
so then what was sobriety?

It seemed impossible to even think
about sobriety as a thing at all!

Well, Barrett hadn't exactly
considered it like that
and wasn't sure if he would.

But Cloud thought that maybe
they'd taken a false baseline
of sobriety conceptually, no?

After all, what technically
was an external substance?

Could they dig even further
and consider the definition
of an external substance?

A conversation could certainly
alter a person's temperament
exponentially as well!—
but did that technically
count as an exogenous substance?

Did words not carry weight?

A vociferous thought
or even a fleeting memory—
especially in Cloud's case!—
could often toss a person completely
off-kilter, yet they still
for some incomprehensible reason
clung to an idea
of an objective sobriety,
and then they subsequently
targeted select substances
as intoxicating,
while deeming so-called
"other" substances—
which also altered temperaments—
as totally fine!

Well,
this was what Cloud was thinking at least,
as he walked over the Washington Street
bridge—that if people didn't
view consuming fresh vegetables
as something fundamentally

mind altering,
then it was possible,
in Cloud's mind,
that they just experienced
the world in vastly different ways,
and Barrett for his part
found this to be
intriguing yet unconvincing,
but Cloud insisted
that there simply
was no true and extended stability
of our mental states—
even if they were hypothetically
deprived of external tinkering,
because even thought itself
was fundamentally external
to some extent, was it not?

And people on average
were constantly accosted
by specific thoughts,
were they not?

Thought almost never ceased
accosting these people,
which were all people?

And even if they confined themselves
to commonly agreed upon
material substances,
then there was still no consistent way
to calculate the degree
of alteration to a mental state
across people of different walks
of life, period.

Barrett might not experience
the same mental shift
after the consumption
of a fresh stick of celery
that Cloud would,
even if the celery itself
remained entirely static.

Walking across the
Washington Street bridge,
Cloud drank from a tiny water bottle
filled with Mezcal
and didn't feel intoxicated
in any way, shape, or form—
any more than had he been
drinking a cup of coffee,
or eating a delicious snack,
or receiving a specific thought.
In his mind at the time
there was no true division
between intoxication and sobriety,
and this was Cloud's final conclusion—
regardless of whether or not
Barrett agreed—as he
somewhat anxiously sent
Tifa a text message
letting her know he was
"taking a walk", just in case
she arrived at his apartment
before he finished
slugging down one last beer
at the bar that he was walking to.

Dinner & Drinks

Echoes: 1,403
Syllables: 1,994
Self-Similarity: .704

“Well, no,” were the two words
Cloud began with as he explained
that his point was that
there was a significant distinction
between the two,
meaning dinner and drinks!—
that if you make it out like
it’s “just drinks”
and then last minute
it becomes dinner?—
then yeah Cloud’s gonna be
a little fucking pissed off!

Especially if he didn’t know
the fucking people, you know Aerith?

How did that make
any sense?

He found it a bit absurd,
frankly.

Sure,
he’d go tie one or two on
with a total stranger, that was fine,
but to sit down and actually
engage in a dinner?—
that was an entirely distinct level
of socializing,
and it was one that, frankly,
Cloud didn’t particularly care for.

And he wasn’t ashamed to admit it!—
that, frankly, he felt this Philistine notion
of just “going out to dinner”

with any and every acquaintance,
that if you didn't acquiesce to that
standard then you would be deemed, what?—
anti-social?

Well color Cloud anti-social then!

But Aerith noted that while, sure,
to be fair, it was a different level
of socialization,
if he truly didn't know the people,
but, you know,
if it was her personally?

Supposing it was Aerith,
then she'd hope that it wouldn't be
that big of a deal to Cloud?

To just go out to dinner?

Was she kidding him?!

Oh, of course not, Aerith! With her?

You fucking kidding?

Cloud was always down
to grab a nosh with someone like her,
no, it was just that the
hypothetical notion
of eating supper
with a complete stranger
("a more or less complete stranger")—
what were they discussing?

Cloud and the hypothetical stranger?

Did he have to come prepared
with a portfolio of talking points?—

Cloud couldn't imagine that
they'd be super intrigued
with anything he had to say,
or that they'd end up
on the precipice of any revelation
that he'd conclude to be
particularly enlightening either.

Cloud was simply
going by empirical evidence really.

That was all—he wasn't, like,
trying to be a dick or anything!

Just that, empirically speaking,
it seemed unlikely
they'd have a lot to converse about,
Cloud and this hypothetical stranger.

But Aerith added that,
to be fair, wasn't Cloud
the one who was always railing
against so-called sensory data?

Yet, in this case,
he was all bent out of shape
about this impromptu dinner
because, in his own words,
because of empirical data?

Of past experience,
which was sensory data?

Memories, right?

Which, wouldn't Cloud agree,
was some of the most
unreliable data available no?

Of course he did! Aerith,
even fucking quantum physics
was still fundamentally
sense-forward, in the sense
that they were beginning with
sense perception—
this was what contemporary
so-called science
had achieved of course!

Placing sense perception
as an apex predator
until finally, with the discovery
of quantum physics,
it'd reduced the observable world
to a degree that even linear
sense-perception no longer
made any fucking sense
in the upper worlds!

That was what they'd done,
and quite smugly at times too!—
but wasn't that what Cloud was doing
with this impending dinner?

Aerith queried him on this point.

Well, Cloud supposed that, thinking about it again, yeah, he was kind of acting like a quantum physicist a bit, wasn't he?

Well, Aerith was just saying—to the extent that his argument was fundamentally empirical, but it was kind of intuitive in a sense too, his argument, in Cloud's opinion.

He agreed with Aerith to the extent that, yes, he was basing his disgust partially on empirical evidence, but he'd also allege that he felt an intuitive disgust with these types of social gatherings as well, and then he, to her point, to be blunt, did tend to dip into the world of empiricism to validate said intuitive disgust.

Although, technically, they should probably be a little cautious to even employ the word empiricism here, because he didn't think empiricism necessarily needed to be restricted to sense-perception necessarily, you know?

Aerith supposed there, yes,
was probably an empiricism
of the intelligible realm as well?

Honestly, to Cloud—
it was certainly possible
that he maybe wasn't even
in the best mind state to even
assess it one way or another.

Aerith took advantage of this
capitulation to say
she'd recently had a dream
about Cloud—
would he mind hearing her out?—
where he was emailing her a
question about
whether a specific action
was defined as
'insider trading', while she was
processing some non-descript
'orders' for something
in a bath tub,
which consisted of,
for some reason,
washing large chocolate cookies
down the drain,
watching them
as they slowly disintegrated
under the hot water, then,
after that, realizing that
the cookies related to
Cloud's question
about insider trading,
she contemplated

if she should have flushed them
all down the drain
before answering the question?

Did she do wrong by Cloud
by washing these cookies
preemptively down the drain?

If Cloud truly wanted
the "order processed", so to speak.
In a sense Aerith
felt an affinity for the cookies,
didn't she, Cloud inferred.

Cloud postulated that she felt like
they were actual beings
as she crumbled them
down the unforgiving drain
with the scorching hot water?

In retrospect, Aerith admitted
that that may have been the case.
Cloud noted that there
was a certain "level of gnosis"
achieved through
contemplating your dreams—
yet was there any to be gleaned
from participating
in double date dinners?

Aerith admitted she'd been clinging
onto the fact of the cookies
being washed down the drain,
and she knew Cloud
had a particular talent

when it came to interpreting dreams.

Well then let's see here,
Cloud contemplated,
the dissolution of a sweet food
in an apparatus usually used
to clean yourself?

But with a transactional,
abutting capitalist
undertone.

And Aerith was doing it,
perhaps unintentionally,
for someone else (Cloud),
without their knowledge,
and not only
without their knowledge
but while ignoring their inquiry—
actually, Cloud guessed
it was his inquiry technically,
about whether it was legal,
as apparently
this was somehow potentially
'insider trading'?

So she was repurposing
an apparatus
for cleansing the body
to destroy large, life-like
pieces of unhealthy food
for Cloud, without his consent,
Cloud meanwhile wondering
if destroying this junk food
in a bath tub

was actually illegal?

Of course in any dream
they also should consider
whether what was represented
was a representation
of another representation,
meaning maybe not
an analogy at all?

But if they proceeded
as if what was represented
in Aerith's dream appeared
as it was intended to appear,
then that would be a decent start.

So, in a sense,
Aerith thought,
that she was cleaning
particular attributes of Cloud
without his permission,
while Cloud was thinking—
perhaps suspecting—
that cleansing himself
in this way may have actually
been a type of insider trading,
it could have been
a very serious crime.

Cloud noted that—Aerith,
cleaning yourself was
"basically a crime
against the state these days".

No surprise there!

Although Cloud liked
a nice cookie every now and then,
he didn't necessarily
find anything
that bad about
eating a few cookies on occasion,
but Cloud also found it
intriguing that Aerith personally
identified with the cookies
as they broke apart
and tumbled down the drain,
that she saw a certain goodness,
a specific being within them,
and subsequently felt
a sadness at the fact
they had to be washed
down the drain of this bath tub.

Even what's fundamentally
bad for you
isn't necessarily bad,
Aerith noted.

But yes, it was sad to see
them fall apart
in a bath tub faucet, huh?

"Even the running shoes
you need to toss into the trash
are eternal," Cloud said.

Institutional Norms

Echoes: 1,332
Syllables: 1,960
Self-Similarity: .680

Cloud was for sure fine
with whatever Tifa wanted
to say to him
("I always want you to speak
your mind!"), but he just wasn't
going to back off
his well-developed
(in his mind) idea
that the institution itself
(as a concept)
was basically restrictive,
that they shouldn't
necessarily care
what's there in the container
("Category theory!"),
but also that
"eros was a gateway".

Tifa just wasn't certain
that engaging in that
in the bar, after hours—
she didn't know, was that
actually appropriate, Cloud?

Even if she wanted to do it!

In the bar?!

Of course,
Cloud totally understood,
but, again—just to reiterate—
"eros was a gateway".

It didn't have to be about,
you know, purely that.

What?—was Tifa now gonna allow
herself to be tyrannically restrained
by the institutional norms of Shinra, et al?

Was that now how
she was gonna live her life?—
by the contemptuous rules of Shinra?

She could "pop that pussy wide open"
whenever she wanted to!—
if she really wanted to,
even if it was just super quickly!

(What exactly was
the temperature in the room?)

There wasn't anything inherently
out of bounds about
any of that, assuming
the correct context, because—
well, no, Cloud wasn't saying
he was in support of
indiscriminate promiscuity—
no, not at all!

It needed to be
rigorous—perhaps "even ritualistic",
and he wasn't even suggesting
Tifa should ipso facto
just quote-unquote
pop that pussy open
to spite the moral norms of Shinra—
it was actually the opposite!

No, Cloud was simply asserting she "shouldn't not make" beautiful love in Seventh Heaven simply because of some societal Shinra code—she shouldn't allow herself, Tifa, to be regulated by an institutional entity whose primary purpose was the employment of the universal restriction.

To Cloud it wasn't in any way, shape, or form Shinra's place to enforce any universal restrictions whatsoever.

Fuck Shinra specifically and fuck the institution in a more generic sense.

Ugh, shut up Cloud!

He was kidding, wasn't he?

Oh yeah!—Cloud admitted it was certainly possible he was exaggerating certain elements of his argument intentionally, in terms of the whole—well, "you know"—no, he wasn't suggesting Tifa should "pop that pussy" in the bar!

No, that was absurd!

Unless she wanted to!

Because if she wanted to Tifa
should know that Cloud took no
offense, like, at all!

They both laughed at themselves,
but didn't he, Cloud,
in the abstract
kind of have a point?

No, just listen for a second,
Cloud said, please Tifa—
he knew she felt an anxiety,
from time to time,
and according to Cloud
it was actually entirely possible
that it was the anxiety
of the younger Socrates.

Namely, it was this anxiety
that Tifa, she felt like
she might have fallen
into a pit of "bottomless nonsense"—
this idea that there could be
an "actual conceptual idea"
behind all phenomena
that had ever occurred,
that every action she took
had some "capital-I" Idea
behind or above it,
that every single sensory perception,
every single moment

of their lives emerged
from some conceptual Idea
behind it, that ideas themselves
became sub-atomic particles
which become multiplied
into an infinite ("seeming!") nonsense.

It was an extreme vertigo
to experience that
without a doubt!—
and Cloud was all too familiar
with that type of madness himself!

In fact, his entire experience in the ether,
so to speak,
was fundamentally in agreement
with this anxiety of young Socrates.

But what Cloud would say in response,
to Tifa, to himself, to Socrates—
what Cloud would say in reply
is exactly what Parmenides said
to this young Socrates himself,
that this anxiety was an anxiety
of youth ("Cloud,
we're basically the exact same age . . ."),
one that would be extinguished
when she'd
"learned not to despise
any of these things".

In short, Tifa shouldn't allow
Shinra mores—or, frankly,
institutional mores from anywhere else
for that matter!—

to interfere with her own processes,
that was all Cloud
was saying really.

If Tifa wanted to do that at
Seventh Heaven, then, sure,
that was fine!

Well, Tifa appreciated the kind words,
even if it was
an awkward subject for Cloud
of all people to be broaching,
given the fact that
it was kind of blatantly obvious
that it was Cloud
that Tifa would probably do that
with in the bar.

Why would they
kid one another about that!

But for Cloud's part—no,
he didn't care one way or the other—
he just thought that
when someone spent
a decent chunk of time in the ether
that it changed their perspective
on that kind of shit—
what conclusion, after all,
should they draw
from the "contemplation
of sensible objects"?

If she wanted to bend over
in her own bar,

it wasn't philosophically
out of bounds to him
in the least.

Like he said,
to some extent
"eros was a gateway"—
they shouldn't view it simply
organically or purely sensibly
even if it was to some extent
existent inextricably
within those realms,
at least from their perspectives
in their bodies or whatever.

A gateway to what though,
Tifa wondered.

To a different type of knowledge
Cloud confirmed.

Wasn't he against sensual empiricism,
Tifa queried—but Cloud quickly
countered that it was
by amplifying
the sensory experience,
by speeding it up
that the sensory experience itself
was transcended—
that was the whole gateway part.

Again, Cloud wasn't
arguing for any of this indiscriminately!—
he was instead making the case
that these amplifications

couldn't be completely cut off!—
that if "other bitter and bilious humors
wander about in the body
and find no exit or escape,
but are pent up within and mingle
their own vapors with the motions
of the soul,
and are blended with them,
they produce
all sorts of diseases".

That just like particles of matter
could be sped up to create
anti-gravitational waves,
the sensory organs could be
similarly sped up in order
to transcend themselves,
basically.

Cloud made
a decent point,
but had he heard back
from Biggs and Wedge—
were they going to make it
to the little thing Tifa
was hosting that Sunday?

She just needed to, you know,
get a definite head count
so she could know
how much food she'd need.

Cloud hadn't heard back,
and frankly he was finding it
a little ridiculous at that point—

because at the very least,
to Cloud,
they could at least RSVP
one way or the other.

Sure, of course,
eros was a gateway—
there couldn't be
a totally universal restriction
oppressing every single member
of a society,
but at the same time
if a person couldn't RSVP
to an event
they basically should start
eating mud out of troughs with pigs,
in Cloud's view at least!

People who refused to RSVP
to events in a timely manner
really had no place in polite society!—
or, for that matter,
in any society!

That was Cloud's perspective
at least! And Tifa agreed!

Frankly, she was getting a little frustrated
with the whole process.

She was, in her mind,
doing a nice thing—
throwing an Avalanche quote-unquote
Sunday Funday, but she just needed to know
a head count ASAP.

It was already Wednesday night!

Cloud noted that they'd sent out the invitations, like, two weeks back, and they hadn't even heard back from half of the potential attendees, which actually moved Cloud to think that maybe Tifa should just cancel the whole damn thing!

But, no, Tifa was right—it was too late to cancel, because then "she'd look like the asshole".

Cloud thought that maybe that was preferable!

Maybe that's what needed to happen!

There needed to be some rules to this shit, right?

The Memory of Capitalism

Echoes: 1,768
Syllables: 2,478
Self-Similarity: .713

Cloud asked Barrett point blank
right in Seventh Heaven:
What "was capitalism" really?—
because that's what he was
actually philosophically opposed
to vis-a-vis Shinra, no?

The mass production of mako
energy—was that not fundamentally
just free market capitalism at its finest?—
and therefore wasn't capitalism
just fundamentally
a singularity of sorts,
just a complete evisceration
of memory,
to the extent that
memory is the context
in which we construct ourselves,
our societies?

Cloud asserted that capitalism
didn't give a fuck about that at all!—
simply because
capitalism couldn't,
because if capitalism didn't
ruthlessly pursue maximum profits,
then someone else would.

Cloud eventually asked Barrett
if capitalism actually
consisted of memory at all?

But Barrett didn't fucking know.

The fuck did he even care—

he was attempting to make
an active difference in things.

No, it didn't at all, did it?

Capitalism was the singular focus sans
memory par excellence—
it sought an increase
at whatever the cost,
regardless of the context—
driven by the hypothetical other,
the hypothetical other
moving capitalism to completely ignore
memory holistically,
the only context in which capitalism
would even remotely consider memory
was in its future forecasts,
but even those types of reports
were fundamentally myopic in character,
weren't they?

Plus "past performance
isn't indicative of future results!"—
and even a five year forecast
would basically just cover
the attention span of a beta fish
in the grand scheme of things.

No, Cloud said,
capitalism clearly operated
sans memory, as a singularity—
and therefore was fundamentally
an agent of destabilization
from a political standpoint—
he was agreeing with Barrett!

Barrett wasn't seeking agreement
when Cloud then asked
if there wasn't also something abutting
divine to that type of singularity—
to Cloud it was almost like
the radiation poisoning of pure mako
itself and shit, no?

Capitalism as a singularity contained
a divine element,
in its radical rejection of memory
capitalism was certainly divine-adjacent.

It was like capitalism as an unfettered
seeking of increase
of expansion
was in itself something
worthy of praise in the abstract,
but for an actual sensible society
the "employment of unrepentant capitalism"
was the most "destabilizing and self-destructive"
political philosophy
you could ever subscribe to!

Capitalism was magnificent in the abstract,
but if you actually subscribed
to the theory in practice
then you would almost definitely,
in due time,
totally destroy yourself
and everything around you!

Ultimately, Barrett reiterated that he didn't really
have a ton of time to discuss

these types of details—
philosophical discussions wouldn't,
after all, fundamentally alter
the rapid environmental destruction
that was ongoing at the hands of Shinra!

Cloud didn't disagree,
yet, at the same time,
weren't the two of them
at Seventh Heaven drinking fucking beers?

How many draft beers
had they drank at that point?

They weren't gonna slow down Shinra's
degradation of the planet
via consuming draft beers either!

Shit, bro. It was like—
Cloud actually woke up that morning
thinking about memory—
not capitalism,
but memory at least—
about how he could be himself
across multiple platforms and shit,
but how, with that in mind,
memory perhaps
wasn't "attached
to Being itself either".

Cloud was always concurrently
multiple iterations of himself,
and he to some extent
partook in Being
across those iterations,

but at the same time—
the thought occurred to Cloud
that memory wasn't necessarily
attached to Being
at all times either?

Being and memory—
what was their exact relationship?

That the soul could fundamentally
be eternal,
but if its being
was disassociated from memory
as we understood it
then obviously
it would kind of be difficult to verify!—
as we tend to confirm experiences
via memory and shit.

Barrett gulped down his eighth pint of Midgar Light,
but that didn't deter Cloud
from prodding further at the point—
namely, that fundamentally
capitalism contained no memory,
and Being itself
perhaps only partially partook
in memory?

Was capitalism a form of being? No,
it couldn't be!—not unless
they took a static vantage point
on an infinite urge
to increase and expand,
which, to some extent,
wasn't that the drive of the infinite,

which was fundamentally
the transcendent,
which was—no Being couldn't be
transcendent, not totally, right?

Cloud didn't think so.

Barrett had had enough
of this fucking shit!—
and he slammed his mug of Midgar Light
on the counter and moseyed
out the bar
(he'd heard about
"some new Queen's Blood thing"
that was being introduced
to Sector Seven
that he wanted to try anyway).

Tifa took the opportunity
to ask Cloud if he'd had
any encounters with—you know?—
those ruthless apparitions
that seemed to be haunting him
intermittently since returning to Midgar?

Well, Cloud was after all
a "remade man"—
in more ways than one, but no? Why?

Who else around the slums
had seen them recently?

It was weird to Cloud,
a little curious,
he noted to Tifa,

mostly because it seemed like
sometimes (a) he'd see them,
yet sometimes (b) no,
he wouldn't necessarily see them
but intuit them, but then other times—
like the other day—(c) the apparitions
would be everywhere for everyone to see,
and he'd whip out
his fucking Buster Sword
with Tifa by his side.

Tifa asked him to extrapolate
on the triad of a-b-c, if he could.

She clearly wanted to assist Cloud
in reaching the bottom of all of this,
so to speak.

