Last year, I spent six months participating in what I was told was a psychological experiment. I found an ad in my local paper looking for imaginative people looking to make good money, and since it was the only ad that week that I was remotely qualified for, I gave them a call and we arranged an interview.

They told me that all I would have to do is stay in a room, alone, with sensors attached to my head to read my brain activity, and while I was there I would visualize a double of myself. They called it my “tulpa.”

It seemed easy enough, and I agreed to do it as soon as they told me how much I would be paid. The next day, I began. They brought me to a simple room and gave me a bed, then attached sensors to my head and hooked them into a little black box on the table beside me. They talked me through the process of visualizing my double again, and explained that if I got bored or restless, instead of moving around, I should visualize my double moving around, or try to interact with him, and so on. The idea was to keep him with me the entire time I was in the room.

I had trouble with it for the first few days. It was more controlled than any sort of daydreaming I’d done before. I’d imagine my double for a few minutes, then grow distracted. By the fourth day, however, I could manage to keep him “present” for the entire six hours. They told me I was doing very well.

The second week, they gave me a different room with wall-mounted speakers. They told me they wanted to see if I could still keep the tulpa with me in spite of distracting stimuli. The music was discordant, ugly, unsettling, and it made the process a little more difficult, but I managed nonetheless. The next week, they played even more unsettling music, punctuated with shrieks, feedback loops, what sounded like an old school modem dialing up and guttural voices speaking some foreign language. I just laughed it off; I was a pro by then.

After about a month, I started to get bored. To liven things up, I started interacting with my doppelganger. we’d have conversations, play rock-paper-scissors, I’d imagine him juggling or break dancing, or whatever caught my fancy. I asked the researchers if my foolishness would adversely affect their study, but they encouraged me.

So, we played and communicated, and that was fun for a while…and then it got a little strange. I was telling him about my first date one day and he corrected me. I’d said my date was wearing a yellow top, and he told me it was a green one. I thought about it for a second and realized he was right. It creeped me out, and after my shift that day I talked to the researchers about it. “You’re using the thought-form to access your subconscious,” they explained. “You knew on some level that you were wrong, and you subconscious corrected yourself.”

What had been creepy was suddenly cool. I was talking to my subconscious! It took some practice, but I found that I could question my tulpa and access all sorts of memories. I could make it quote whole pages of books I’d read once, years before, or things I was taught and immediately forgot in high school. It was awesome.

That was around the time I started “calling up” my double outside of the research center. Not often, at first, but I was so used to imagining him by now that it almost seemed odd not to see him. So, whenever I was bored, I’d visualize my double. Eventually, I started doing it almost all the time. It was amusing to take him along like an invisible friend. I imagined him when I was hanging out with friends, or visiting my mom; I even brought him along on a date once. I didn’t need to speak aloud to him, so I was able to carry out conversations with him and no one was the wiser.

I know that sounds strange, but it was fun. Not only was he a walking repository of everything I knew and everything I had forgotten, he also seemed more in touch with me than I did at times. He had an uncanny grasp of the minutiae of body language that I didn’t even realize I was picking up on. For example, I thought the date I brought him along on was going badly, but he pointed out how she was laughing a little too hard at my jokes and leaning towards me as I spoke, and a bunch of other subtle clues I wasn’t consciously picking up on. I listened and let’s just say that the date went very well.

By the time I’d been at the research center for four months he was with me constantly. The researchers approached me one day after my shift and asked me if I’d stopped visualizing him. I denied it and they seemed pleased. I silently asked my double if he knew what prompted that, but he just shrugged it off. So did I.

I withdrew a little from the world at that point. I was having trouble relating to people. It seemed to me that they were so confused and unsure of themselves, while I had a manifestation of myself to confer with. It made socializing awkward. Nobody else seemed aware of the reasons behind their actions, why some things made them mad and others made them laugh. They didn’t know what moved them…but I did, or at least I could ask myself and get an answer

A friend confronted me one evening. He pounded at the door until I answered it and came in fuming and swearing up a storm. “You haven’t answered when I called you in fucking weeks, you dick!” he yelled. “What’s your fucking problem?”

I was about to apologize to him and probably would have offered to hit the bars with him that night, but my tulpa grew suddenly furious. “Hit him,” it said, and before I knew what I was doing, I had. I heard his nose break. He fell to the floor and came up swinging, and we beat each other up and down my apartment. I was more furious than I have ever been, and I was not merciful. I knocked him to the ground and gave him two savage kicks to the ribs, and that was when he fled, hunched over and sobbing.

The police were by a few minutes later, but I told them that he had been the instigator and since he wasn’t around to refute me, they let me off with a warning. My tulpa was grinning the entire time. We spent the night crowing about my victory and sneering over how badly I’d beaten my friend.

It wasn’t until the next morning, when I was checking out my black eye and cut lip in the mirror, that I remembered what had set me o ff. My double was the one who’d grown furious, not me. I’d been feeling guilty and a little ashamed, but he’d goaded me into a vicious fight with a concerned friend. He was present, of course, and knew my thoughts. “You don’t need him any more. You don’t need anyone else,” he told me; I felt my skin crawl.

I explained all this to the researchers who employed me, but they just laughed it off. “You can’t be scared of something that you’re imagining,” one told me. My double stood beside him and nodded his head, then smirked at me.

I tried to take their words to heart, but over the next few days I found myself growing more and more anxious around my tulpa, and it seemed that he was changing. He looked taller and more menacing. His eyes twinkled with mischief, and I saw malice in his constant smile. No job was worth losing my mind over, I decided. If he was out of control, I’d put him down. I was so used to him at that point that visualizing him was an automatic process, so I started trying my damnedest to not visualize him. It took a few days, but it started to work somewhat. I could get rid of him for hours at a time, but every time he came back, he seemed worse. His skin seemed ashen, his teeth more pointed. He hissed and gibbered and threatened and swore. The discordant music I’d been listening to for months seemed to accompany him everywhere. Even when I was at home; I’d relax and slip up, no longer concentrating on no seeing him, and there he’d be, and that howling noise with him.

I was still visiting the research center and spending my next six hours there. I needed the money, and I thought they weren’t away that I was now not actively visualizing my tulpa. I was wrong. After my shift one day, about five and a half months in, two impressive men grabbed me and restrained me, and someone in a lab coat jabbed a hypodermic needle into me.

I woke up from my stupor back in the room, strapped into the bed, music blaring, with my doppelganger standing over me, cackling. He hardly looked human any more. His features were twisted. His eyes were sunken in their sockets and filmed over like a corpse’s. He was much taller than me, but hunched over. His hands were twisted