Well, to Cloud, it was almost like
the Eleatics were correct all along—
that this type of phenomena—
where sometimes (a) he'd see them
and she wouldn't,
sometimes (b) he wouldn't even see them
but he'd feel them,
and then other times (c) they'd appear
to the public at large,
well, phenomena like that
basically undermined the entire idea
of empiricism via sense perception, no?

If sense perception
was something that they could reliably employ
as a first principle to gather data
and then arrive at conclusions

regarding the nature
of the corporeal world—
then shit like
what Cloud just described
couldn't be possible, right?

Cloud asked how could it possibly?!

There had to be a separate first principle
they'd need to reference.

Also, he'd "switch to Fernet"
if that was okay with Tifa?

But the problem with this notion—
both he and Tifa agreed
(Tifa reluctantly agreed)—
was that (a) there was no evidence
that he saw them when others didn't,
and (b) there was no evidence
even to himself that he felt them
when he didn't see them.

Cloud could see them
and he'd be sure
that he saw them
even if Tifa didn't—
he'd have an empirical data point
that he just couldn't prove!—
but when Cloud simply felt himself
to be in communion with something formless
and incorporeal,
then even he couldn't be sure,
from an empirical standpoint,
what it was he experienced,

because his experience lacked a form entirely—
he didn't have a sense-based
empirical data point
to even prove to himself
that he experienced anything!

Tifa poured the Fernet
and said something about
wanting to believe Cloud.

At that point Cloud said,
hearkening back to the point
that previously caused Barret
to stomp out of the bar,
what was memory anyway?—
if not this type of communion
with a formless and incorporeal
experience like these ruthless
apparitions?

After all, he remembered
a boatload of shit that didn't
necessarily have images attached!

A lot of his memories
were in fact formless feelings,
but then—like some of Cloud's other
encounters—did indeed
contain images,
but they featured images
that only appeared to Cloud,
just like Tifa's image-memories
only appeared to her!

So Cloud was of the "acute opinion"

that memories themselves
were to some extent
like these ruthless apparitions
he'd been experiencing?—
yet Tifa quickly corrected him,
aptly pointing out
that Cloud's memories,
to the best of her knowledge,
had never swarmed around Seventh Heaven
and attacked innocent civilians?

He had to grant that as true!—
"but you know what I mean, Tifa".

She did.

Cloud's memories were
similar to those ruthless apparitions
in terms of (a) and (b),
but not in terms of (c).

Cloud continued on to say,
sipping a fresh Fernet,
that the point more or less
remained, that while sure
memories were distinct,
these apparitions—
these unidentified flying apparitions,
they fundamentally undermined
the utility of our sense-perception,
which was something,
to Cloud's original point,
that the Eleatics really emphasized.

Tifa acknowledged

Cloud's point about memory—
she didn't necessarily disagree with it
just because memories,
to the best of their knowledge,
never physically manifested themselves
in corporeal forms,
that it struck Tifa as basically true
that memory was a similar type
of experience,
something that they interacted with
sometimes via an image
that wasn't sensible to anyone else,
and sometimes via a vague feeling
that they couldn't even corroborate
themselves!—
even memory to some extent
completely undermined the idea
that our sensory faculties
were reliable instruments to use
to come to accurate conclusions
about what we perceive to be
the corporeal world.

Yellow Flower Gossip

Echoes: 1,247
Syllables: 1,707
Self-Similarity: .731

Cloud knew that of course
Aerith was suffering from this gnawing inkling
that, you know,
Cloud may have gone and given away the flower,
or perhaps that was a tad too strong a phrase—
maybe "passed along was a better way
to put it", that's what Cloud postulated
at least, but in any case
he knew that Aerith knew
that he forwarded the flower, right?

But how did she come
to possess that knowledge exactly?—
could it have possibly been
via the under city whisper network?

Or did Aerith come to realize
Cloud gave the shit away
via some sort of divine intuition?

Basically, Cloud was attempting to ascertain
the source origin of Aerith's knowledge—
was it opinion or intuition—
whereas Aerith was chiefly concerned
with the "implications of the knowledge itself".

She actually made it quite clear
that she wasn't sure if Cloud's prevarications
were really the point she was attempting to make
when she brought the whole flower
re-gifting up to Cloud—
that the issue at hand wasn't,
perhaps, "how she obtained this particular knowledge",
but instead "whether or not
Cloud gave the flower away",

which to be fair she wasn't,
like, offended by—
Aerith was just a little curious?

Who'd Cloud "forward it to" anyway?

Tifa, right? Of course it was Tifa,
which was totally fine!

They were actually friends!
But Cloud, if possible,
wanted to stay on this prior point—
this epistemological point—because
he thought there was a pretty important distinction
to be found there,
between knowing something via opinion—
because, for instance,
some Sector Six dipshit
was yapping his fucking gums in the slums—
or, by contrast,
becoming familiar
in a more pure fashion.

There was pure knowledge of things,
and then there was bullshit
you heard third hand from douchebags
in the Sector Six Slums.

Cloud felt like Aerith
probably knew via the former method—
could she confirm though?

Instead Aerith chose to posit
the radical notion that maybe
it could have been both?

Sure, Cloud thought that was possible
(he guessed . . .),
but he didn't think so—
it was possible yet not probable—
in fact, Cloud felt like he knew that Aerith knew,
no, not via some whisper network,
no, not by opinion at all,
but instead by direct intuition,
and it just so happened that it was
by his own intuitive capabilities
that Cloud knew that Aerith knew
that he gave that very fucking flower away
via her own intuition,
not by any lurid rumor monger
frolicking shamelessly in the slums.

Were there any rumor mongers
frolicking shamelessly in the slums
though?

Spreading disinformation
about Cloud giving away flowers
to a plethora of women in Midgar!

No, that wasn't the way
Aerith had accessed her knowledge—
not at all.

Anyway,
Aerith thought maybe
Cloud should consider thinking twice
before giving away flowers again.

That was all. Not that she

was particularly perturbed.

Not in the least actually!

But maybe Cloud could just,
hypothetically,
if a girl like her were
to "give him a beautiful yellow flower"
in the middle of Midgar,
maybe he should hold onto the thing!

Or at the very least
don't go and give it
to some other fucking chick!

Was it really that difficult
to just continually keep a single flower
on your person?

Not that it was Aerith's business anyway,
because clearly if Cloud wanted to gift the flower to
Tifa—
sure that was fine,
it was totally his option
if that's how he wanted
to go about it, but didn't Cloud think
it was just a little rude?

No, instead he thought
that there was a notable distinction
between the two types of knowledge,
but if Aerith did so happen to hear
it in the street,
then would she be willing to tell Cloud
who was flapping their lips?

Was anyone out in the slums
specifically looking to rat his spiky ass out?

In any case, regardless of all that,
Cloud totally understood
where Aerith was coming from,
and he guessed he just wasn't
really thinking at the time,
when he re-gifted the flower—
Tifa took note of the flower,
and he didn't want to go into
"the whole flower girl anecdote",
so he figured it might be kind of nice to,
you know, pass along the love?

Aerith repeated the phrase
"pass along the love" in a way
that, quite amazingly,
wasn't completely filled to the brim
with consternation and contempt.

To Cloud there was something ineffably true
about contemplating the female form,
in its blunt physical iteration—
there was no lurid opinion
present within it,
although Cloud didn't
explicitly express this idea
to Aerith at the time,
given her reticence
to engage in the opinion
versus intuition
dichotomy he started the conversation with,
yet he was still obviously contemplating

her form as this back and forth
occurred.

Her typical philosophical disposition
when it came to love triangles
was waning just slightly—
this little flower incident
seemed to "almost rile her up" emotionally,
although it was clear to Cloud
when she repeated the phrase
"pass along the love"
that she wasn't entirely riled up.

Not yet at least.

Aerith finally confirmed for Cloud that, yes,
it was via pure intuition
she'd surmised her flower
no longer resided
on his person, and, sure,
she agreed that there was a certain
distinction between the two types of knowledge.

Cloud then asked Aerith
what she thought was the cause
of each type—well,
obviously opinion consisted of
literal whisper networks,
she said, from what people saw
and heard and all that.

This allowed Cloud
to note that wasn't everything
Shinra was working on—
especially Hojo—

was that not basically another whisper network,
that Hojo,
despite being a so-called scientist,
was simply working off of what he
and his associates heard and saw?

Aerith was tempted to say
Hojo's operation
was a more systematic version
of that, yes, but instead abruptly cut
herself off, because
when she considered it further
she concluded the under city whisper networks
were actually quite complex themselves!

So instead she accused Cloud
of changing the subject,
then she noted that, actually,
she wanted to shift topics,
but not to the so-called whisper networks
of Hojo versus the well-known
whisper networks
of the Sector Six Slums, no!

No,
Cloud understood.
Even he didn't even really want to
talk about Hojo!

Maybe he was obfuscating.

Cloud apologized,
but Aerith said it wasn't necessary,
there was no sorry needed really—
they probably shouldn't beat a dead horse,

so to speak.

But, ugh,
what a horrendous turn of phrase.

No, Cloud agreed—
it was a terrible saying,
a scumbag saying, really—
Hojo probably would do it though,
beat a dead horse?—
and then fucking, like,
inject it with mako or some shit,
make it a mutant steed!

Gross!

Fucking loser!

New Co-Op Cashier
False Doppelganger Arguments

Echoes: 1,227
Syllables: 1,738
Self-Similarity: .706

Cloud just at that moment
had begun to recapitulate,
this time to the two of them—
Aerith and Tifa—
how it wasn't actually the case
that he'd seen the being,
no, there wasn't in fact
an actual physical being
in that sense of the phrase—
it wasn't like the men in the black
cloaks they'd be following in Rebirth
(were either of them
familiar with that plotline yet?).

He'd just begun to explain this
to the both of them,
and Cloud didn't feel any different
about it necessarily—
the fact that he was telling
the both of them—Tifa was behind the bar
and Aerith just happened to be there.

It was fine.

Were they familiar
with Rebirth yet? Probably not, right?

But no, in this case Cloud had been
fucking, you know, just sitting
on this carpet in Wutai at the time—
he sat on the carpet cross-legged,
and then he suddenly intuited
a "purely divine being" emanating
in the triangle head encapsulated
in the perfectly square design

that repeated endlessly
throughout the entire carpet.

This triangle head was what
Cloud could only describe
as a "laughing Allah",
that's how it struck him—
there wasn't really a question about it
in Cloud's mind, and it was actually beautiful.

Yes, a "laughing Allah"
was the only way he could describe the divine being,
which certainly "communicated with him"
as he sat cross-legged in Wutai
in a somewhat mystical manner,
albeit not quite verbally,
but the being certainly
communicated in a way
that caused Cloud to smile.

Cloud—smile?! The two women
found that totally hilarious!

Tifa nearly fucked up
the beer she was pouring
she was so surprised to hear
Cloud of all people
talking about himself "smiling",
but neither Tifa nor Aerith
found this anecdote of Cloud's
to be disingenuous in any way—
in fact they both fully supported
Cloud's confessions and more often
than not even found them
legitimately intriguing

(but there were, of course,
some exceptions!),
albeit they generally
found the anecdotes intriguing
in a one-on-one setting,
as opposed to this FFM arrangement.

But that was clearly fine!
It just so happened Aerith
was around and she popped in the bar.

No big deal at all!

Yet, while contemplating whether or not
another Moscow Mule
was advisable or not,
Cloud expressed quite vigorously
that he wanted to relay
a subsequent anecdote
that he viewed apropos
of the carpet encounter,
if that was okay? Of course!

Well, specifically
it was that when
he popped into his local co-op
grocery store that morning,
for just a few minor items,
a couple hand fruits really,
and the new cashier asked him—
right as he shifted his headphones
up off of his ears
to start the formalized sales transaction—
if his "brother or something"
went there sometimes?—

to the grocery store?

Did Cloud "have a brother" by any chance?

Because she, the new cashier,
felt like she'd seen him before?

Well,
Cloud said to the cashier,
thinking about it for a second,
he found it quite possible
that this alleged
doppelganger was actually
fucking just him!—Cloud himself!—
that the cashier was
in that particular instance
confusing Cloud "for his actual self",
that this cashier
"only believed she'd seen"
someone who looked "just like Cloud" before
because she'd, in fact,
seen Cloud before.

He walked away just momentarily,
he told Tifa and Aerith,
just to toss his basket back
into the stack of baskets
behind the automatic
doors.

Yeah, he'd take one more
Mule, please Tifa?

The new cashier was chuckling
when Cloud arrived back

at the checkout counter
ready to pay for his shit—
she was in the process of entering
the item number for his red quinoa,
chuckling alone—
"it could've been you" she repeated,
chuckling, but then,
Cloud relayed
to Tifa and Aerith,
she actually came around to Cloud's particular
hypothesis.

The new cashier,
after thinking about it,
came to agree with Cloud,
that she actually probably had seen him
in the grocery store before,
and that she'd just now erroneously
figured he had a brother,
when in fact this hypothetical brother
was "actually just Cloud himself".

Tifa considered,
after she'd ingested the full anecdote
and served Cloud
his refreshed Moscow Mule,
that it was somewhat likely
that the cashier wanted to
quote-unquote suck his cock,
and Cloud didn't necessarily
disagree with the notion!—
he certainly considered it
possible, that this cashier
may have been amenable
to something like that,

but that wasn't quite the point!

There was a type of wisdom
latent in the exchange,
wasn't there?—
regardless of whether or not
the cashier wanted to
"perform fellatio" on Cloud?

Aerith, by contrast,
took a more philosophical angle
to her analysis
of the encounter,
because she agreed with Cloud
that the cashier exhibited
a certain spiritual insight,
even if it was inadvertent.

Aerith, for her part,
didn't put much of any stock
into the cashier's intentions,
whether or not they were sordid,
benign, or simply indifferent.

Upon acknowledging this
Tifa noted that she recognized
Aerith's point of view as valid,
that it was probably
the "right way to take it in",
even if she, Tifa,
wasn't personally at the point
of participating in quite that level
of objectivity
(if they could, in fact, call it that).
Cloud noted that,

at the end of the day,
he couldn't help it if
a "certain person felt an urge"
to suck his cock—that whether or not
someone wanted to suck anyone's cock
is something ultimately unknowable,
that he couldn't simply
toss potential spiritual encounters
to the wayside purely because
of a purported sordid subtext
or intention.

Both women
agreed with this,
yet perhaps Aerith
just a tad more than Tifa?—
not to say Tifa was somehow
beside herself with jealousy
in any material way—no,
this distinction between Tifa and Aerith
was probably rooted more so
in Aerith's basically absurd ability
to remain philosophically
undeterred about other women
while steeped in an obvious love triangle.

Did she even like Cloud, really?

Because it was really quite evident
that Cloud, Tifa, and Aerith
were "collectively entwined
in a sort of love triangle",
but Aerith, for her part,
maintained quite the unique ability
to remain essentially

philosophical about it all—
she didn't seem to allow feelings of jealousy
to overcome her in the least
when Cloud relayed anecdotes
about cashiers that,
if the three were being honest,
clearly wanted to whip
the guy's cock out and suck on it
for an extended interval of time.

Did she even really like Cloud?

His individual feelings on the situation
were a little ambiguous,
even when he was all alone—
Cloud was of course incapable
of assessing his own feelings
for somewhat obvious reasons.

The Original Text

[C][l]oud was [s][i]tt[i]ng at [S][e]v[e]nth H[ea]v[e]n
d[r]in[k]ing a Fernet on the [r]o[ck]s e[n]g[a]g[i]ng i[n]
l[i]ght [c]onver[s]a[t]i[on] with a [c]o[ck]s[u]ck[er] h[e]’d
ne[v]er [e]v[en] met [a]b[ou]t [a] [Q]ueen’s [B][l]ood
[p][l]ay-in g[a]me that he’d - this [p]arti[c]ular
[c]o[ck]s[u]ck[er] - [r]e[q]uested to [b]e [p]ut on the [T][V]
at the [b]ar. Well, a[c]tua[l]l[y] [C][l]oud [c]o[r]re[c]ted, for
the [r]e[c]ord, that he’d a[c]tua[l]l[y] been [r]eading a [f]ew
[p]a[ges] of [T]im[a]eus [p]r[i]or to all this, [m]a[k]ing a
[f]ew [d]is[p]a[r]ate notes, [f]in[d]ing him[s]el[f] [p]uzzled
at the [s]en[s]o[r]y i[n]f[or]m[at]ion that [c]on[t]inued [t]o
[b]e [r]e[l]ay[ed] i[n]t[o] his [b]r[ai]n. [C][l]oud
[b]a[s]icall[y] a[l]leged he was [f]u[m]moxed a[b]out
the [s]en[s]o[r]y i[n]f[or]m[at]ion that [b]e[c]a[me], in
[s]ome [w]ay, [r]el[ay]ed to [w]hat he guessed [w]as his
[b]r[ai]n? - how any of that was [c]o[r]ro[b]o[r]ated, [b]ut
[m]ore [s]o [C][l]oud [c]on[t]em[p]l[ate]d the [s]t[ati]c
n[ature] of [s]aid i[m]ages - that’s [w]hat he [w]as
[s]p[e]cifi[c]all[y] [c]on[t]em[p]l[ating] [w]hen [a] guy
[w]ith [a] r[ou]nd-a[s]s [f]a[c]e l[e]aned o[n]t[o] the [b]ar,
[s]ee[k]ing to [c]l[ose] his [t]ab, obviou[s]l[y] ex[c]ited [t]o
[t]ell the [b]ar[t]ender that he may n[eed] to show [h]er
[h]is I[D], just [b]e[c]a[use] he [t]oo[k] his wife’s l[a]s[t]
name and [h]adn’t [h]ad a [ch]an[c]e to [ch]ange his
l[i]c[en]se yet? The pa[t]r[on] with the [r]ound-a[s]s
f[a]c[e] [n]oted how [n]ic[e] the bar[t]ender was ((T)[i]f[a!]),
[b]ut [w]hat [w]as her [n]ame again? He [c]ould
[d]efi[n]ite[l]y [d]isp[lay] his I[D] if sh[e] r[e]a[l]l[y]
[n]eeded, just [b]e[c]a[use], again, his l[ast] [n]ame [w]as
[d]i[f]ferent [n]ow - ta[k]ing his [w]i[f]e’s [n]ame and all! Of
[c]ourse, [C][l]oud [n]o[t]ed, [th]at it was [c]lear [th]at
[n]o one gave [a] [f]u[c]k [a]bout the [p]r[int]ed name on
[a] [c]r[edit] [c]a[r]d in that [b]ar, and Ti[f]a, [f]or her

[p][ar]t, [d]i[d]n't exa[c]t[ly] [s][ee]m [i]i[k]e she was
 [r]am[p]ing [u][p] to [s][u]ck this [d]ude o[ff] j[ust]
 be[c]au[se] he was a [r]a[d]i[c]al [f]eminist. [F]or
 [C][l]oud's [p]art he was still, you know, a[tt]em[p]ting [t]o
 get [b][e]hind the [b][u]nt [s]en[s]ations [b][e]ing
 [s]muggled [r]e[le]nt[ly] into his [s]o-[c]alled
 [c]onsciou[s] [e]xi[s]ten[c]e. [E]ve[r]ything was [a]n
 [i]mage to [s]ome e[x]tent, [r]ight Ae[r]ith? Touch it[s]e[lf]
 was a [f]u[c]king [s]en[s]o[r]y [i]m[a]ge. [I]t was a [q]uaint
 [S]p[r]ing evening where [C][l]oud [f]elt m[or]e [or] [l]es[s]
 [d]e[st]ined to [p]h[i]o[s]o[ph]i[ze], having [s]tarted
 [d]r[in]k[ing] w[i]ne in [p]re[p]a[r]ation [f]or a [F]r[i]d[ay]
 [n]i[gh]t [d]inner, on[ly] to have Tiffa [b]ail [l]ast mi[n]ute,
 [b]e[c]ause sh[e] [n]eeded to [p]i[c]k u[p] a [b]ar sh[i]ft
 - [l]ea[ving] him [c]om[p]l[e]te[ly] fr[ee] to [c]ontinue
 this wine [d]r[in]k[ing] [i]n a [r]i[tua]l[ist]ic [w]ay that
 [w]ould be [c]on[d]u[c]ive to [p]h[i]o[s]o[ph]i[c]al i[d]eas.
 Yes, [C][l]oud [c]on[t]inued [t]o Ae[r]ith, it was
 [b]asi[c]a[l]ly on[ly] vi[a] d[r]in[k]ing [a]ll[one], [b]ut in [a]
 [r]i[tua]l[ist]ic [f]a[sh]ion, th[at] h[e]'d ach[ie]ved any
 [s]ort of [p]h[i]o[s]o[ph]i[c]al [i]n[qu]iry. You [c]oul[d]n't
 just [s]it at a [d]e[s]k and be[c]ome [p]h[i]o[s]o[ph]i[c]al,
 at [l]ea[s]t [n]ot for [C][l]oud! May[b]e [s]ome [p]eo[p]le
 [c]ould! [B]ut, [n]o, [n]ot [C][l]oud. He'd i[m]agine [th]at
 [th]ere were [p]ro[b]a[b]ly a [l]itany of [p]o[s]si[b]le ways
 of [b]e[c]o[m]ing [p]h[i]o[s]o[ph]i[c]al - [i]i[k]e, [f]or
 in[s]tan[c]e, [f]or the round-[f]a[c]ed albino ch[a]p,
 [p]erh[a]p[s] [t]he [l]ing [T]iffa that he'd [t]aken his wif[e]'s
 [l]a[s]t n[a]me, m[ay]b[e] that could [b]e [s]ee[n] as
 po[s]si[b]ly ritua[l]i[s]t[i]c [i]n a w[ay], a g[at]ew[ay] to
 [s]ome [s]ort of be[c]o[m]ing [p]h[i]o[s]o[ph]i[c]al. This was
 a[c]tua[l]ly [s]cien[c]e, [C][l]oud [t]old [h]er [h]e [th]ought
 at [th]e bar, [s]uc[c]e[s]sfully avoid[ing] [m]a[k]i[ng] any
 eye [c]on[t]a[ct] with the round-fa[c]ed [m]an. Was it
 [n]e[c]e[s]sa[r]ily [s]t[r]ange at all that [o]n[c]e the

G[r]ee[k]s [w]ent extin[c]t [ph]i[!]o[s]o[ph]y went m[or]e
 [or] [!]ess [c]omp[!]e[te[!]y] and utter[!]y downhill and
 [n]ever [!]oo[k]ed b[a][c]k in the [!]ea[s]t, [th][a]t [th]e
 [!]a[s]t group to [r][ea][!]y [r][ea]ch much of any
 [ph]i[!]o[s]o[ph]i[c]al [s]u[c]ce[s]s made a [s]in[c]ere
 e[ff]ort to [c]onjoin getting [f][u][c]ked [u][p] with
 [c]on[t]em[p][!]ating in[t]e[!]ligible [ph]e[n]o[m]e[n]a? -
 [th]at [th][e]se G[r]ee[k]s a[t]tem[p]ted [t]o [m]a[r]ry
 i[n]e[b]r[!]iation and [r]igo[r]ous dia[!]e[c]tic? [Th]at all
 [th]ought since - to [p]a[r]a[ph][r]ase [N]orthhead - had
 been a mi[n]or [f]oot[n]ote to [P]lato or [w]hatever? [Th]e
 [th]ing [w]as, a[c]cording to [C][!]oud, you just [c]oul[d]n't
 w[ri]t[e] n[on]e into metaph[y]s[i]cs
 [c]omp[!]e[te[!]y [s]o[b]er! [B]ut that wasn't to [s]ay a
 [p]er[s]on should [n]e[c]es[s]arily [b]e[c]ome [s]ome
 dege[n]e[r]ate al[c]ho[h]i[c] either, [b]e[c]ause a
 [d]ege[n]e[r]ate [d]runk would in [n]o w[ay] [m]a[ke] a
 g[r]ea[t] [m]eta-phys[i]c[!]ist either - that was
 [b]a[s]i[c]a[!]ly impo[s]si[b]le, [b]e[c]ause, [!]i[k]e [C][!]oud
 [s]aid, the [s][o][!]o m[od]e of in[e]b[r]i[!]ation should
 [b]e done [r]itua[!]i[s]ti[c]a[!]ly, in [s]p[ur]ts, at [c]er[tain
 times. You [c]ouldn't just [b]e [!]i[k]e h[itt]ing the [b]ottle
 [a]s soon [a]s you wo[k]e [f]rom a [s]lum[b]er! - a[ft]er
 [s]aid in[e]b[r]i[!]ation [s]essions you'd [r]e[qu]ire
 [s]o[b]r[!]iety to [p]arse through [w]hatever it [w]as that
 [c]ame to you via [s]aid [c]ontem[p]lation, [n]o? In f[a]c[t],
 the [a]c[tual [s]cience was [n]othing [b]eyond this
 [p]ar[s]ing th[r]ough of in[e]b[r]i[!]ation [s]essions of
 [r]igo[r]ous [c]ontem[p][!]a[tion! That was it - what [!]ai[d]
 [b]eh[i]nd [!]ogi[c] and metaph[y]s[i]c[s], in [C][!]oud's
 m[i]nd at [!]east! [B]ut in[e]b[r]i[!]ation [c]ould [b]e
 anything [r]eally - [C][!]oud [c]ould en[t]er a s[t]ate of
 in[e]b[r]i[!]ation in [a] [c]ar [a][!]one on [a] Tuesd[ay] [A]M,
 without [c]onsuming a damn thing. [A]e[r]ith [m][or]e [or]
 less ag[r]eed, [a]dding th[at] on the one hand a

[ph]i[!]oso[ph]ical [m][i]nd should [b]e a[b]le [t]o ana[!]lyze, in[t]er[p][r]et, ex[t][r]a[p]o[!]ate, all of that [s]cien[t][i][f]ic [s][t]u[f]f - but, on [th]e o[th]er, i[f] you [f]ail to [p][!]a[c]e yourself [i]n a [p]os[!]t[i]on to [r]e[c]eive [a][n]ything to [a][n]a[!]lyze, in[t]er[p][r]et, or ex[t][r]a[p]o[!]ate then you were [b]a[s][i]c[a][!]ly [s][c][r]ewed! [C][!]oud m[or]e [or] [!]ess ag[r]eed [b]ut [a]dded th[at] - [s][a]ns this ty[p]e of “in[s][p]i[r]ation,” [s]o to [s][p][ea][k] - they’d [b][e] [s]tu[c]k [s][i]tt[ing] at [a] ta[b]le just [n]ood[!]ing [a]r[oun]d [n][on][s]en[s][i]c[a][!]ly, v[a][c]i[!]ating [b][a][c]k [a]nd forth [b]e[t]ween [t]wo [t]ypes of [n]othing[n]ess, and then just pr[o][b]a[b][!]y k[n][o][c]king [o]ff s[o]me[o]ne else’s [w]ork [b]y [a][c]cident. [B]ut [n]one of this [w]as [n]ew! It [w]asn’t [i]i[k]e [C][!]oud [w]as [b][r][ea][k]ing [n]ews i[n] a[n]y [w][ay]. [A]t this point [A]e[r]ith [a]sked - you k[n][o]w, was thi[s] [a][b]i[n]o douche [b]ag, he was an e[!]ement of this [a][n]a[!]y[s]is? [N]o, [n]ot real[!]y - a[c]cording to [C][!]oud - maybe the g[uy] was [t]r[an]s[cr]y[ng] a [t]ad [t]oo hard? - to [p][r]es[e]nt him[s][e]l[f] as a [s][p]e[c][i]f[ic] ar[c]he[t]y[p]e [t]o the gene[r]al [p]ubli[c], as a g[uy] who [d]e[c]i[!]ded to [s][p][i]t [i]n the fa[c]e of his [o]wn [c]h[r]o[m]o[s]o[m]e [c]ount, [w]hich [w]as [s]omething [C][!]oud [p]er[s]ona[!]ly en[d]or[s]ed! Gran[t]ed [C][!]oud [p]ro[b]a[b][!]y [w]oul[d]n’t [d]o it [b]y [t]a[k]ing his [w]ife’s [!]ast [n]a[m]e, [b]e[c]ause [C][!]oud [p]er[s]o[n]a[!]ly was obviou[s][!]y more [p]rone [t]o a [t]y[p]e of [i][s]o[!]ated and over[!]y [d]ramatic [s]elf-ann[!]i[!]ation than a [s]ub[s]ervient and [d][i]s[!]ingen[u]ous[!]y [m][u]ted [f]e[m]i[n]ist a[n]nihi[!]ation, [b]ut he w[as]n’t i[p][s]o [f]act[o] op[p]o[s]ed to either! Ae[r]ith ag[r]eed [on]e h[un]dr[ed] [p]er[c]ent! But [C][!]oud [s]till would g[o] a [!]ittle [f]urther, n[ot]ing [th]at i[n] [th]e i[n]telligible [s]p[h]ere, as [s]o[m]e[o]ne [!]i[k]e, [s]ay, Pr[o][c][!]us would n[ot]e, that

[s][o]-[c]alled [f]orms were [s]omehow able to [p]arti[c]i[p]ate in [o]ne an[o]ther w[i]thout m[i]xing, [w]hereas [w][i]th[i]n the [s]en[s]ible realm they [p]art[i][c][i]pated [i]n th[i]ngs and [s]ub[s]e[qu]ent[ly] got [d]irt[y]. But [C][l]oud [th]ought [th]at it [w]as [w]orth going [o]ne [s]tep [f]urther - [s]ince they were [d]i[s][c]u[s]sing a[n]nihilation [a]nd [s]tu[f]f [a][n]yway, [th]at [th]e [p]er[c]ei[ve]d m[i]x[i]ng be[t]w[ee]n [f]orms that [t]ook [p]lace in the [s]en[s]ible a[r]e[n]a was it[s]el[f] j[us]t a [p]r[o]je[c]tion of [m]ixture but not a[c]tual [m]ixture. The in[t]el[ligi]b]le sphere, [b]eing [p]ure[ly] e[m]an[ate]d, [p]ar[t]i[c]i[p]at[ed] w[i]th[i]n [i]t[s]elf without [m]i[x]i[n]g [i]t[s]el[f], while i[n] the [s]e[n]s[i]b]le [s]p]here [i]t [d]i[d]n't [s]eem like that was [p]o[s]s[i]b]le, that [b]y [p]arti[c]i[p]ating w[i]th[i]n [s]en[s]i]ble [th]i[n]gs [th]ey [b]e[c]ame e[s]sential[ly] m[i]xed w[i]th them, a[s]suming they were [c]ategori[c]al[ly] [s]en[s]ible. E[s]sential[ly] [n]a[t]ure was t[ai]nted, which of [c]our[s]e [C][l]oud [a]nd [A]erith k[n]ew all [t]oo [w]ell! [W]ay [t]oo [w]ell! He[n]c[e] thei[r] sha[r]ed a[c]quie[s]ce[n]c[e] toward [o]c[c]a[s]io[n]al [a]n[n]ihil[a]tion! [B]ut even this [s]en[s]i]b]le f[i]th, [s]o to [s][p]ea[k], [C]loud [th]ought, [th]i[s] [p]er[c]ei[ve]d m[i]x[i]ng u[p] [i]n the [p]arti[c]i[p]ation of [s]en[s]i]ble th[i]ngs, wasn't it [a]l[s]o [a] [p]roje[c]tion? - [a]n [e]man[ati]on, just as the [p]ar[t]i[c]i[p]ati[on] of the in[t]elligible [s]phere was al[s]o [a]n [e]m[an]ation of the [p]r[i]m[ar]y u[n]ity of all things? Which, yeah, [b]r[ou]ght [C][l]oud [b][a]ck to th[at] al[b]i[n]o [r]ound-f[ac]ed [f]u[c]k at the [b]ar, [t]a[k]ing his wif[e]'s [l]ast [n]ame - [b]e[c]ause ul[t]i[m]ate[ly] the al[b]i[n]o's [v]antage point wasn't [r]e[m]ar[k]a[b]l[e] di[v]ergent f[r]om [C][l]oud's or Ae[r]i[th]'s, [C][l]oud thought. Thi[s] al[b]i[n]o was [p]r[o]m[oti]ng a [c]ertain t[y]p[e] of an[n]i[hil]ation of their [c]ultu[r]al-[s]en[s]i]b]le [r]ealm, [th]i[n]k[ing] [th]at [th]e

[p]at[r]iar[c]hal lineage of their [s]o[c]iety was
 [b]a[s]i[c]ally [s]omething obje[c]tiona[b]le, [s]omething
 e[s]sential[ly] t[ai]nted, that should [b]e a[n]nihilat[ed] in
 the [s]ervi[c]e of [s]omething [m]ore pure. O[k]ay, well,
 [C][l]oud [th]ought [th]at [m][a]de a [m]odi[c]um of
 [s]ense! [M][a]ybe t[ai]king his wi[f]e's [l]a[s]t n[a]me was
 in a [s]ense a g[r][ea]ter [f]orm of [p]u[r]ity than [l]o[c]king
 a woma[n] i[n] a [k]itche[n] and [e]xp[er]ting a blowjob
 [e]v[er]y other [e]v[en]ing, [C][l]oud thought. Ju[s]t as
 [P][r]o[c]l[us] and [S]o[c]r[ra]t[es] [s]en[s]ed [th]at [th]e
 in[t]el[lig]ible [s]p[he]re [p]arti[c]ipated w[i]th [i]t[s]elf
 yet not in a [w]ay [w]here it m[i]xed w[i]th [i]t[s]elf, [th]at
 [th]i[s] was [d]i[s]tinct [f]rom our [f]urther [d]e[s]cen[d]ed,
 [s]en[s]i[b]le [s]p[he]re where things [p]arti[c]ipated
 [w]ith [o]ne another [b]ut got [m]ixed u[p] in the
 [p]ro[c]e[s]s - well, [m]ay[b]e this al[b]i[n]o [m]an was
 [n]o[t]ing [th]at [th]e [p]a[t]riar[c]h[y] was a
 [p]ar[t]i[c]ipat[or]y m[i]x[i]ng that [l]eft un[s]eem[ly]
 [c]um [s]t[ai]ns - [f]or [l]a[c]k of a better [p]h[r]a[se]! - on
 hu[m]an ex[p]e[r]ience. [P]at[r]iar[c]hy, in the al[b]i[n]o
 [m]an's [m]i[n]d, should [b]e a[n]nihilated [b]e[c]ause of
 this [s]en[s]i[b]le m[i]x[i]ng u[p], this [p]u[t]rid [t]ai[n]ting
 of [w]hat [w]ould [b]e [b]etter o[f]f [p]ure. And [t]a[k]ing
 your [n]i[c]e wi[f]e's [n]ame was a [p]r[o]p[er] [m]ode of
 an[n]ihilation in [r]es[p]onse. Ae[r]ith [r]e[m]ar[k]ed that
 she knew [C][l]oud would inevita[b]ly [b]ring the
 dis[c]ou[r]se [b]a[c]k to this [p]oo[r] ch[a]p [c]l[os]ing his
 t[a]b, [b]ut, just to [b]e [c]l[ear], [w]hat [C][l]oud [w]as
 saying [w]as [th]at [th]i[s] m[i]xing [th]at o[c]curred in the
 [s]en[s]ible [r]ealm was it[s]elf ju[s]t a [s]e[p]a[r]ate
 [p]r[o]jection - ju[s]t a l[e]s[s]er mode of [p]roj[e]cting! So
 [w]hile the [m]a[t]erial [w]orld [m]ay have di[s]gu[s]ted
 them, [p]erha[p]s [m]oving the [t]wo [t]oward [s]ome
 [s]ort of [a]ll-en[c]om[p]a[s]sing [c]on[c]e[p]tual
 [a]nnihilation, [a]nd [a]s [m]uch as the [p]a[t]r[i]archy

[m]ight have seemed [p]u[t][r]id to the al[b]ino hus[b]and at the [b]ar who [l]oo[k]ed to an[n]ih[i]l[ate] him[s]el[f] [b]y ta[k]ing his [n][i][c]e w[i]f[e]’s [l]a[s]t [n]ame, it [c]ould be wise to [c]on[s]i[d]er [th]at [th]ese [d]i[s]gu[s]ting a[g]g[r]e[g]ates were them[s]elves [s]im[p]ly [d]e[r]i[v]at[i]ve [p]roje[c]tions, [th]at [th]ey weren’t a[c]tual [m]ixtures, [th]at [th]ey were just [d]erivative e[m]anations as o[p]posed [t]o [t]at[t]oos of what [th]ey [th]ought [th]ey [d]e[s]i[p]ised. Aerith [w]as a[w]are. She wasn’t [d]i[s]tressed a[b]out it, [b]ut she k[n]ew this poor al[b]i[n]o g[uy] would in [t][i]me [t]a[k]e the [b]r[u]nt [o]f it from [C]loud. [C]loud [q]uestioned whether he [d]i[d]n’t [d]eserve it? [P]l[us] [l]ike they’d al[r]eady im[p]l[i]ed - they [m]u[s]t to [p]ro[c]eed from the i[m]mane[n]t [t]o the [t]ran[s]cende[n]t, no?

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[C]l[oud] [f]ound it a [t]ad [b]e[f]u[dd]l[i]ng, j[u]s[t] [b]e[c]a[us]e [T]ifa [s]aid sh[e]’d h[a]d [a]n [o]dd [d]r[e]am [a]b[ou]t him the [p]r[e]v[i]ous night, and h[e]’d [r]e[p]l[i]ed [b]luntl[y] that he [d]i[d]n’t usual[l]y have [d]reams a[b]out [p]eop[le] h[e] knew, somehow [c]om[p]l[e]te[l]y [p]urging the [f]a[c]t [f]rom his m[i]nd th[at], just that n[i]ght, [h]e’d [h]ad a [v]i[v]id dream in[v]ol[v]ing one of his [f]i[r]st gi[r]l[f]riends and he[r] [c]u[r]rent (to the [b]e[s]t of [C]l[oud]’s knowl[e]dge) [s]p[ouse]. [H]ow [c]ould th[at] [h]a[ve] [p]o[s]si[b]l[y] [s]i[p]ped his [m]e[m]o[r]y, given the [v]i[v]a[c]it[y] of the [d]ream it[s]elf? [B]ar[r]ett [d]i[d]n’t have a [c]lue [e]ither, [r]eal[l]y. [H]is ex and [h]er [h]usband were [l]i[v]i[n]g w[i]th [C]l[oud] and h[is] [f]i[c]tional w[i]f[e] in a [m]o[d]est [c]on[d]o they’d been l[e]a[s]ing in Up[pe]r [M]idgar, yet he [t]old [T]i[f]a he “[n]ever [d]reamt” about

[p]eo[p]le he k[n]ew, yet [p]erha[p]s the [m]o[s]t bef[ɪ]uddling a[s][p]e[c]t of it [w]as that [w]hen he'd said th[at] to [h]er [h]e [a][c]tua[l][i]y [b]e[ɪ]e[ɪ]ved it! [C][l]oud's ex-girlfriend and h[is] [f]i[c]tional [w]i[f]e had [b]e[c]ome s[o]me[w]h[at] [f]riend[li]y i[n] the [d][r]eam, i[n] the [c]on[d]o, and the wh[o]le or[d]eal, in [C][l]oud's [d][r]eam, st[r]u[c]k him as total[ly] [f]ine [i]n[i]tial[ly]. H[is] [f]i[c]tional [w]i[f]e [w]as ob[s]c[u]r[e], a [p]u[r]e [m]irage, [w]hile his ex [w]as [a]n [i]m[ag]e of [h]ow [h]e'd k[n]own [h]er in the [p]ast, [n]ot [h]ow she was [n]ow ([n]ot that [h]e k[n]ew [h]ow she was [n]ow!), [b]ut eventua[l]ly [C][l]oud [b]egan [t]o [c]ome [t]o the [r]ea[l]ization [th]at [th]is was his ex-[r]oman[tic] in[t]ere[s]t, and that his [c]u[r]rent wi[f]e and ex-girl[fr]iend [b]e[c]oming [f]riends was [a]n [a]b[s]olute[ly] [c]ata[c]ly[s]m[ic] deve[lop]m[ent] for him [s]ocial[ly], [th]at it [w]as [th]e [p]ro[b]a[b]ly [w]or[s]t [th]ing [th]at [c]ould [p]o[s]si[b]ly [h]a[p]pen to his [m]arriage. [H]e [w]ondered [w]h[at] the [h]u[s]band of [h]is ex [w]as thin[k]ing - [C]loud [w]as [w]ondering how it [w]as ex[a]ctly th[at] he got r[o]ped into this wh[o]le [th]in[g] as he was [e]xitin[g] [t]his a[p]art[m]ent into an U[p]per [M]idgar that, of [c]ourse, wasn't [e]xa[c]tly U[p]per [M]idg[a]r at [a]ll! Yet on[ly] hours [l]ater when [T]ifa [t]old [C][l]oud sh[e]'d had a [d]ream w[i]th h[im] [i]n [i]t that [n]ight he [c]laimed to [n]ever [d]ream a[b]out [p]eo[p]le he k[n]ew. Odd! [B]ar[r]ett [n]oted [th]at he just [d]id, [th]ough, [r]ight? [Th]at his [s]tatement [t]o [T]ifa [w]as [f]a[ls]e, [n]o? Um, yeah, th[at]'s ex[a]c[t]ly what [C][l]oud ju[s]t [s]aid! [C][l]oud [r]e[te]r[ate]d that it was "[i]n[i]tial[ly] [th]at night" [th]at [h]e'd [h]ad [th]e [d]ream, [f]urther em[ph]asizing the ab[s]ur[d]i[t]y of h[is] [s]t[ate]m[ent] [t]o [T]ifa. [M]a[y]be, [C][l]oud thought, it was [c]o[s]er to a [c]o[n]c[i]d[e]n[c]e th[a]n [a]n a[c]tue

[m]i[s][r]e[m]em[b]erin[g] o[r] fo[r]gettin[g]? Was that [p]os[s]i[b]le? [M]e[m]o[r]y was ellip[t]i[c]al [s]ome[t]imes. [B]ut i[n] a[n]y [c]a[s]e, he [t]old [B]a[r]rett [h]e'd [h]ad another d[r]e[m] [r]e[c]ent[ly] - if [B]a[r]rett was [b]y any chan[c]e [i]nte[r]e[s]ted [i]n [i]i[s]tening to more [b]ullshit a[b]out his [d]r[e]am [s]tates? - where [C]loud had [d]i[s]c[ov]ered a g[l]owin[g], f[l]uo[r]e[s]cent i[n]s[e]c[t] i[n] one of the [d]r[aw]ers on a [s]c[r]eened-in patio that [d]idn't ex[i]s[t] [i]n [s]o-c[al]led "[r]eal [l]ife," and [C]loud to[s]sed the [f]u[c]king thing [o]ut[s]ide [o]nto the gras[s], [k]i[nd] of [d]i[s]gu[s]ted [b]y it to [b]e hone[s]t, on[ly] to [d]i[s]c[ov]er that [s]ame in[s]e[c]t ju[s]t a [f]ew [m]o[m]ents [l]a[ter] - but [n]ow a[p]pea[r]in[g] in a huma[n]oid [f]orm, [s]tandin[g] out[s]ide the [s]c[r]eened-in [p]atio, ho[p]in[g] to b[e] [l]et in. Now, in [th]e dr[e]am [th]ere was a [l]ittle [g]e[t-to[g]e[th]er on [th]i[s] [p]ati[o], [s]o [C]loud [w]as a [l]ittle wa[r]y of [l]etting this [b]e[ing] - who was female, [t]o [b]e [c]l[ear] - in[t]o the [p]arty, [b]ut [c]u[r]ious[ly] [e]ve[r]yone [e]lse at the [p]o[w]-wo[w] [s]eem[ed] total[ly] in[c]a[p]a[b]le of [p]er[c]eiv[ing] her, [e]ven a[ft]er [C]loud al[l]ow[ed] her in? Yes, [C]loud al[l]ow[ed] her in and the [f]orm of [c]ommuni[c]ation be[t]ween him[s]el[f] a[n]d the e[n]t[ity] was [s]im[pl]y a [s]eries of vague [f]eelings, [p]erhap[s], he [th]ought, [th]i[s] was [s]ome [k]i[nd] of [r]em[i]nder that you [c]ouldn't just, you know, [c]r[ea]te [th]ings - [th]at [r]e[fr]e[sh]in[g] [s]ynthe[s]es are the b[e]s[t] [w]e [c]ould do? [W]ith [th]at [s]aid, [th]ey [s]tarted [c]o[p]ulatin[g] on the [p]atio. [B]a[r]rett wan[t]ed [t]o [c]l[ear]i[f]y [th]at it was [th]e [b]utter[fl]y [w]oman that [C]loud [w]as [f]u[c]king? Or [w]hatev[er] she [w]as? [W]ell, [C]loud n[ot]ed, [o]nly [w]hen she [b]e[c]ame a human [b]e[ing], of [s]ome [s]ort, [th]at [th]at [w]as [w]hen the [c]o[m]p[ar]ison o[c]curred, obviou[s]l[ly]! [B]ut, with

that [s]aid, it was a[c]tual[!][y] ([k]ind of?) int[r]iguing [t]o [B]a[r]rett, [t]o [b]e honest? [B]ut, mo[r]e impo[r]tant[!][y], [C][!][oud [r]eal[!][y] wan[t]ed [t]o know how [S][e]v[e]nth H[ea]v[e]n was [!]a[s]t night, [b]e[c]ause [B]a[r]rett [s]top[p]ed [b]y there, [d]i[d]n't [h]e? [H]ow was it? Well. [L]et's [s]e[e]. [B]arrett [d]e[f]inite[!][y] [f]elt the [p]urit[y] of the [b]ooze ex[p]and w[i]th[i]n h[i]s che[s]t u[p]on his [f]ir[s]t [s]i[p], and while the [b]ar[t]ender ([o]bvious[!][y] [n]o[t T]i[f]fa, [b]ut he [d]i[d]n't [c]atch her [n]ame) was s[!]ight[!][y] more a[f]fable than [w]hen he [w]ent there [w]ith [C][!][oud, but she [d]i[d]n't [a][c]tual[!][y] [a]sk [w]hat [f]ruit he [w]anted [i]n the dr[i]nk. [S]itting a[!][o]ne at [S][e]v[e]nth H[ea]v[e]n Bar[r]ett [t]oo[k] n[o]te of him[s]elf [t]o[s]sing the [s]ingle orange [s][!][c]e onto h[i]s th[i]n, [n]ow i[m]m[e]d[i]ate[!][y] [m]oist n[!]a[p][k]in and [m]a[n]ual[!][y] extr[a]c[t]ing the [s]ingle [s]eed th[at] h[ad] been ex[p]elled [f]r[om] the o[r]ange [i]nto the [!][!][q]uor [f]rom the gl[!]a[s]s, a[n]d i[n] doing [s]o, he n[o]ted [th]at all [th]at he'd a[cc]ounted for [a]t the [b]ar - the [a][f]fa[b]i[!][i]t[y], the [f]ruit, the s[e]ed - that extr[a]c[t]ing those id[e]as [o]ut [o]f the air was [b][a][s]i[c]ally the [s]a[me] as the [c]oo[r]dinate-t[r]a[c]king [r]epo[r]ted [b]y [r]emote viewers. He gl[!]nced [b][a][c]k [a]t the [b]ar and too[k] [b]rief note of the [b]artender ch[!]gging [a] shot [o]f [b]ooze with a [c][u]stomer and was vio[!][ent[!][y] sma[c]ked in the [f]ace with an a[c]ute [m]e[m]o[r]y of [r][!][p]p[!][ng [s][!][m[i]lar shots with a [s][p]e[c]i[!][c] bartender [f]rom his [p]ast, [w]hich [w]as [b]a[s]i[c]ally ju[s]t a[n]other [s]et of [c]oordi[n]ates, [b]ut these [p]ar[t]i[c]u[!][ar [c]oordinates [r]e[t]urned [t]o [h]im, [h]e [d]i[d]n't [p][!][u[c]k them [o]ut [o]f the air. He [d]i[d]n't [p][!][u[c]k these ri[p]ping shots with a bartender [c]oordinates [f]rom a [r]a[p]id [r]ush of in[f]ormation - no, [s]aid [c]oordinates [r]eturned to him [a]s he [s]a[t] in [s]o[!][i[t]ude [a]t the bar [t]otal[!][y] in[v]o[!][un[t]ari[!][y],

[v]io[ɪ]ent[ɪ]y sm[a]c[k]ing B[a]rret in the [f]u[c]king
 [f]a[c]e and [s]omewhat [r]ude[ɪ]y [c]o[ɪ]l[a]p[ɪ]s]ing time
 [i]t[s]elf [i]n the [p]r[o]c[e]s[s], [r]ight as [B]ar[r]ett [s][a]t
 [a]t th[at] [t]iny [t]a[b]le a[ɪ]one, [i]nn[o]c[en]t[ɪ]y [s][i]pping
 h[ɪ]s dr[ɪ]n[k] [i]n [S]e[v]e[n]th H[e]av[e]n. [B]arrett the[n]
 w[e]nt on [t]o [t]ell [C]loud how, [b]efore the [b]ar, he'd
 s[ee]n a [b]unch of [p]l[e]o[p]le with [M]a[k]o
 [p]o[isi]oning that [h]e [h]adn't seen in [m]onths, and
 [C]loud [n]oted that's how they k[n]ew S[p]r[ing] was
 ap[p]r[o]aching, [r]ight?! Yet, on that [n]ote, it was [k]ind
 of [f]unny be[c]ause [C]l[oud] was a[c]t[ua]l[ɪ]y thin[k]ing to
 himsel[f] [th]e o[th]er [d]ay - [w]hat [w]as the exa[c]t
 [d]ef[ɪ]n[ɪ]tion of sobriety any[w]ay - li[k]e how [c]ould
 they a[c]tually [d]i[s]t[ɪ]ngu[i]sh [s]o[b]r[ie]ty fr[om]
 intoxi[c]ation? [B]arrett [p]er[k]ed [u]p [a] [b]it. [C]l[oud]
 made it [c]l[ear] that, [n]o, he wasn't [n]e[c]e[s]sari[ɪ]y
 [i]f[k]e [t]al[k]ing about s[m]o[k]ing [c]r[ack], or
 exp[o]sing your[s]elf to high in[t]en[s]ity [m]a[k]o shards
 for [d]e[c]ades on end, [b]ut [m]a[y]b[e] ju[s]t [d]rin[k]ing
 [w]h[ɪ]te [w]i[n]e or [s]omething? [B]e[c]ause [C]l[oud]
 [w]as [c]r[os]s[s]ing the [W]a[sh]i[n]gton [S]t[r]eet
 [b]r[idge] [c]on[t]em[p]l[ɪ]ating a [p]ar[t]i[c]u[l]ar [v]is[i]on of
 [i]nd[i]v[i]sible One[n]ess [th]e o[th]er [n]ight, [a]s
 [B]arrett k[n]ew too well th[at] [C]loud was [a]pt [t]o do
 [f]rom [t]ime [t]o [t]ime, and [b]e[l]ieve it [n]ot he was
 a[c]t[ua]l[ɪ]y [d]i[s]covering [a] [d]e[c]ent [a]m[ou]nt of
 e[n]joy[m]ent i[n] the [m]a[t]e[r]i[al] [w]orld at the [t]ime! -
 [d]rin[k]ing a [m]ini [w]ater [b]ottle fi[l]led w[ith]
 [M]ez[c]al, [b]ut [a]lso [a]t[t]em[p]t[ɪ]ng to [g]auge whether
 [h]e'd [h]ave the [t]ime [t]o [g]rab just one [m]o[r]e [b]eer
 [b]ef[o]r[e] [T]i[f]a was su[p]posed to b[e] at his
 a[p]art[m]ent. [C]l[oud] was [c]ontemp[ɪ]a[ti]ng the
 n[atu]re of a[n] [i]nd[i]v[i]sible [O]n[e]s[s], [b]ut he [w]as
 al[s]o [c]omforted [b]y the mate[r]i[al] [r]ealm while
 [c]o[n]d[ɪ]t[ɪ]o[n]ally [c]al[cu]l[ɪ]ating his odds of [b]eing a [b]le to

ch[u]g an[o]ther [b]eer while still ma[k]ing it [b]a[c]k to his
 [a][p]artment [b]ef[ɹ]ore Ti[f]fa was sup[p]osed to [a]rrive.
 [A]nd [a]s [C][l]oud was [c]ontem[p]l[ɪ]a[ti]ng this n[ə]ture
 of a[n] i[n]d[i]v[i]s[i]ble [O]neness, [c]r[o]s[s]i[ŋ] a
 [W][a]sh[i]ngton [S]t[r]ee[t] b[r]idge, [d][r]in[k]ing [M]ez[c]al
 from a [m]ini water [b]ottle [C]loud [r]e[m]ar[k]ed to
 [B]a[r]rett [h]ow [h]e'd [s]tarted to [q]ue[s]tion this very
 [d]ef[i]n[i]tion of [s]o[b]r[i]ety. [B]ut it was here [B]a[r]rett
 [b]egan to [q]uestion - [w]ell - [w]hat did [C][l]oud
 [a][c]tua[l]ly mean by th[at]? [W]ell, [w]hat [C]loud [w]as
 [t]r[y]ing [t]o get [a]t, Ba[r]rett, was th[at] [s]o[b]riety
 it[s]elf was [s]up[p]osed to [b]e a [b]a[s]eline of [s]orts,
 no? Of [c]our[s]e it was! Yet how [c]ould [th]ey [m]easure
 [th]i[s] [b]a[s]e[l]ine exa[c]t[ly]? - was there [a]
 [m]easure[m]ent at [a]ll? - was so[b]r[i]ety to [b]e
 def[i]ned [b]y a [l]ack of p[a]ssion, or a vague [s]en[s]e
 of th[e] "[e]ven-ke[e]led"? [B]ut the pro[b]l[em] was, in
 [C][l]oud's [m]ind at [l]ea[s]t, [th]at [th]ere was [n]o
 u[n]iver[s]al e[m]otional [b]a[s]eline [w]i[th] [w]h[i]ch to
 def[i]ne [s]o[b]r[i]ety. [S]ome [p]eo[p]le - he [m]eant, even
 [C][l]oud [h]imself [c]ould be t[ot]al[ly] un[h]inged
 e[m]o[tional[ly] on o[c]casion while [q]u[ote]-un[q]u[ote]
 "[c]omp[le]te[ly] [s]o[b]er"! [F]urther[m]ore, even i[f]
 they - [B]arrett and [C][l]oud - [c]ould de[f]ine [s]ome
 [b]a[s]e[l]ine e[m]otional [s]tatus [a]s [a]xiom[ati]c,
 [th]en [th]ey would [s]till have to [c]ombat
 [ph]ilo[s]o[ph]i[c]al[ly] with e[x]ternal [s]ub[s]tan[c]es
 that weren't [c]on[s]i[d]ered int[er]i[or]ants that would
 o[b]viou[s]ly sh[i]ft th[i]s e[m]otional ba[s]eline. What
 did [C][l]oud [m]ean? Well, [l]i[k]e, [a] [l]ack of [f]ood
 [c]ould [a]lter m[ood]. The [s]ame [c]ould be [s]aid of
 [c]affeine! [C]o[n]suming dirt would pro[b]a[b]ly shi[ft]
 s[ome]o[n]e's emotional [s]tate. Hi[sto]ri[c]al[ly],
 a[c]co[r]ding to [C][l]oud, [p]eo[p]le ate fu[c]king [p]lants
 with [s]mall [d]oses of p[er]y[c]h[e]d[e]l[i]c[s]

em[b][e][d][d[e]d w[i]th[i]n them and [p][r]o[b]a[b]ly thought ve[r]y little about “in[t][o]xi[c]ation” [p][r][o][p]er! [P]eo[p]le u[s]ed to fu[c]king [s]ani[t]ize [w]ater [w]ith al[c]ohol! [S][m]o[k]ing [t]o[b]a[c]co al[t]ered [m]ood. [B]a[s]i[c]ally, [B]arrett, “a[n]ything we i[n]ge[s]t alters our l[a]tent [s]t[a]te of exi[s]ten[c]e and there[f]o[r]e ch[a]nges u[s] in [s]ome [f]o[r]m or [a]nother, wh[i]ch [i]n [m]o[s]t [a]ll [c]a[s]es pro[b]a[b]ly [f]i[il]t[ers] [i]n[t]o our [m]ood.” [C]loud [n]oted, [f]or him [p]er[s]o[n]al[l]y, a shi[ft] in his [d]iet [c]ould [d]o won[d]ers for h[is] [i]ntel[l]e[c]tual [d]i[s]p[osition] - [s]o then [w]hat [w]as [s]o[b]riety? It [s]eemed im[p]o[s]si[b]le to even [th]in[k] a[b]out [s]o[b]r[i]ety as [a] [th]ing at [a]ll! Well, [B]a[r]rett h[a]dn’t ex[a]c[t]ly [c]on[s]idered it li[k]e that and [w]asn’t sure if he [w]ould. [B]ut [C]l[oud] [th]ought [th]at m[a]y[b]e th[ey]’d t[a]k[en] a [f]al[s]e [b][a][s]e[l]ine of [s]o[b]riety [c]on[c]eptual[l]y, no? A[ft]er all, [w]hat [t]e[c]h[n]i[c]al[l]y [w]as an ex[t]er[n]al [s]ub[s]tan[c]e? [C]ould they [d]ig even [f]urther and [c]on[s]i[d]er the [d]e[f]i[n]i[t]ion of an ex[t]er[n]al [s]ub[s]tan[c]e? A [c]onver[s]ation [c]ould [c]ertainly [a]lter [a] [p]er[s]on’s [t]e[m]p[er]ame[n]t ex[p]one[n]tial[l]y as well! - but did that [t]e[c]h[n]i[c]al[l]y [c]ount as [a]n [e]xoge[n]ous [s]ub[s]tan[c]e? Did [w]ords [n]ot [c]arry [w]eight? A vo[c]i[f]e[r]ous thought or [e]ven a [f]l[e]eting [m]e[m]o[r]y - e[s]p[ec]ial[l]y in [C]l[oud]’s [c]a[s]e! - [c]ould [o]f[te]n t[o]s[s] a [p]er[s]on [c]om[p]l[e]te[l]y o[f]f-[k]ilter, yet they [s]till [f]or [s]ome in[c]om[p]r[eh]en[s]i[b]le [r]eason [c]l[ung] to an [i]dea of an ob[je]c[tive [s]o[b]r[i]ety, and [th]en [th]ey [s]ub[s]e[qu]e[n]t[l]y [t]argeted [s]e[l]e[c]t [s]ub[s]tan[c]es as in[t]oxi[c]ating, while deeming [s]o-[c]alled “other” [s]ub[s]tan[c]es - which [a]ll[s]o [a]l[t]ered [t]emperaments - as [t]otally fine! [W]ell, [th]is [w]as [w]hat [C]l[oud] [w]as [th]in[k]ing at [l]east, as he

[w][a][k]ed over the [W][a]shington [S]treet [b]ridge - that
 if [p]eo[p]le [d]idn't [v]iew [c]on[s]uming [f]resh
 [v]ege[t]a[b]les as [s]omething [f]unda[m]en[t]ally
 [m]ind al[t]ering, then it was [p]o[s]si[b]le, in [C]loud's
 [m]ind, [th]at [th]ey ju[s]t ex[p]e[r]ien[c]ed the [w]orld in
 va[s]tly diff[e]r[en]t [w]ays. [A]nd [B][a]r[r]ett [f]or his [p]art
 [f]ound this to [b]e int[r]iguing yet un[c]onvin[c]ing. [B]ut
 [C][l]oud in[s]i[s]ted [th]at [th]ere [s]i[m]p[l]y was no
 [t]rue [a]nd [e]x[t]ended [s]tabi[l]it[y] of our men[t]al
 [s]tates - even if [th]ey were hy[p]o[th]eti[c]al[l]y
 de[p]rived of ex[t]ernal [t]in[k]e[r]ing, be[c]ause even
 thought it[s]elf was [f]undamen[t]al[l]y e[x]t[er]nal [t]o
 [s]ome e[x]t[er]ent, was it not? [A]nd [p]eo[p]le on
 [a]verage were [c]onstant[l]y a[c]costed by
 [s]p[e]c[i]f[i]c th[ou]ghts, were they n[ot]? Thought
 [a]lmost [n]ever [c]lea[s]ed [a]c[c]o[s]ting th[e]se
 [p]eo[p]le, [w]hich [w]ere all [p]eo[p]le? And even if
 [th]ey [c]onfined [th]emselv[e]s to [c]ommonly ag[r]eed
 u[p]on mate[r]ial [s]ub[s]tan[c]es, [th]en [th]ere was [s]till
 no [c]on[s]i[s]tent way to [c]al[c]u[l]ate the [d]eg[r]ee of
 al[t]e[r]a[t]ion [t]o a men[t]al [s]t[ate] a[c]r[ro]s[s] [p]eo[p]le
 of [d]i[f]fe[r]ent walk[s] of [l]ife, [p]e[r]iod. Bar[r]ett
 [m]ight not ex[p]e[r]ien[c]e the [s]ame [m]ental shif[t]
 a[f]ter the [c]on[s]um[p]tion of a [f]resh [s]t[i]c of
 [c]e[l]e[r]y that [C][l]oud would, [e]ven if the [c]e[l]e[r]y
 it[s]elf r[em]ained en[t]irel[y] [s]t[atic]. [W][a][k]ing
 a[c]ro[s]s the [W][a]shington [S]treet [b]ridge, [C]loud
 [d]ran[k] [f]rom a [t]iny [w]ater [b]ottle [f]ill[ed] w[i]th
 [M]ez[c]al and [d]idn't [f]eel in[t]oxi[c]at[ed] i[n] a[n]y
 w[ay], sh[a]p[e], or [f]orm - any [m]ore than [h]ad [h]e
 been [d]rin[k]ing [a] [c]u[p] [o]f [c]off[ee], or [ea]ting a
 [d]el[ic]ious [s]nack, or re[c]ei[v]ing a [s]p[e]c[i]f[i]c
 thought. [I]n h[is] m[i]nd at the t[i]me there was no [t]rue
 [d]i[v]ision [b]e[t]ween in[t]oxi[c]ation and so[b]riety,
 and this was [C][l]oud's final [c]on[c]lusion -

[r]egard[!][e]ss of wh[e]ther or not Bar[r]ett ag[r]e[e]d - [a]s he [s]omewhat [a]nxious[!][y] [s]ent [T]if[a] [a] [t]ext m[e]s[s]age [!][e]tting her know he was "[t]a[k]ing a wal[k]," just in [c]a[s]e she [a]rrived at his [a]partment bef[ore] he [f]i[n]ished [s]l[ugging] down one [!][a]s[t] [b]eer [a]t the [b]ar th[at] he [w]as [w]alking to.

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"[W]ell, no," [w]ere the two [w]ords C[!][oud] began [w]ith as he ex[p]l[ained] [th]at his [p]oint was [th]at [th]ere was a [s]i[gn]i[fi]c[ant] d[i]s[t]i[n]c[t]ion be[tw]ee[n] the [t]wo, m[e]aning [d]i[n]ner and [d]r[i]nks! - that if you [m]a[k]e it out [!][k]e it's just [d]rin[k]s and then [!][a]s[t] [m]i[n]ute it [b]e[c]omes [d]i[n]ner? - then yeah [C]l[oud]'s gonna [b]e a [!][ittle [f]u[c]king [p]i[s]sed off! E[s]p[eci]al[ly] i[f] h[e] [d]i[d]n't k[n]ow the [f]u[c]king [p]eo[p]le, you k[n]ow [A]erith? How did that ma[k]e [a]ny [s]en[s]e? He [f]ound it [a] [b]it [a]b[s]urd, [f]r[an]k[ly]. Sure, he'd go [t]h[rough] one or [t]wo on with a [t]otal [s]tr[anger], that was f[i]ne, but to [s]it [d]own [a]nd [a]c[tually] e[n]g[a]ge in a [d]i[n]ner? - that was a[n] e[n]tirely [d]i[s]t[i]n[c]t [!][evel of [s]ocia[!][ization, and it [w]as [o]ne that, [f]ran[k][!][y], [C]l[oud] [d]i[d]n't parti[c]u[lar][!][y] [c]are [f]or. [A]nd he wasn't ashamed to [a]dm[it] [i]t! - th[at], [f]r[an]k[ly], he [f]elt th[at] [Ph]i[!][s]tine n[ot]io[n] of ju[s]t g[oi]ng out to [d]inner with an[y] and ever[y] a[c]quaintan[c]e, that [i]f you [d]i[d]n't a[c]quie[s]ce to [th]at [s]tan[d]ard [th]en you [w]ould [b]e [d]e[e]med, [w]hat? - ant[i]-s[oc]ial? [W]ell [c]o[or] [C]l[oud] ant[i]-s[oc]ial then! [B]ut Aerith n[ot]ed that while, sure, to [b]e [f]air, it was a dif[ferent] [!][evel of s[oc]ia[!][ization, if he tru[ly] [d]i[d]n't k[n]ow the [p]eo[p]le, but, you k[n]ow, if it was he[r] [p]e[r]s[on]al[!][y]? [S]u[p]posing it was Aerith, then she'd

h[o][p]e that it woul[d]n't [b]e that [b]ig of a [d]eal [t]o
 [C]l[ou]d? [T]o just go [ou]t to [d]i[n]ner? Was she
 k[i][d]ding him?! Oh, of [c]ourse not, Ae[r]ith! With her?
 You fu[c]king [k]id[d]ing? [C]l[ou]d [w]as al[w]ays [d]own to
 g[r]ab a [n]osh with s[o]me[o]ne li[k]e her, [n][o], it was
 just [t]hat [t]he hypo[th]eti[c]al [n][o]tion of [ea]ting
 [s]u[p]per with a [c]om[p][l]i[te] [s]tranger ("a mo[r]e o[r]
 [l]e[s]s [c]om[p][l]i[te] [s]tranger") - [w]hat [w]ere they
 di[s][c]u[s]sing? [C]l[ou]d and the hy[p]o[th]eti[c]al stranger?
 [D]id [h]e [h]ave to [c]ome [p]re[p]ared with a
 [p]ortf[o][l]i[o] of tal[k]ing [p]oints? - [C]l[ou]d [c]oul[d]n't
 i[m]agine [t]hat [t]hey'd b[e] [s]u[p]per i[n]tr[i]gued with
 an[y]thing [h]e [h]ad to [s]ay, or [t]hat [t]hey'd [e]nd u[p]
 on the [p]r[e]c[i]p[i]c[e] of [a]ny r[e]v[e]lation that he'd
 [c]on[c]l[ude] to b[e] [p]arti[c]u[l]ar[l]y en[l]ighten[i]ng
 [e]ither. [C]l[ou]d was [s]im[p]l[y] going by [e]m[p]i[r]i[c]al
 [e]viden[c]e [r]ea[l]ly. That [w]as all. He [w]asn't, [l]i[k]e,
 tr[y]ing to be a dick or [a]nything! Ju[s]t that,
 [e]m[p]i[r]i[c]al[l]y [s]p[ea]king, it [s]eemed
 un[l]i[k]e[l]y they'd have [a] lot to [c]onver[s]e [a]b[ou]t,
 [C]l[ou]d and [t]h[i]s hy[p]o[th]eti[c]al [s]tranger. [B]ut
 [A]erith [a]dded that, to [b]e fair, [w]asn't [C]l[ou]d the
 [o]ne who [w]as al[w]ays r[ai]ling again[s]t [s]o-c[al]led
 [s]en[s]ory data? Yet, in thi[s] [c]a[s]e, he was [a]ll [b]ent
 [ou]t of sh[a]p[e] [a]b[ou]t this im[p]rom[p]tu [d]inner
 [b]e[c]ause, in his own words, [b]e[c]ause of
 [e]m[p]i[r]i[c]al [d]ata? Of [p]a[s]t [e]x[p]er[i]en[c]e,
 [w]hich [w]as [s]en[s]o[r]y [d]ata? [M]e[m]o[r]ies, [r]ight?
 [W]hich, [w]ouldn't [C]l[ou]d ag[r]ee, was [s]ome of the
 mo[s]t un[r]el[a]b]le [d]a[ta] [a]v[ai]l[a]b]le no? Of
 [c]our[s]e he [d]id! Aer[i]th, ev[e]n [f]u[ck]ing [q]uantum
 [ph]y[s]i[c]s was [s]till [f]un[d]amentally
 [s]en[s]e-[f]orward, in the [s]en[s]e [t]hat [t]hey were
 beg[i]nn[i]ng w[i]th [s]en[s]e [p]er[c]e[p]tion - this [w]as
 [w]hat [c]ontem[p]o[r]a[r]y [s]o-c[al]led [s]cien[c]e had

[a]chieved [o]f [c]our[s]e! [P]la[c]ing [s]en[s]e
 [p]er[c]e[p]tion [a]s [a]n a[p]ex [p]re[d]ator un[t]il [f]inally,
 with the [d]i[s][c]ove[r]y of [q]uan[t]um [ph][y]s[i][c]s, [i]t'd
 [r]e[d]u[c]ed the obse[r]vable wo[r]ld to a [d]egr[e]e that
 [e]ven [l]inear [s]en[s]e-[p]er[c]e[p]tion no [l]onger [m]ade
 any fu[ck]ing [s]en[s]e in the u[p]per [w]orlds! [Th]at
 [w]as [w]hat [th]ey'd done. [A]nd [q]uite [s][m]ugly [a]t
 [t]imes [t]oo! But [w]asn't that [w]hat [C]loud [w]as
 [d]oing w[i]th th[i]s im[p]en[d]i[ng] [d][i]nner? Ae[r]ith
 [q]ue[r]ied him on thi[s] [p]oint. Well, [C]loud [s]u[p]posed
 [th]at, [th]in[k]ing [a]bout it [a]gain, yeah, he was [k]ind of
 a[c]ting li[k]e a [q]uantum [ph][y]s[i]c[i]st a b[li]t, [w]asn't
 he? [W]ell, Aerith [w]as just saying - to [th]e [e]xtent
 [th]at his argu[m]ent was [f]unda[m]e[n]tally [e]mpirical.
 But it was [k]ind of [i]n[t]uitive [i]n a [s]en[s]e [t]oo, his
 argument, i[n] [C]loud's opi[n]ion. H[e] agr[e]ed with
 A[e]rith to the [e]xtent that, ye[s], he was [b]a[s]ing his
 [d]i[s]gu[s]t [p]artially on [e]m[p]irical [e]vi[d]e[n]c[e], [b]ut
 he'd [a]ll[s]o [a]ll[e]ge that he f[e]lt a[n] i[n]tuitive
 [d]i[s]gu[s]t with these [t]y[p]es of [s]ocial g[a]therings
 [a]s well, and then [h]e, [t]o [h]er [p]oint, [t]o [b]e [b]l[un]t,
 [d]i[d] [t]end [t]o [d]i[p] i[n]t[o] the world of em[p]iri[c]ism
 to va[l]idate [s]aid i[n]tuitive [d]i[s]gu[s]t. Although,
 [t]e[c]hni[c]al[l]y, they should [p]ro[b]a[b]l[y] [b]e a
 [l]ittle [c]autious to ev[e]n [e]m[p]l[o]y the word
 [e]m[p]iri[c]ism here, be[c]ause he [d]i[d]n't th[i]n[k]
 em[p]iri[c]ism [n]e[c]e[s]sa[r]il[y] [n]eeded to b[e]
 [r]e[s]t[r]i[c]ted to [s]en[s]e-[p]er[c]e[p]tion
 [n]e[c]e[s]sa[r]il[y], you k[n]ow? Ae[r]ith [s]u[p]posed
 the[r]e, ye[s], was [p]ro[b]a[b]l[y] a[n] [e]m[p]iri[c]ism of
 the intel[l]igi[b]le [r]ealm as w[e]ll? Hone[s]t[l]y, to
 C[l]oud - it was [c]ertain[l]y [p]o[s]si[b]le that h[e]
 may[b]e wasn't [e]ven in the [b]e[s]t mind [s]tate to
 even [a]s[s]e[s]s it [o]ne [w]ay or [a]nother. [A]erith too[k]
 [a]dvantage of this [c]apitu[l]a[tion to [s]ay sh[e]'d

[r][e][c]ent[li]y had [a] d[r][e]am [a]b[ou]t [C][l]oud - would [h]e mind [h]earing [h]er out? - [w]here he [w]as emailing her a [q]ues[ti]on [a]bout whether [a] [s][p]e[c]i[f]i[c] a[c]t[i]on was [d]e[f]ined as 'in[s]i[d]er tra[d]in[g]', while she was [p]roce[s]sin[g] [s]ome non-[d]e[s]c[ri]p[t] 'or[d]ers' for [s]omething in a bath t[ub], which [c]on[s]i[s]ted [o]f, for [s]ome [r]eason, w[a]shing [l]arge ch[o][c]o[ll]ate [c]oo[k]ies [d]own the [d][r]ain, [w]atching [th]em as [th]ey [s][l]ow[ly] [d][i]s[i]nteg[r]ated un[d]er the hot [w]ater. Then, after [th]at, [r]ea[l]izing [th]at [th]e [c]oo[k]ies [r]e[ll]a[te]d to [C][l]oud's [q]ue[s]tion about in[s]i[d]er [t][r]a[ding], she [c]on[t]emp[er]a[te]d if [sh]e [sh]ould have [f]l[ush]ed them all [d]own the [d][r]ain be[f]ore an[s]we[r]ing the [q]ue[s]tion? [D]id she [d]o w[r]ong [b]y [C]loud [b]y washing these [c]oo[k]ies [p][r]eemptive[ly] [d]own the [d][r]ain? If [C][l]oud [t][r]u[ly] wan[t]ed the 'order [p][r]o[c]e[s]sed,' [s]o to [s]p[ea]k. In a [s]e[n]s[e] Aerith [f]e[el]t an a[f]f[i]n[i]t[y] [f]or the [c]oo[k]ie[s], [d]i[d]n't sh[e], [C]loud in[f]erred. [C]loud [p]ostu[late]d [th]at she [f]elt [l]ike [th]ey were [a]c[tual [b]eings [a]s she [c]r[um]b[le]d [th]em [d]own [th]e un[f]org[i]v[i]ng [d][r]ain [w]ith the [s]c[or]ching hot [w]ater? In [r]et[r]o[s]p[ec]t, [A]erith [a]d[m]itted [th]at [th]at [m]ay have been the [c]a[s]e. [C]loud [n]o[t]ed [th]at [th]ere was a [c]ertain [l]evel of g[n]o[s]is ach[ie]ved through [c]ontem[p]l[ating] your dr[ea]ms - yet was there any to [b]e g[ai]ned from [p]artici[p]a[ting] in [d]o[ub]le [d]a[te] [d]inners? [A]erith [a]dmitted she'd [b]een [c]l[im]bing onto the fa[c]t of the [c]oo[k]ies [b]eing washed [d]own the [d]rain, and she knew [C]loud had a [p]ar[t]icu[lar] [t]a[le]nt when [i]t [c]ame to [i]n[t]er[p]r[et]ing [d]r[ea]ms. W[el]l th[e]n [l]e't's [s]ee here, [C]loud [c]on[t]em[p]l[ated], the [d]i[s]so[l]ution of a [s]w[e]et [f]ood in an [a]p[par]a[tu[s] [u]sual[ly] [u]sed

t[o] [c][l]ean your[s]el[f]? [B][u]t with a [t]rans[a]c[t]ional, a[b][u]tting [c][a][p]ita[l]i[s]t un[d]er[t]one. [A]nd [A]erith was [d]oing it, [p]erh[a]p[s] unint[e]ntional[l]y, for [s]omeone [e]lse ((C)[l]ou[d]), with[ou]t their k[n]ow[l]edge, and [n]ot on[l]y [w]ith[ou]t their k[n]ow[l]edge but [w]hile [i]g[n]oring their [i]n[q]uir[y] - a[c]tual[l]y), [C]loud guessed it [w]as h[i]s [i]n[q]uir[y] te[c]h[ni]c[al]l[y], about [w]hether it [w]as [l]egal, as a[p]parent[l]y this was [s]omehow [p]otential[l]y 'in[s]ider trading'? So sh[e] was [r][e][p]ur[p]o[s]ing [a]n [a]p[pa]r[a]tus for [c][l]eaning the bo[d]y to [d]e[s]troy [l]arge, [l]ife-[l]i[k]e [p]ie[c]es [o]f [u]nhealthy [f]ood [f]or [C]lou[d], [w]ith[ou]t his [c]on[s]ent, [C]lou[d] mean[w]hile [w]on[d]ering i[f] [d]e[s]troying thi[s] jun[k] [f]ood in a b[a]th tub was a[c]tua[l]l[y] i[l]l[e]gal? Of [c]our[s]e in any [d]ream they al[s]o should [c]on[s]i[d]er [w]hether [w]h[at] [w]a[s] [r]e[p]r[es]ented [w]as [a] [r]e[p]r[es]en[t]ation [o]f [a]nother [r]e[p]r[es]en[t]ation, [m]ea[n]ing [m]ayb[e] [n]ot [a]n [a]n[a]l[og]y [a]t all? But i[f] they [p][r]o[c]e[e]d[ed] as i[f] [w]hat [w]as [r]e[p]r[es]ented in Ae[r]ith's [d][r]e[am] a[p]p[ea]red as [i]t was [i]n[t]e[n]d[ed] [t]o a[p]pear, [t]h[en] [t]h[at] would b[e] a [d]e[c]ent [s]tart. [S]o, in a [s]en[s]e, Aerith [t]hought, [t]h[at] sh[e] was [c][l]eaning [p]arti[c]u[l]ar attributes of [C]lou[d] with[ou]t his [p]ermi[s]s[i]on, [w]hile [C]lou[d] [w]as th[i]n[k]i[n]g - [p]erh[a]p[s] [s]u[s]p[e]c[t]ing - that [c][l]eaning him[s]elf [i]n th[i]s w[ay] m[ay] h[a]ve a[c]tual[l]y been a [t]y[p]e of insider [t]rading, it [c]ould have been a ve[r]y [s]er[i]ou[s] [c]rime. [C]loud [n]o[t]ed that - Ae[r]ith, [c][l]eaning your[s]elf was b[a]s[i]c[a]lly [a] [c]rime [a]gain[s]t [t]he [s]t[ate] [t]hes[e] d[ay]s. [N]o [s]urprise [t]here! Al[th]ough [C]loud [l]i[k]ed a [n]i[ce] [c]oo[k]ie [e]very [n]ow and th[en], he [d]i[d]n't [n]e[c]e[s]sarily [f]ind a[n]ything th[at] b[a]d a[b]out [ea]ting a [f]ew [c]oo[k]ies on o[c]casion, but

[C]loud also [f]ound it intr[i]guing that Aerith [p]ersonally [i]dentif[i]ed with [th]e [c]oo[k]ies as [th]ey [b][r]o[k]e a[p]art and tum[b]led [d]own the [d][r]ain, that she [s]aw a [c]ertain goodnes[s], a [s]pe[c]i[f]i[c] [b]eing w[i]th[i]n them, and [s]u[b][s]e[qu]ently [f]elt a [s][a]dne[s]s [a]t the [f]a[ct] they h[a]d to [b]e washed [d]own the [d]rain of this [b][a]th tub. Even what's fundamental[!][y] [b]ad for you isn't [n]e[c]e[s]sari[!][y] [b]ad, Aerith [n]oted. [B]ut ye[s], it was [s]ad to [s]ee them [f]a[ll] [a]part in [a] [b]ath t[u]b [f]a[ul]c[et], h[u]h? “[E]ven the [r]unning shoes you n[ee]d to [t]o[s]s in[t]o the [t]r[ash] are e[t]ernal,” Cloud [s]aid.

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Cloud was [f]or sure [f][i]ne [w]ith [w]h[a]tever Tiffa [w][a]nted to [s][a]y to him (“I al[w][a]ys [w][a]nt you to [s]peak your m[i]nd!”), [b]ut he just [w][a]sn't going to [b]ack off his [w]ell-[d]eveloped (in his m[i]nd) [i][d]ea [th]at [th]e [i]n[s]t[it]ution [i]t[s]elf (as a [c]on[c]ept) was ba[s]i[c]ally [r]e[s]t[r]i[c]t[i]ve, [th]at [th]ey shouldn't ne[c]e[s]s[ar]ily [c]ar[e] what's th[e][r]e in the [c]ontainer (“[C]atego[r]y theo[r]y!”), but al[s][o] that e[r][o][s] [w]as a g[a]te[w]a[y]. Tiffa ju[s]t wasn't [c]ertain th[at] e[n]gaging i[n] [th]at in the bar, [a]f[ter] hours - she [d]i[d]n't kn[o]w, was th[at] [a][c]tual[!][y] ap[p]r[o]p[ri]ate, [C][l]oud? [E]ven [i]f sh[e] wan[t]ed [t]o [d]o [i]t! [!][n] the [b]ar?! Of [c]our[s]e, [C][l]oud total[!][y] un[d]er[s]tood, [b]ut, again - ju[s]t to [r]eite[r]a[te] - e[r]os was a g[a]te[w]a[y]. [!][t] [d]i[d]n't have to [b]e a[b]out, you know, purely that. [W]hat? - [w]as [T]iffa [n]ow gon[n]a [a][ll]ow her[s]elf to [b]e [t]y[r]an[n]ical[!][y] [r]e[s]t[r]ained [b]y the [i]n[s]t[it]utio[n]al [n]orms of Shin[r]a, et al? [W]as that [n]ow h[ow] she [w]as gon[n]a [l]ive her [l]ife? - by the [c]ontem[p]uous [r]ules of

[Sh]in[r]a? [Sh]e [c]ould [p]op that [p]ussy [w]ide o[p]en
[w]henever she [w]an[t]ed [t]o! - if sh[e] r[e]all[y]
[w]an[t]ed [t]o, ev[e]n [i]f [i]t was ju[s]t [s]u[p]er
[q]u[i][c]k[i]y! ([W]hat exa[c]t[i]y [w]as the
tem[p]e[r]ature in the [r]oom?) There wasn't an[y]th[i]ng
[i]nhe[r]entl[y] [o]ut [o]f [b]o[un]ds [a][b]o[ut] an[y] of that,
[a]ssuming the [c]orr[e]c[t] [c]ont[ex]t, [b]e[c]ause - [w]ell,
no, [C]loud [w]asn't [s]aying he [w]as in [s]u[pp]ort of
[i]nd[i][s]c[r]i[m]i[n]ate [p]rom[i][s]c[ui]t[y] - [n]o, [n]ot at
all! It [n]e[ed]ed to b[e] [r][i]go[r]ou[s] - [p]erhaps [e]ven
[r]i[tual[i]s]t[i]c, and h[e] wasn't [e]ven [s]ugge[s]ting
[T]i[fa] should [i]p[s]o [f]a[c]t[o] ju[s]t
[q]u[ote]-un[q]u[ote] [p]o[p] that [p]u[s]sy [o]p[en] to
[s]p[ite] the m[o]r[al] n[o]r[m]s of Shinra - it was a[c]tually
the o[p]posite! No, [C]loud was [s]im[p]ly a[s]serting [sh]e
[sh]ouldn't not ma[k]e [b]eautiful [l]ove in [S]e[v]e[n]th
H[ea]v[e]n [s]im[p]l[y] [b]e[c]ause of [s]ome [s]o[c]ietal
Shinra [c]ode - [sh]e [sh]ouldn't al[l]ow her[s]elf, T[iffa],
to [b]e [r]egu[l]ated [b]y a[n] i[n]s]titutional e[n]tity
whose [p]ri[m]a[r]y [p]ur[p]o[s]e was the
em[p]l[o]y[m]ent of the univer[s]al [r]e[s]t[r]i[c]tion. To
[C]l[oud] it [w]asn't in any [w]ay, sh[a]p[e], or [f]o[r]m
Shi[n]ra's [p]l[a]c[e] to e[n]f[o]r[c]e a[n]y u[n]iver[s]al
[r]e[s]t[r]i[c]tions what[s]oever. [F]u[c]k Shin[r]a
[s]p[e]c[i]f[i]cally and [f]u[c]k the [i]n[s]t[i]tution in a
more generi[c] [s]en[s]e. [U]gh, sh[ut] [u]p [C]loud! He
[w]as [k]idding, [w]asn't he? Oh yeah! - [C]loud
ad[m]i[t]ted [i]t was [c]ertainl[y] [p]o[s]sible he was
[e]xaggerating [c]ertain [e]l[e]m]ents of his argu[m]e[n]t
i[n]te[n]tiona[l]ly, i[n] terms of the [w]h[o]le - [w]ell, you
k[n]o[w - [n]o, he [w]asn't [s]ugge[s]t[i]ng [T]i[fa] should
“[p]o[p] that [p]u[s]sy” in the [b]ar! No, that [w]as
a[b]surd! Unle[s]s she [w]an[t]ed [t]o! [B]e[c]ause if she
wan[t]ed [t]o [T]i[fa] should know that [C]loud [t]oo[k] no
o[ff]en[s]e, li[k]e, at all! [Th]ey both [l]aughed [a]t

them[s]elves, but [d][i][d]n't he, [C][l]oud, in the
 [a]bstr[ac]t [k]ind of h[a]ve a [p]oint? No, ju[s]t [l]i[s]ten
 for a [s]e[c]ond, [C][l]oud [s]aid, [p]le[as]e T[ri]f[a] - h[e]
 knew she [f]elt [a]n [a]nxiety, [f]rom [t]i[m]e [t]o [t]i[m]e,
 and a[c]cording to [C][l]oud it was a[c]tua[l][l]y
 en[t]ire[l]y po[s]sible [th]at it was [th]e anxiet[y] of the
 younger [S]o[c]rat[es]. Namel[y], it was [th]is anx[i]et[y]
 [th]at T[ri]f[a], sh[e] [f]elt [l]i[ke] she m[i]ght have [f]a[il]e[n]
 i[n]to a pit of "b[o]ttomle[s]s n[o]n[s]en[s]e" - this [i]dea
 [th]at [th]ere [c]ould be an a[c]tual [c]on[c]eptual [i]dea
 beh[i]nd all phe[n]ome[n]a th[at] h[a]d e[v]e[r]
 o[c]cu[r]red, th[at] e[v]e[r]y [a]c[t]ion she too[k] had some
 [c]apital-[l] [l]ide[a] [b]eh[i]nd or [a][b]ove it, that eve[r]y
 [s]ingle [s]en[s]o[r]y [p]er[c]e[p]tion, eve[r]y [s]ingle
 [m]o[m]ent [o]f their l[i]ves [e][m]erged fr[om] [s]o[m]e
 [c]on[c]eptual [i]dea [b]eh[i]nd it, that [i]deas
 them[s]elves [b]e[c]ame [s]u[b]-a[t]omi[c] [p]arti[c]les
 which [b]ecome mul[t]i[p]l[i]ed i[n]to a[n] i[n]f[i]n[i]te
 ("[s]eeming!") [n]on[s]en[s]e. It was [a]n [e]xt[re]me
 vertigo to [e]x[p]er[i]en[c]e that with[ou]t a d[ou]bt! - and
 [C][l]oud was all [t]oo [f]amiliar with that [t]y[p]e of
 [m]adnes[s] him[s]elf! In [f]a[ct], his [e]ntire
 [e]x[p]er[i]en[c]e in the [e]ther, [s]o to [s]p[ea]k, was
 funda[m]entall[y] in ag[r]ee[m]ent w[i]th th[i]s anxiet[y]
 of young [S]o[c]rat[es]. B[ut] wh[at] [C]loud would [s]ay
 in [r]e[s]ponse, [t]o T[ri]f[a], [t]o him[s]elf, to [S]o[c]rat[es]
 - [w]hat [C]loud [w]ould [s]ay in [r]e[p]ly is exactly what
 [P]armen[i]de[s] [s]aid to this young [S]o[c]rat[es]
 him[s]elf, [th]at [th]i[s] anxiet[y] was a[n] a[n]xiet[y] of
 youth ("[C][l]oud, we're b[a]s[i]c[a]l[l]y the exa[c]t
 [s]ame [a]ge . . ."), [o]ne that [w]ould be ext[ingu]ish[ed]
 [w]hen sh[e]'d "learned not to despise any of [th]e[s]e
 [th]ings." In [sh]ort, T[ri]f[a] [sh]ouldn't a[l]low [Sh]in[r]a
 [m]o[r]es - or, [f]i[r]an[k]l[y], i[n]s]titutional [m]o[r]es [f]rom
 anywhere el[s]e for th[at] [m]a[tt]er! - to i[n]terfere with

her own p[r]o[c]e[ss]es. That [w]as all [C][l]oud [w]as
 [s]aying [r][e]al[ly]. I[f] [T][i]f[a] [w]an[t]ed [t][o] d[o] th[at]
 [a]t [S][e]v[e]n H[e]av[e]n, [th][e]n, sure, [th]at [w]as
 [f]ine! [W]ell, T[i]f[a] [a][p]pr[ec]iated the [k]ind [w]ords,
 [e]ven [i]f [i]t was an [a]w[k]ward subject for [C]loud of
 all [p][e]o[p]le to [b][e] [b]roaching, given the [f][a][c]t
 th[at] it was [k]ind of [b][l]atant[ly] obvious [th]at it was
 [C][l]oud [th]at T[i]fa would [p]ro[b]a[b]l[ly] do that with in
 the [b]ar. [W]hy [w]ould they [k]id [o]ne [a]nother [a][b]out
 that! [B]ut for [C]loud's [p]art - no he [d]i[d]n't [c]are [o]ne
 [w]ay or the other - he ju[s]t [th]ought [th]at [w]hen
 [s]ome[o]ne [s]p[ent] a [d]e[c]ent [ch]unk of time in [th][e]
 [e]n[th]er [th]at it [ch]anged [th]eir [p]er[s]p[ec]tive on that
 [k]ind of shit - what [c]on[c]lusion, after [a]ll, should
 they d[r]aw f[r]om the [c]ontem[p]l[ation] of [s]en[s]i[b]le
 o[b]je[c]ts? If she [w]an[t]ed [t]o [b]end [o]ver in her [o]wn
 [b]ar, it [w]asn't [ph]i[lo]s[oph]i[c]al[ly] [ou]t of [b]o[un]ds
 to him in the [l]ea[s]t. [L]i[k]e he [s]aid, to [s]ome [e]xtent
 [e]ros [w]as a g[a]te[w]a[y] - they shouldn't view it
 [s]im[p]l[ly] organi[c]al[ly] or [p]ure[ly] [s]en[s]i[b]l[ly]
 [e]ven [i]f [i]t was to some [e]x[tent] [e]x[ist]ent
 in[e]x[t]r[ic]a[b]l[ly] w[i]th[i]n those [r]ealms, at [l]ea[s]t
 from their [p]er[s]p[ec]tives in their [b]odies or
 [w]hat[e]ver. A g[a]te[w]a[y] to [w]hat though, [T]i[f]a
 [w]on[d]ered. [T]o a [d]i[f]ferent [t]ype of knowledge
 [C]loud [c]onfirmed. Wasn't he agai[n]s[t] [s]e[n]sual
 emp[ir]i[c]ism, T[i]fa [q]ue[r]ied - [b]ut [C][l]oud [q]ui[c]k[ly]
 [c]ountered that it was [b]y am[p]l[y]ing the
 [s]e[n]s[o]r[y] ex[p]e[r]ien[c]e, by [s]p[eed]ing it u[p] [th]at
 [th]e [s]e[n]s[o]r[y] ex[p]e[r]ien[c]e it[s]elf was
 t[r]an[s]cended - that was the whole [g]a[t]ew[a]y [p]art.
 A[g]ain, [C][l]oud wasn't arguing for any of th[is]
 [i]nd[i]s[c]r[i]m[in]ate[ly]! - he was in[s]tead m[a]k[ing] the
 [c]a[s]e [th]at [th]ese ampl[i]f[i]cations [c]ouldn't b[e]
 [c]omp[re]te[ly] [c]ut o[f]f! - [th]at i[f] "o[th]er [b]l[itter

and [b][i]llious humors wan[d]er a[b]out in the [b]o[d]y and find no [e]xit or esca[p]e, [b]ut are [p]lent u[p] w[i]th[i]n and [m]ingle their own va[p]ors with the [m][o]tions of the [s][ou]l, and are [b]len[d]ed with [th]em, [th]ey [p]ro[d]uce all [s]orts of [d]iseases.” That ju[s]t li[k]e [p]arti[c]les of matter [c]ould be s[p]ed u[p] to [c][r]eate anti-[g][r]avit[a]tional w[a]ves, the [s]en[s]o[r]y or[g]ans [c]ould [b]e [s]imi[l]ar[l]y [s][p]ed in order [t]o [t][r]an[s]end them[s]elves, [b]a[s]i[c]a[l]l[y]. [C]loud made a d[e]c[en]t [p]oint, [b]ut [h]ad [h]e [h]eard [b]a[c]k from [B]iggs and [W]edge - [w]ere they g[o]ing to ma[k]e it to [th]e little [th]ing Tifa was h[o]s[ti]ng that [S]unday? She ju[s]t [n]eeded to, you k[n]ow, g[e]t a d[e]f[ini]te h[e]ad [c]ount so she [c]ould k[n]ow how much [f]ood sh[e]’d [n]eeded. [C]loud [h]adn’t [h]eard ba[c]k, and [f][r]an[k]l[y] h[e] was [f]inding it a l[i]ttle [r]i[d]i[c]u[l]ou[s] [a]t th[at] point - be[c]ause at the ver[y] [l]ea[s]t, to [C]loud, they [c]ould at [l]ea[s]t R[S][V][P] one way or [th]e o[th]er. Sure, of [c]our[s]e, eros was a g[a]tew[a]y - there [c]ouldn’t be a totally univer[s]al [r]e[s]tri[c]tion op[er]e[s]s[ing] [e]very [s]ingle mem[b]er of a [s]o[c]iety, [b]ut at the [s]ame time if a [p]er[s]on [c]ouldn’t R[S][V][P] to [a]n [e]vent they ba[s]i[c]a[l]l[y] should [s]tart [e]ajting mud out of t[r]oughs with [p]igs, in C[loud’s] view at [l]ea[s]t! [P]eo[p]le who [r]e[refused] to R[S][V][P] [t]o events in a [t]imely [m]anner [r]eally had no [p]o[li]t[ic]al [s]o[c]iety! - or, for th[at] [m]atter, in any [s]o[c]iety! That was [C]loud’s [p]er[s]p[ec]tive at [l]ea[s]t! And T[i]ffag[r]ee! [F]ran[k]l[y], sh[e] was getting a [l]ittle [f]ru[s]t[r]ated with the whole [p]ro[c]e[s]s. She was, in her m[i]nd, doing a n[i]c[e] [th]ing - [th]rowing an Avalanche [q]u[ot]e-un[q]u[ot]e [S]unday [F]u[n]d[a]y, but sh[e] ju[s]t [n]eeded to k[n]ow a head [c]ount [A][S][A][P]. It [w]as alrea[d]y [W]ednes[d]ay [n]ight! [C]loud [n]oted [th]at [th]ey’d sent out the invi[t]ations,

[l]i[k]e, [t]wo weeks [b][a][c]k, and they [h][a]dn't even [h]eard [b][a][c]k from [h][a]lf of the po[t]ential a[tt]end[ee]s, which [a][c]tuall[y] [m]oved [C]loud to [th]ink [th]at [m]ayb[e] T[i]fa should ju[s]t [c][a]n[c]el the whole d[a]mn thing! [B]ut, no, [T]ifa was right - it was [t]oo [l]ate to [c][a]n[c]el, [b]e[c]ause then she'd [l]oo[k] [l]i[k]e the [a][s]shole. [C]l[oud] [th]ought [th]at [m]ay[b]e that was [p][r]efe[r]a[b]le! [M]ay[b]e that's what [n]ee[d]ed to ha[pp]en! There [n][e]e[d]ed to [b][e] some [r]ules to this shit, [r]ight?

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[C]l[oud] [a][s][k]ed [B][a][r]rett [p]oint [b][l]a[n]k [r]ight in [S]e[v]e[n]th H[ea]v[e]n: [W]hat [w]as [c][a]p[ita]l[i]sm [r]ea[l]ly? - [b]e[c]ause that's [w]hat he [w]as [a][c]tual[l]y [p]h[i]o[s]o[p]h[i]c[al][l]y o[p]p[os]ed to [v]is-a-v[is] Shinra, [n][o]? The [m]a[s]s [p]rodu[c]tion of [m]a[k]o e[n]ergy - was that [n]ot [f]unda[m]ental[l]y ju[s]t [f]ree [m]ar[k]et [c]a[p]ita[l]i[s]m at [i]ts [f]ine[s]t? - and there[f]ore wasn't [c]a[p]ita[l]i[s]m ju[s]t [f]unda[m]ental[l]y a [s]ingu[l]a[r]it[y] of [s]orts, ju[s]t a [c]om[p]l[ete] evis[ce]r[ati]on of [m]e[m]o[r]y, to [th]e ex[t]ent [th]at [m]e[m]o[r]y is [th]e [c]on[t]ext in [w]hich [w]e [c]on[s]tru[c]t our[s]elves, our [s]o[c]ieties? [C]l[oud] a[s]serted th[at] [c][a]p[ita]l[i]sm [d]i[d]n't g[i]ve a fu[c]k about th[at] [a]t all! - sim[p]l[y] [b]e[c]ause [c]a[p]ita[l]i[s]m [c]oul[d]n't, [b]e[c]ause if [c]a[p]ita[l]i[s]m [d]i[d]n't [r]uth[l]e[s]s[l]y [p]ur[s]ue [m]axi[m]um [p]r[of]its, then [s]ome[o]ne e[ls]e [w]ould. [C]l[oud] eventua[l]l[y] [a]s[k]ed [B][a]rrett if [c][a]p[ita]l[i]sm [a][c]tuall[y] [c]on[s]i[s]ted of [m]e[m]o[r]y [a]t all? [B]ut [B]arrett [d]i[d]n't [f]u[c]king know. The [f]u[c]k [d]id h[e] [e]ven [c]are - he was a[tt]empting [t]o ma[k]e an a[c]tive

[d]ifference [i]n th[i]ngs. No, [i]t [d][i][d]n't at all, [d][i]d [i]t? [C]a[p]ita[l]ism was the [s]ingu[l]ar fo[c]u[s] [s]ans [m]e[m]ory [p]ar ex[c]e[l]len[c]e - it [s]ought a[n] i[n][c]rea[s]e at whatever the [c]o[s]t, [r]egard[e]s[s] of the [c]ont[e]xt - d[r]iven by [th]e hy[p]o[th]eti[c]al o[th]er, [th]e hy[p]o[th]eti[c]al o[th]er [m]oving [c]a[p]ita[l]ism to [c]om[p]l[ie]te[l]y ignore [m]e[m]or[y] ho[l]isti[c]a[l]l[y]. The on[l]y [c]ontext [i]n wh[i]ch [c]a[p]ita[l]ism would [e]ven [r]e[m]otel[y] [c]onsider [m]e[m]o[r]y was [i]n [i]ts [f]uture [f]ore[c]asts, but even those ty[p]es of [r]e[p]orts were [f]unda[m]entally [m]yo[p]i[c] [i]n [c]ha[r]a[c]ter, weren't they? [P]lu[s] "[p]a[s]t [p]er[f]or[m]an[c]e [i]sn't [i]nd[i]cative of [f]uture results!" And even a [f]ive year [f]ore[c]ast would [b]a[s]i[c]ally ju[s]t [c]over the [a]ttention [s]pa[n] of [a] [b]e[ta] [f]ish in [th]e gra[n]d [s]cheme of [th]ings. No, [C][l]oud [s]aid, [c]a[p]ita[l]ism [c]l[iear]l[y] o[p]erated [s]a[ns] [m]e[m]o[r]y, [a]s a [s]ingu[l]ar[ity] - and there[f]ore was [f]undamental[l]y an [a]gent of de[s]t[abi]lization [f]rom a [p]o[l]iti[c]al [s]tand[p]oint - h[e] was ag[r]e[ei]ng with [B]a[r]rett! [B]a[r]rett wasn't [s]e[e]k[ing] agr[e]ement whe[n] [C][l]oud the[n] a[s]ked if there wasn't al[s]o [s]omethin[g] a[b]uttin[g] divine to that [t]y[p]e of [s]ingu[l]arity - [t]o [C][l]oud it was al[m]o[s]t [l]i[k]e the r[a]di[ati]on [p]oisoning of [p]ure [m]a[k]o it[s]elf and shit, [n][o]? [C]a[p]ita[l]ism as a [s]ingu[l]a[r]ity [c]ontained a [d]ivine e[l]ement, [i]n [i]ts [r]a[d]i[c]al [r]e[j]ection of [m]e[m]o[r]y [c]apita[l]ism was [c]ertainl[y] [d]ivine-adjac[ent]. It was [l]i[k]e [c]a[p]ita[l]ism [a]s [a]n un[f]e[tt]ered [s]e[e]king of in[c]r[e]a[s]e of [e]xp[ansion] [w]as [i]n [i]t[s]e[l]f [s]omethin[g] [w]orthy of [p]r[aise] in the [a]b[s]t[r]a[c]t, but for an [a]c[tual] [s]en[s]ible [s]o[c]iety the em[p]l[oy]m[ent] of unre[p]entant [c]a[p]ita[l]ism was the [m]o[s]t [d]e[s]t[abi]lizing and [s]elf-[d]e[s]tru[c]tive [p]o[l]iti[c]al [p]h[i]o[s]o[ph]y you [c]ould ever

[s]ub[s]c[ri]be to! [C]a[p]ita[l]ism was m[a]gni[f]i[c]e[n]t
i[n] the [a]bstr[ac]t, [b]ut i[f] you [a]c[t]ually
[s]ub[s]c[ri]bed to [th]e [th]eo[r]y in [p]r[ac]tice [th]en
you would almo[s]t [d]ef[i]n[ite]l[y], in [d]ue [t]ime,
[t]otal[l]y [d]e[s]t[r]oy your[s]elf and eve[r]ything a[r]ound
you! Ultimate[l]y, Ba[r]rett [r]eite[r]ated that he [d]i[d]n't
[r]eal[l]y have a [t]on of [t]ime to [d]i[s]cuss these
[t]ypes of [d]e[t]ails - [ph]ilo[s]o[ph]i[c]al [d]i[s]cussions
woul[d]n't, a[f]ter [a]ll, [f]un[d]a[m]entally [a]fter the
[r]apid envi[r]on[m]ental [d]e[s]t[r]u[c]tion that was
ongoing at the hands of Shinra! [C]loud [d]i[d]n't
[d]i[s]agree! Yet, at the [s]ame [t]ime, weren't [th]e [t]wo
of [th]em at [S]e[v]e[n]th H[e]av[e]n [d]r[in]k[ing]
[f]u[c]king [b]eers? How many [d]r[af]t [b]eers h[ad] they
[d]r[an]k [a]t th[at] [p]oint? They weren't gonna slow
[d]own Shin[r]a's [d]eg[r]a[d]ation of the [p]lanet via
con[s]uming [d]r[af]t [b]eers [e]ither! Shit, [br]o. It was
[i]f[k]e - [C]l[oud] [a]c[t]ual[l]y w[o]k[ed] up th[at] [m]or[n]ing
thi[n]k[ing] a[b]out [m]e[m]ory - [n]ot [c]a[p]ita[l]ism, [b]ut
[m]e[m]ory at [l]e[as]t - [a]b[ou]t [h]ow [h]e [c]ould
[b]e him[s]el[f] [a]c[r]o[s]s multi[p]le [p]lat[fo]rms and
shit, [b]ut how, with that in [m]ind, [m]e[m]ory [p]erha[p]s
wasn't a[t]tached to [B]e[ing] it[s]el[f] [e]ither. [C]l[oud]
[w]as al[w]ays [c]on[c]ur[r]ently multi[p]le ite[r]a[tions of
[h]im[s]e[lf], and [h]e [t]o [s]ome [e]xtent [p]ar[t]oo[k] in
[B]e[ing] a[c]ross those ite[r]a[tions, [b]ut at the same
time - [th]e [th]ought o[cc]urred to [C]loud that
[m]e[m]o[r]y wasn't ne[c]e[s]sa[r]ily [a]tt[ac]hed [t]o
[B]e[ing] [a]t all [t]imes [e]ither? [B]e[ing] and [m]e[m]o[r]y
- [w]hat [w]as their ex[a]c[t [r]ela[t]ion[sh]ip? [Th]at [th]e
soul [c]ould [f]un[d]a[m]entall[y] [b]e eternal, [b]ut [i]f
[i]ts [b]e[ing] was [d]i[s]a[s]sociated [f]rom [m]e[m]o[r]y as
w[e] un[d]er[s]tood it then obviou[s]l[y] it would [k]ind of
b[e] di[f]fi[c]ult to ve[r]i[f]y! As we [t]end [t]o [c]on[f]irm
expe[r]iences via [m]e[m]o[r]y and shit. [B]arrett gull[p]ed

[d]own his eighth [p][i]nt of Midgar [L][i]ght [b]ut that
 [d][i]d'n't [d]eter [C][l]oud [f]rom [p][r]od[ding] [f]urther at
 the [p]oint - [n]ame[!][y], that [f]unda[m]en[t]al[!][y]
 [c]a[p]ita[!][ism] [c]on[t]ained [n]o [m]e[m]or[y], and Being
 itself [p]erha[p]s on[!][y] [p]a[r]tial[!][y] [p]a[r]t[!][oo]k in
 [m]e[m]or[y]? Was [c]a[p]ita[!][ism] a form of [b][e]ing?
 [N]o, it [c]ouldn't [b][e]! - [n]ot unles[s] they too[k] a
 [s]t[!][a]tic v[a]ntage [p]oint on a[n] i[n]f[i]n[i]te urge to
 i[n]c[re]a[s]e and ex[p]and, which, to [s]ome exte[n]t,
 wasn't [th]at [th]e [d]rive of the i[n]f[i]n[i]te, [w]hich [w]as
 [f]un[d]ame[n]tally the transce[n]d[e]n[t], [w]hich [w]as -
 [n]o [B]eing [c]oul[d]n't [b]e [t]ran[s]cen[d]ent, [n]ot
 [t]otal[!][y], [r]ight? [C]loud [d][i]d'n't thin[k] [s]o. Ba[r]rett
 [h]ad [h]ad enou[gh] of thi[s] [f]u[c]king shit! - [a]nd he
 [s]t[!][a]mmed his [m]ug of [M]idgar [L]ight on the
 [c]ounter and [m]oseyed out the [b]ar ([h]e'd [h]eard
 a[b]out some new "[Q]ueen's [B]lood" [th]ing [th]at was
 [b]eing introdu[c]ed to [S]e[c]tor [S]even that he wan[t]ed
 [t]o [t]ry anyway). [T]i[f]fa [t]oo[k] the op[p]or[t]unity to
 as[k] [C][l]oud i[f] [h]e'd [h]ad a[n]y e[n]c[ou]nters with
 - you kn[o]w? - th[o]se [r]uth[!][es] ap[p]a[r]itions that
 [s]e[e]med to [b]e [h]aunting [h]im in[t]er[m]ittently
 [s]in[c]e re[t]urning [t]o [M]idg[a]r? [W]ell, Cloud [w]as
 after [a]ll [a] re[m]a[de] [m]an - in [m]ore [w]a[ys] than
 [o]ne, but no? [W]hy? Who el[s]e a[r]ound the [s]t[!][ums]
 had [s]e[e]n them r[e]c[entl]y? It [w]as [w]eird to
 [C][l]oud, a [!][ittle] [c]urious, he n[o]ted [t]o [T]ifa,
 m[o]st[!][ly] be[c]ause it [s]e[e]med [!][i]k[e] [s]ometimes (a)
 h[e]d s[e]e them, yet [s]ometimes (b) [n]o, he wouldn't
 [n]e[c]e[s]sari[!][y] [s]e[e] them [b]ut in[t]uit them, [b]ut
 [th]en o[th]er [t]i[m]es - [!][ike the o[th]er day - (c) the
 a[p]p[ar]itions [w]ould be [e]ve[r]y[w]here for
 [e]ve[r]y[o]ne to [s]e[e], and h[e]d whi[p] out his
 f[u]c[king B[u]ster [S]word with [T]i[f]fa b[y] his [s]i[de].
 [T]i[f]fa a[s]ked him to ext[r]a[p]olate on the [t]riad of

a-b-[c], if he [c]ould. Sh[e] [c][l]ear[l][y] wan[t]ed [t]o as[s]i[s]t [C][l]oud in reaching the b[o]ttom [o]f [a]ll [o]f thi[s], [s]o to [s]pea[k]. [W]ell, to [C][l]oud, it [w]as almost [l]i[k]e the E[l]eatics were [c]orre[c]t [a][l]l [a][l]ong - [th]at [th]is [t]ype of phe[n]ome[n]a - where some[t]imes (a) h[e]'d [s][ee] them and sh[e] wouldn't, [s]ometimes ((b)) he wouldn't [e]ven [s][ee] them [b]ut h[e]'d f[e]el them, and [th]en o[th]er times (c) [th]ey'd a[pp]ear to the [p]u[b]l[i]c at [l]arge, well, phe[n]ome[n]a [l]i[k]e that [b]a[s]i[c]a[l]ly un[d]ermined the [e]ntire [i]dea of [e]m[p]iri[c]ism v[i]a [s]en[s]e [p]er[c]e[p]tion, no? If [s]en[s]e [p]er[c]e[p]tion was [s]ome[th]ing [th]at [th]ey [c]ould [r]e[l]iably em[p]l[o]y as a fir[s]t [p]ri[n]c[i]ple to g[a]th[er] d[ata] a[nd] [th]en a[r]rive at [c]on[c]lusions [r]egarding the n[atu]re of the [c]or[p]o[r]eal [w]orld - then shit [l]i[k]e [w]hat [C][l]oud ju[s]t [d]e[s]c[r]ibed [c]oul[d]n't [b]e [p]o[s]si[b]le, [r]ight? [C][l]oud a[s]ked how [c]ould it [p]o[s]si[b]l[e]?! There had to [b]e a [s]e[p]a[r]ate [f]ir[s]t [p]ri[n]c[i]ple they'd n[e]ed to [r]e[f]er[en]c[e]. Al[s]o, he'd [s]witch to [F]er[n]et i[f] that was okay with Ti[f]a? [B]ut the p[r]o[b]lem with this [n]o[t]ion - [b]o[th] h[e] and Ti[f]a a[g]r[ee]ed (Ti[f]a [r]e[l]uctant[l]y a[g]r[ee]ed) - was [th]at (a) [th]ere was no evi[d]en[c]e that he [s]aw [th]em when o[th]ers [d]i[d]n't, and (b) there was no e[v]i[d]en[c]e e[v]en to him[s]e[f] that he [f]e[el]t [th]e[m] wh[e]n he [d]i[d]n't [s]ee them. [C]loud [c]ould [s]ee [th]em and h[e]'d [b]e sure [th]at h[e] saw [th]em [e]ven i[f] Ti[f]a [d]i[d]n't - [h]e'd [h]ave an em[p]iri[c]al [d]ata [p]oint that he just [c]oul[d]n't [p]r[ove]! - [b]ut when [C][l]oud [s]im[p]l[y] [f]e[el]t him[s]e[f] to [b]e in [c]ommunion with [s]omething [f]o[r]mle[s]s and in[c]o[r]p[or]eal, then [e]ven h[e] [c]ouldn't [b]e sure, [f]rom [a]n [e]m[p]iri[c]al [s]tand[p]oint, [w]hat it [w]as he ex[p]er[ien]c[ed], [b]e[c]ause his [e]x[p]er[ien]c[e] [l]a[c]ked a [f]orm [e]ntire[l]y - [h]e [d]i[d]n't [h]ave a

[s]en[s]e-b[a][s]ed em[p]i[r]i[c]al d[a]ta [p]oint to even
[p][r]ove to him[s]el[f] that he ex[p]e[r]ien[c]ed anything!
Ti[fa] [p]oured the [F]ernet and [s]aid [s]omething ab[ou]t
wanting to be[l]ieve C[l]oud. [A]t th[at] [p]oint [C][l]oud
[s]aid, hear[k]ening [b]a[c]k to the [p]oint that
[p]r[e]v[i]ou[s][l]y [c]aused [B]ar[r]et to [s]t[om]p [ou]t [o]f
the [b]ar, [w]hat [w]as [m]e[m]o[r]y any[w]ay? - [i][f] not
th[i][s] ty[p]e of [c]o[m]munion with a [f]orm[l]e[s]s and
in[c]o[r]p[or]eal ex[p]e[r]ien[c]e [l]ike these [r]uth[l]e[s]s
[a]p[pr]a[r]itions? [A]f[ter] all, he [r]e[m]em[b]ered a
[b]oat[oa]d of sh[ut] that [d][i][d]n't ne[c]e[s]sa[r]i[l]y
have i[m]ages a[tt]a[ched]! [A] [l]ot of his [m]e[m]o[r]i[es]
were in [f]a[c]t [f]orm[l]ess [f]ee[l]ings, but then - [l]ike
some of [C][l]oud's other en[c]o[un]ters - [d]id in[d]eed
[c]ontain i[m]ages, but they [f]eatured i[m]ages that on[l]y
a[p]peared to [C][l]oud, just [l]ike Ti[fa]'s
i[m]age-[m]e[m]ories o[n]ly a[p]peared to her! S[o]
[C]loud was of [th]e [a]c[c]ute [o]p[ini]on [th]at
[m]e[m]ories [th]em[s]elves were to [s]ome extent [l]ike
[th]ese [r]uth[l]e[s]s a[p]p[ar]itions he'd been
ex[p]e[r]ien[c]ing? - yet Tifa [q]ui[c]k[l]y [c]o[r]re[c]ted
him, a[p]tly [p]ointing [ou]t that [C][l]oud's [m]e[m]ories,
to the be[s]t of her k[n]ow[l]edge, had [n]ever [s]warmed
a[round] [S]e[v]e[n]t H[e]av[e]n and a[tt]acked
i[n]no[c]ent [c]iv[i]lians? [H]e [h]ad to gr[ab] th[at] [a]s
[t]rue! - "but you know what I m[ea]n, [T]i[fa]." Sh[e] did.
C[l]oud's [m]e[m]o[r]ies were [s]i[m]i[l]ar [t]o those
[r]uth[l]e[s]s a[p]p[ar]itions [i]n [t]erms of (a) and ((b)),
[b]ut not in [t]erms of (c). [C]loud [c]on[t]inued on to [s]ay,
[s]i[m]p[l]y a [f]resh [F]ernet, [th]at [th]e [p]oint
[m]o[r]e o[r] les[s] [r]e[m]ained, that [w]hile sure
[m]e[m]o[r]ies [w]ere [d]i[s]tinct, these a[p]p[ar]itions -
these un[i]denti[f]i[ed] [f]l[y]ing a[p]p[ar]itions, they
[f]un[d]a[m]ental[l]y un[d]er[m]ined the uti[l]it[y] of our
[s]en[s]e-[p]er[c]e[p]tion, [w]hich [w]as [s]omething, to

[C]l[oud]'s or[i]g[i]nal [p]oint, [t]hat [t]he [E][a]t[i]c[s] real[i]y [e]m[ph]asized. T[ri]f[a] a[c]k[n]ow[le]dged [C]l[oud]'s point about [m]e[m]o[r]y - she [d]i[d]n't [n]e[c]e[s]sa[r]il[y] [d]i[s]ag[r]e[e] w[i]t[h] [i]t ju[s]t [b]e[c]a[us]e [m]e[m]o[r]ies, to the [b]e[s]t of their k[n]ow[le]d[ge], [n]ever [ph]y[s]i[c]al[l]y mani[f]e[s]ted them[s]e[l]ves in [c]o[r]p[or]eal [f]orms, that it [s]tru[c]k [T]ri[f]a as [b]a[s]i[c]al[l]y [t]rue that [m]e[m]o[r]y was a [s]i[m]il[ar] [t]y[p]e of ex[p]e[r]ien[c]e, [s]ome[th]ing [t]hat [t]hey in[t]era[c]ted with [s]ome[t]i[m]es v[i]a [a]n [i]mage that wasn't [s]en[s]ible to [a]nyone [e]l[s]e, and [s]ometi[m]es [v][i]a [a] [v]ague feeling [t]hat [t]hey [c]ouldn't even [c]o[r]robo[r]ate them[s]el[ve]s! - [e]ven [m]e[m]o[r]y to [s]ome e[x]tent [c]omp[re]te[l]y un[d]ermi[n]ed [t]he [i]d[e]a [t]hat our [s]en[s]o[r]i[y] f[a]c[t]u[al]ities were [r]eliab[le] instruments t[o] [u]se t[o] [c]ome to [a]c[cu]r[ate] [c]o[n]c[lu]sions a[b]out [w]hat [w]e [p]e[r]c[e]ive to b[e] the [c]o[r]p[or]eal [w]orld.

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[C]l[oud] k[n]ew that of [c]o[ur]s[e] Ae[r]ith was [s]u[f]fe[r]ing [f]r[om] this g[n]awing [i]n[k]i[n]g that, you k[n]ow, [C]l[oud] m[ay] have [g]one and [g]iven aw[ay] the [f]l[ower] - or [p]erh[a]p[s] th[at] was a [t]ad [t]oo st[r]ong a [ph]r[ase] - m[ay]b[e] [p]assed [a]l[ong] was [a] [b]etter w[ay] to [p]ut it, that's what C[l]oud [p]ostu[lat]ed at [l]east - [b]ut i[n] a[n]y [c]ase he k[n]ew [t]hat Ae[r]ith k[n]ew [t]hat he [f]or[w]arded the [f]l[ower], [r]ight? But how did she [c]ome to [p]osse[s]s that k[n]ow[le]d[ge] exa[c]tly? - [c]ould it have [p]o[s]si[b]l[y] [b]een via the under [c]i[ty] [w]h[is]p[er] [n]et[w]o[r]k? Or [d]id Ae[r]ith [c]ome to [r]ea[l]ize [C]l[oud] g[ave] the shit aw[ay] via [s]ome [s]ort of [d]i[v]ine [i]ntu[it]i[on]?

Ba[s]i[c]a[l]ly, [C]l[oud] was a[t]t[em]p[t]ing [t]o
 [a][s]cer[t]ain the [s][our][c]e [or][i]g[i]n of [A]e[r]ith's
 know[le]dge - was it o[p]i[n]ion or i[n]tu[it]i[on] - [w]hereas
 Aerith [w]as ch[ie]f[ly] [c]on[c]erned with [th]e
 im[p]l[i]c[at]ions of [th]e know[le]dge it[s]elf. She
 a[c]tua[l]ly made it [q]uite [c]l[ear] that [sh]e wasn't [s]ure
 if [C]l[oud]'s [p][r]eva[r]i[c]ations were [r]ea[l]ly the [p]oint
 she was a[t]t[em]p[t]ing [t]o ma[k]e when she b[r]ought the
 whole [f]l[ower] [r]e-gi[f]ting u[p] to [C]l[oud] - [th]at [th]e
 issue [a]t h[an]d wasn't, [p]erha[p]s, how she ob[t]ained
 thi[s] [p]ar[t]i[c]u[l]ar k[n]ow[le]dge, but in[s]t[ea]d
 wh[e]ther or [n]ot [C]l[oud] g[a]ve the [f]l[ower] a[w]ay,
 [w]hich to [b]e [f]air she [w]asn't, [l]i[k]e, o[ff]end[ed] [b]y -
 Ae[r]ith was just a [l]ittle [c]u[r]ious? Who'd [C]l[oud]
 "[f]or[w]ard" it [t]o any[w]ay? [T]i[f]fa, [r]ight? Of [c]ourse it
 [w]as [T]i[f]fa - [w]hich [w]as [t]ota[l]l[y] [f]ine! They [w]ere
 a[c]tua[l]l[y] [f]riends! [B]ut [C]l[oud], i[f] [p]os[s]ible,
 wan[t]ed [t]o [s]tay on this [p]r[i]or [p]oint - this
 e[p]i[s]t[em]o[l]og[ic]al [p]oint - [b]e[c]ause he [th]ought
 [th]ere was a [p]r[etty] im[p]ortant d[i]s[t]i[n]c[t]ion [t]o [b]e
 [f]ound there, [b]etween knowing [s]omething via
 o[p]inion - [b]e[c]ause, [f]or [i]n[s]t[an]c[e], [s]ome
 [S]e[c]tor [S]ix d[i]p[sh]it was ya[p]ping his f[u]c[k]ing
 g[u]ms in the [s][u]m - or [b]y [c]ontr[ast] [b]e[c]oming
 [f]a[m]iliar in a [m]ore [p]ure [f]a[sh]ion. [T]here was
 [p]ure knowledge of [th]ings - and [th]en [th]ere was
 [b]ull[sh]it you h[ear]d th[ir]d hand from dou[ch]e[b]ags in
 the [S]e[c]tor [S]ix [S]u[m]. [C]l[oud] [f]elt [l]i[k]e Ae[r]ith
 p[r]o[b]a[b]l[y] knew via [th]e [f]ormer m[et]hod - [c]ould
 she [c]onf[irm] though? Instead Ae[r]ith ch[ose] to
 [p]o[s]it the [r]adi[c]al n[ot]ion that may[b]e it [c]ould have
 [b]een [b]o[th]? Sure, [C]l[oud] [th]ought [th]at was
 [p]o[ssi]b[le] (he guessed . . .) - [b]ut he [d]i[d]n't [th]in[k]
 [s]o - it was [p]o[ssi]b[le] yet not [p]ro[b]a[b]le - in [f]a[c]t,
 [C]l[oud] [f]elt [l]i[k]e he k[n]ew that Aerith k[n]ew, [n]o,

[n]ot via [s]ome [w]hi[s][p]er [n]et[w]ork, [n]o, [n]ot [b]y
 o[p]inion at all, [b]ut i[n][s]t[ea]d [b]y dir[e]ct i[n]tuition.
 And it just [s]o h[a]p[p]ened th[at] it was [b]y his own
 [i]ntu[i]t[i]ve [c]a[p]a[b]i[i][i]ties th[at] [C]l[ou]d k[n]ew
 [th]at Ae[r]ith k[n]ew [th]at he g[a]ve [th]at [v]e[r]y
 [f]u[c]king [f]l[ow]er [a]w[ay] [v]i[a] her own intu[i]t[i]on,
 [n]ot by a[n]y [l]u[r]id [r]u[m]or [m]onger [f][r]o[ll]i[c]king
 shame[l]e[s]s[l]y in the [s][l]ums. Were there any
 [r]u[m]or [m]ongers [f][r]o[ll]i[c]king sh[a]me[l]e[s]s[l]y in
 the [s][l]ums though? [S][p][r]ea[d]ing
 [d]i[s]in[f]or[m]a[tion] [a]b[ou]t [C]l[ou]d [g]iving [a]w[ay]
 [f]l[ow]ers to a [p]l[et]ho[r]a of wo[m]en [i]n [M]i[d]g[ar]!
 [N]o, that [w]asn't the [w]ay [A]erith [h][a]d [a]c[ce]s[s]ed
 [h]er k[n]owledge - [n]ot at all. [A][n]y[w]ay, [A]erith
 [th]ought [ma]ybe [C]l[ou]d should [c]on[s]ider [th]in[k]ing
 t[w]i[c]e bef[ore] [g]iving [a]w[ay] [f]l[ow]ers [a]g[ain]. That
 [w]as [a]ll. [N]ot that she was [p]ar[t]i[c]u[l]ar[l]y
 [p]e[r]f[ect]u[r]bed. [N]ot in the [l]e[as]t a[c]tua[l]l[y]! [B]ut
 may[b]e [C]l[ou]d [c]ould just - hy[p]o[theti]c[a]l[l]y - if a
 [g]irl [l]i[k]e h[er] w[er]e to [g]i[v]e h[i]m a [b]eautif[ul]
 ye[l]l[ow] [f]l[ow]er in the [m]i[d]dle of [M]i[d]g[ar], [m]ay[b]e
 [h]e should [h]old onto [th]e [th]ing! Or at the ver[y] l[ea]st
 don't [g]o and [g]ive it to some other [f]u[c]king chi[ck]!
 Was it real[l]y that d[i]f[f]i[c]ult to just [c]ontinuall[y]
 [k]ee[p] a [s]ingle [f]l[ow]er on your [p]e[r]son? [N]ot that
 it was [A]erith's [b]usiness [a][n]y[w]ay, [b]e[c]ause
 [c]l[earl]y [i]f [C]l[ou]d [w]an[t]ed [t]o g[i]f[t] the [f]l[ow]er
 [t]o [T]ifa - sure that was [f]ine, it was totally his [o]p[t]io[n]
 if that's [h]ow [h]e w[a]n[t]ed [t]o go a[b]ou[t] it, [b]ut
 [d]i[d]n't [C]l[ou]d th[i]nk [i]t was just a [l]i[t]tle rude?
 [N]o, in[s]tead he [th]ought [th]at [th]ere was a
 [n]o[t]a[b]le [d]i[s]tinction [b]e[t]ween the [t]wo [t]ypes of
 k[n]owledge - [b]ut if Ae[r]ith [d]id [s]o [h]appen to [h]ear
 [i]t [i]n the [s]t[r]ee[t], then [w]ould sh[e] b[e] [w]illing [t]o
 [t]ell [C]l[ou]d who was f[l]a[p]ping their [l]i[p]s? [W]as

any[o]ne out in the [s][l]ums [s][p]e[c]ifi[c]a[l]ly [l]oo[k]ing to [r]at his [s][p]i[k]y a[s]s out? I[n] a[n]y [c]a[s]e, [r]egard[ing]e[s]s of all that, [C][l]oud [t]ota[l]ly under[s]t[oo]d wh[er]e A[er]ith was [c]o[m]ing [f]rom, and [h]e gue[s]sed [h]e ju[s]t wasn't [r]eally th[i]n[k]i[n]g at the [t]ime, when h[e] [r][e]-g[i]f[t]e[d] the [f]l[ow]er - [T]ifa [t]oo[k] n[o]te of the [f]l[ow]er, and he [d]i[d]n't wan[t] [t]o go in[t]o the wh[o]le fl[ow]er girl a[n]ecd[ote], s[o] he figured it m[i]ght be [k]i[n]d of [n]i[c]e to, you k[n]ow, [p]ass a[l]ong the [l]ove? Ae[r]ith [r]e[p]eated the [ph]r[ase] [p]ass a[l]ong the [l]ove in [a] w[ay] that, [q]uite [a]m[a]zing[ly], wasn't [c]o[m]p[li]e[t]e[ly] [f]i[l]led to the br[i]m with [c]o[n]t[em]p[er]n[ation] and [c]o[n]t[em]p[t]. [T]o [C][l]oud there was something ine[f]fa[b]ly [t]rue a[b]out [c]o[n]t[em]p[er]n[ation] the [f]e[m]a[le] [f]orm, [i]n [i]ts [b]i[j]unt [ph]y[s]i[c]al [i]te[r]n[ation] - there was no [l]u[r]id o[p]i[n]ion [p]r[e]sent w[i]th[i]n [i]t, although C[l]oud [d]i[d]n't e[x]p[er]i[m]e[n]t[ally] e[x]p[re]s[s] thi[s] [i]dea to [A]e[r]ith [a]t the [t]ime, given her [r]e[t]ic[en]c[e] to e[n]gage i[n] the op[i]n[i]on [v]er[s]us [i]n[t]u[i]t[i]o[n] di[c]hotomy he [s]t[ar]ted the [c]o[n]v[er]s[ation] with - yet he was [s]till o[b]v[i]ous[ly] [c]o[n]t[em]p[er]n[ating] her [f]o[r]m [a]s this b[a]c[k] [a]nd [f]o[r]th o[c]curred. Her [t]y[p]o[ph]i[c]al [ph]i[s]o[ph]i[c]al d[i]s[p]o[s]i[t]i]o[n] when it [c]ame to [l]ove triangles [w]as [w]aning just [s]l[i]ght[ly] - this [l]ittle [f]l[ow]er [i]n[c]i[dent] s[e]emed to [a]l[m]o[s]t [r]ile her up e[m]o[t]ionally, [a]lthough it was [c]l[ear] to [C][l]oud when she [r]e[p]eated the [ph]r[ase] [p]ass a[l]ong the [l]ove that she wasn't ent[i]rely r[i]led u[p]. Not yet at [l]east. Aerith [f]ina[l]ly [c]o[n]f[i]rmed [f]or [C][l]oud that, yes, it was v[i]a [p]ure [i]n[t]u[i]t[i]o[n] she'd [s]u[r]m[i]sed her fl[ow]er no [l]onger [r]e[s]i[d]ed on his [p]e[r]s[on], and [s]ure [sh]e ag[r]eed [th]at [th]ere was a [c]e[r]tain di[s]t[i]n[c]t[i]o[n] be[t]ween the [t]wo [t]ypes of kn[ow]l[e]dge. [C][l]oud then [a]s[k]ed [A]erith [w]hat

she [th][ou]ght [w]as [th]e [c][au]se of each [t]y[p]e - well, [o]bvious[ly] [o][p]inion [c]on[s]i[st]ed of [l]i[te]ral [w]h[i][s]p[er] [n]et[w]orks, she [s]aid, from what [p]eo[p]le [s]aw [a]nd heard [a]nd [a]ll that. This [a][ll]ow[ed] [C]l[oud] to note that wasn't eve[r]ything Shin[r]a [w]as [w]or[k]ing on - e[s]p[eci]al[ly] H[o]j[o] - was that [n]ot [b]a[s]i[c]al[ly] a[n]other [w]hi[s]p[er] [n]et[w]ork, that H[o]j[o], de[s]p[ite] [b]eing a [s]o-c[al]led [s]cientist, [w]as [s]im[p]ly [w]or[k]ing [o]ff [o]f [w]hat [h]e and [h]is a[s]so[c]iates heard and [s]aw? Ae[r]ith was [t]em[p]t[ed] [t]o [s]ay H[o]j[o]'s o[p]e[r]a[t]ion was a [m]ore [s]yste[m]a[tic] version of th[at], yes, [b]ut in[s]tead a[b]r[u]p[tly] [c]u[t] her[s]e[lf] o[f]f, [b]e[c]ause when she [c]on[s]i[d]ered it [f]urther she [c]on[c]l[u]d[ed] the un[d]er [c]i[t]y [w]h[i][s]p[er] net[w]or[k]s [w]ere a[c]tua[l]ly [q]uite [c]om[p]l[ex] them[s]elves! [S]o in[s]tead she a[c]cused [C]l[oud] of changing the [s]ubj[ect], th[en] she noted th[at], [a]c[tua]lly, [sh]e wan[t]ed [t]o [sh]ift [t]o [p]i[c]s, but [n]o[t] to the [s]o-c[al]led [w]hispe[r] [n]et[w]or[k]s of H[o]j[o] versus the [w]ell-k[n]own [w]h[i][s]p[er] [n]et[w]or[k]s of the [S]e[c]tor [S]ix [S]ums, [n]o! [N]o, [C]l[oud] under[s]tood. [E]ven [h]e [d]i[d]n't [e]ven r[e]ally want [t]o [t]alk abou[t] H[o]j[o]! Maybe he was obfus[c]ating. [C]l[oud] a[p]ologized, but Ae[r]ith [s]aid it wasn't [n]e[ce]ssa[r]y, there was [n]o [s]o[r]ry [n]eeded [r]eal[ly] - they [p]ro[b]a[b]ly shouldn't [b]eat a [d]ead [h]orse, [s]o to [s]p[ea]k. [B]ut, [u]gh - what a [h]or[r]e[n]d[ous] [t]urn of ph[r]ase. No, [C]l[oud] ag[r]eed - it was a [t]e[r]ri[b]le [s]ay[ing], a [s]c[um]b[ag] [s]ay[ing], [r]eal[ly] - H[o]j[o] p[ro]b[ab]ly would [d]o it though, [b]eat a [d]ead horse? - a[n]d the[n] [f]u[c]king, [l]i[k]e, [i]nje[c]t [i]t w[i]th [m]a[k]o or [s]ome shit, [m]a[k]e it a [m]utant [s]teed! G[r]o[s]s! [F]u[c]king loser!

[C][l]oud just [a]t th[a]t [m]o[m]ent had begun to [r]e[c]apitu[l]ate, [th]is [t]ime [t]o [th]e [t]wo of [th]em - [A]e[r]ith [a]nd [T]ifa - how it wasn't a[c]tually the [c]ase that h[e]'d s[ee]n the [b][e]ing, no, there wasn't i[n] [f][a][c]t a[n] [a][c]tual [ph][y]s[i]c[al] [b]eing i[n] that se[n]se of the [ph]rase - it wasn't [i]f[k]e the me[n] i[n] the [b][l]a[c]k [c][l]oa[k]s they'd [b]e [f]o[l]l[ow]ing in Re[b]irth (were ei[th]er of [th]em [f]amiliar with [th]at [p][l]ot[ti]ne yet?). He'd just [b]egan to ex[p]l[ain] [th]is to [th]e [b]oth of [th]em, and [C][l]oud [d]i[d]n't [f]eel a[n]y [d]i[f]fe[r]ent a[b]out it [n]e[c]e[s]s[ar]i[l]y - the [f][a][c]t t[h]at he was [t]elling [th]e [b]oth of [th]em - [T]i[f]a was [b]e[h]ind the [b]ar [a]nd [A]erith just [h]appened to [b]e there. It was [f]ine. [W]ere they [f]amiliar [w]ith [R]e[b]irth yet? [P]ro[b]a[b]l[y] [n]ot, [r]ight? [B]ut [n][o], in thi[s] [c]a[s]e [C][l]oud had [b]een fu[c]king, you k[n]o[w, just [s]itting on this [c]ar[p]et in Wu[t][ai] at the [t]i[m]e - he [s]at on the [c]ar[p]et [c]ros[s]-[l]egged - and then he [s]u[d]denl[y] in[t]uited a [p]urel[y] [d]ivine b[e]ing [e]man[a]ting in the [t]riangle head [e]ncap[s]u[l]at[ed] in the [p]erfe[ct]l[y] [s]q[ua]re [d]es[i]gn that [r]e[p]e[ate]d [e]ndl[e]s[s]l[y] th[r]oughout the [e]n[t]i[r]e [c]ar[p]et. This [t]ri[an]gle head [w]as [w]hat [C][l]oud [c]ould onl[y] des[cri]be [a]s [a] "[l]aughing [A][l]ah". That's how it [s]tru[c]k him. There wasn't [r]ea[l]l[y] [a] [q]uestion [a]bout [i]t [i]n [C][l]oud's mind and it was a[c]tua[l]l[y] beauti[f]ul. Yes, [a] "[l]aughing [A][l]ah" [w]as the onl[y] [w]ay he [c]ould [d]e[s]c[r]ibe the [d]ivine being, which [c]ertainl[y] [c]ommuni[c]ated with him [a]s he [s]at [c]ros[s]-[l]egged in [W]utai in a [s]ome[w]hat [m]y[s]ti[c]al [m]a[n]ner, al[b]eit not [q]uite ver[b]all[y], [b]ut the [b]eing [c]ertainl[y] [c]o[m]mu[n]i[c]at[ed] in a

w[ay] that [c]aused [C][l]oud to [s][m]ile. [C][l]oud, s[m]ile?! The [t]wo wo[m]en [f]ound that [t]otal[l]y hi[l]arious! [T]i[f]fa n[ea]r[l]y [f]u[c]ked u[p] the b[ee]r sh[e] was [p]ou[r]ing she was [s]o [s]ur[p]rised to h[ea]r [C][l]oud of [a]ll [p]eo[p]le [t]a[l]k[ing] [a]b[ou]t him[s]el[f] [s]mi[l]ing. [B]ut [n][ei]ther [T]i[f]fa [n]or [A]erith [f]ound this [a][n]e[c]d[ote] of [C]loud's to [b]e [d]i[s]i[n]genuous i[n] a[n]y way - i[n] [f]a[c]t they [b]oth [f]u[l]ly [s]uppo[r]ted [C][l]oud's [c]on[f]essions and mo[r]e o[f]ten than not [e]ven [f]ound them [l]egitimate[l]y intru[ding] (b[ut] there were, of [c]our[s]e, [s]ome ex[c]eptions!), al[b]eit they gene[r]al[l]y [f]ound the ane[c]dotes i[n]triguing i[n] a [o]ne-on-[o]ne [s]etting, as [o]p[posed] to thi[s] [F][F]M [a]rrangement. [B]ut that was c[lear]l[y] [f]ine! It just [s]o h[a]ppened [A]erith was a[r]ound and she [p]o[p]ped in the [b]ar. N[o] [b]ig deal at [a]ll! Yet, [w]hile [c]ontem[p]l[ating] [w]hether or [n]ot a[n]other [M]os[c]ow [M]ule was ad[v]isable or [n]ot, [C]loud ex[p]r[es]sed [q]uite [v]igo[r]ousl[y] that he wan[t]ed [t]o [r]e[lay] a [s]ub[s]e[qu]ent ane[c]d[ote] that he [v]iewed a [p]r[o]p[ri]e[t]ies of the [c]ar[p]et en[c]ounter, if that was o[k]ay? Of [c]ourse! Well, [s]p[ec]i[f]icall[y] it [w]as that [w]hen he [p]o[pp]ed in[t]o his [i]n[c]al [c]o-[o]p[er]g[r]o[c]e[r]y [s]t[ore] that [m]or[n]ing, [f]or just a [f]ew [m]i[n]or [i]tems, a [c]ou[p]le h[and] [f]r[uits] r[e]ally, [a]nd the new [c]a[sh]ier [a]sked him - [r]ight as [h]e sh[ut]t[er]ed [h]is [h]ead[ph]ones [u]p o[f]f [o]f his ears to [s]t[ar]t the [f]ormalized [s]ales [t]r[ans]a[c]tion - [i]f h[is] b[r]other "or [s]omething" went there [s]ome[t]imes? - [t]o the g[r]o[c]e[r]y [s]t[ore]? Did [C][l]oud have a [b]r[other] [b]y a[n]y chance? [B]e[c]ause she, the [n]ew [c]a[sh]ier, felt [i]k[e] sh[e]'d s[e]en him [b]efo[r]e? Well, [C]loud [s]aid to the [c]a[sh]ier, thin[k]ing a[b]out it [f]or a [s]e[c]ond he [f]ound it [q]uite [p]o[s]si[b]le [th]at [th]is a[l]l[e]ged do[p]p[e]lga[n]ger was a[c]tual[l]y [f]u[c]king just

him! - [C][l]oud him[s]el[f]! - [th]at the [c][a]shier was in [th]at [p]arti[c]u[ll]ar in[s]tan[c]e [c]on[f]using [C][l]oud for his a[c]tual [s]el[f], [th]at [th]is [c]ashier on[l]y bel[ie]ved sh[e]'d [s][ee]n [s][o]me[o]ne who [l]oo[k]ed just [l]i[k]e [C][l]oud [b]efore [b]e[c]ause sh[e]'d, in [f]a[c]t, s[ee]n [C][l]oud [b]e[f]ore. He [w]alked a[w]ay just [m]o[m]en[t]a[r]ily, he [t]old [T]ifa [a]nd [A]e[r]ith, just [t]o [t]o[s]s his [b][a][s]i[k]et [b][a][c]k in[t]o the [s]t[a]c[k] of [b][a][s]i[k]ets [b]ehind the auto[m]a[t]ic d[oor]s. Yeah, he'd [t]a[k]e one [m][or]e [M]ule, pl[e]ase [T]ifa? The new [c]ashier was [c]hu[c]k[l]ing when [C][l]oud a[r]rived b[a]c[k] [a]t the [c]he[c]kout [c]ounter [r]eady to [p]ay for his [sh]it - [sh]e was in the [p][r]ocess of ente[r]ing the item num[b]er for his [r]ed [q]uinoa, [c]hu[c]k[l]ing a[l]one - "it [c]ould've [b]een you" she [r]e[p]eated, chuc[k]l[ing], [b]ut then, [C][l]oud [r]e[l]ayed [t]o [T]ifa and Ae[r]ith, she a[c]tua[l]ly [c]ame a[r]o[un]d to [C][l]ou[d]'s [p]arti[c]u[ll]ar hy[p]othesis. The new [c][a]shier, [a]fter thin[k]ing [a]bout it, [c]ame to [a]gree with [C][l]oud, th[at] she [a][c]tua[l]ly p[r]o[b]a[b]l[y] had [s]een him in the gr[oo]ce[r]y [s]t[or]e [b]ef[or]e, and that she'd just [n]ow er[r]o[n]eously [f]igured [h]e [h]ad a [b]rother, when in [f]a[c]t this hypo[th]eti[c]al [b]ro[th]er was [a]c[tua]lly just [C][l]oud himsel[f]. [T]ifa [c]on[s]id[er]ed, [a]fter she'd inge[s]t[ed] the [f]ull [a]ne[c]d[ote] and [s]erved [C][l]oud his [r]e[f]r[esh]ed [M]o[s]c[ow] [M]ule, that it was [s]omewhat [l]i[k]e[l]y [th]at [th]e [c]ashier wan[t]ed [t]o [q]u[ote]-un[qu]o[te] [s]u[c]k his [c]o[c]k, and [C][l]oud [d]idn't [n]e[c]e[s]sa[r]i[l]y [d]i[s]ag[r]e[e] with the [n]otion! - he [c]ertain[l]y [c]on[s]id[er]ed it [p]o[s]si[b]le, [th]at [th]is [c]ashier [m]ay have [b]een a[m]ena[b]le to some[th]ing [l]i[k]e [th]at, but [th]at wasn't [q]u[ite] the [p]oint! There [w]as a [t]y[p]e of [w]isdom [l]i[ab]le in the exch[ange], [w]asn't there? - regard[less] of [w]hether or not the [c]ashier [w]anted to per[f]orm [f]el[icit]atio[n]

[C]loud? Ae[r]ith, by [c]on[t]r[ast], [t]oo[k] a more [ph]ilo[s]o[ph]i[c]al [a]ngle to her [a]nal[y]s[is] of the en[c]ounter, [b]e[c]ause sh[e] agr[ee]ed with [C]loud [th]at [th]e [c]a[sh]ier exh[i]b[it]ed a [c]ertain [s]p[irit]ual in[s]ight, even [i]f [i]t was in[a]dvertent. [A]erith, [f]or her [p]art, [d]idn't [p]ut much of a[n]y sto[c]k i[n]t[er]o the [c]a[sh]ier's i[n]t[er]entions, whether or [n]ot they were [s]or[d]id, be[n]ign, or [s]im[p]l[y] in[d]i[f]ferent. U[p]on [a]c[k]n[ow]l[ed]ging this T[ri]fa [n]oted that she [r]e[c]og[n]ized [A]e[r]ith's [p]oint of [v]iew as [v]alid, th[at] it was [p]ro[b]a[b]l[y] the "[r]ight way [t]o [t]ake [i]t [i]n," [e]ven [i]f sh[e], [T]ri[fa], wasn't [p]er[s]onal[l]y at the [p]oint of [p]articipat[ing] in [q]uite that [l]evel of obje[c]t[i]v[i]ty (i[f] [th]ey [c]ould, in [f]a[c]t, [c]all it [th]at). [C]loud m[en]tioned [th]at, [a]t [th]e [en]d of the [d]ay, [h]e [c]oul[d]n't [h]el[p] [i]t [i]f a [c]er[tain] [p]er[s]on ex[p]erien[c]ed an [ur]ge to [s]u[ck] his [c]o[ck] - that [w]hether or [n]ot [s]ome[one] [wa]n[t]ed [t]o [s]u[ck] any[one]'s k[n]ob [w]as [s]omething [u]n[k]n[ow]able, that [C]loud [c]ouldn't [s]im[p]l[y] [t]oss [p]otential [s]p[irit]ual en[c]ounters to the way[s]ide [p]ure[l]y be[c]ause of a [p]ur[p]orted [s]ordid [s]ub[t]ext or in[t]ention. Both [w]omen ag[r]eed [w]ith th[is], yet [p]erh[a]ps Ae[r]ith just a [t]ad more than [T]ri[fa]? - not to [s]ay [T]ri[fa] was [s]omehow [b]e[s]ide her[s]el[f] with jealou[s]y i[n] a[n]y ma[t]erial way - no, th[is] d[is]i[n]j[un]ctio[n] [b]e[t]w[ee]n [T]ri[fa] [a]nd [A]e[r]ith was [p]ro[b]a[b]l[y] [r]ooted more [s]o in Ae[r]ith's [b]a[s]i[c]al[l]y a[b]s[ur]d [a]b[ilit]y to [r]e[m]ain [ph]ilo[s]o[ph]ically undet[er]red [a]b[ou]t other [w]o[m]en [w]hile s[t]eeped i[n] a[n] obvious [l]ove [t]riangle. Did sh[e] [e]ven [l]ike [C]loud, r[e]al[l]y? [B]e[c]ause it was [r]eal[l]y [q]uite [e]vident that [C]loud, [T]ri[fa], and Ae[r]ith were [c]olle[c]tive[l]y [e]n[t]w[i]ned i[n] a sort of [l]ove [t]riangle, [b]ut Ae[r]ith, for her part,

[m][ai]nt[ai]ned [q]uite the uni[q]ue [a][b]i[li]t[y] to [r]e[m][ai]n es[s]entia[li]t[y] [ph]i[lo]so[ph]i[c]al [a][b]out it [a]ll - she [d]i[d]n't [s]eem to [a]llow f[eel]ings of jea[lo]u[s]y to over[c]ome her in the [le]ast when [C]oud re[lay]ed anecdotes a[bout] [c]ashiers th[at], if [th]e [th]r[ee] [w]ere [b]eing h[on]est, [c]learly [w]anted to [w]hip the guy's [c]o[ck] out and [s]u[ck] [on] it for an ex[t]e[n]d[ed] i[n]t[er]val of [t]ime. [D]id she [e]ven r[eal]ize [k]e [C]oud? H[is] i[n]d[i]v[is]ual f[eel]ings on the situ[a]tion were a [l]ittle am[b]iguous, even when he was [a]ll [a]lone. [C]oud was of [c]our[s]e i[n]c[ap]a[b]le of as[s]es[s]ing his own f[eel]ings [f]or [s]omewhat obv[i]ous r[eas]ons.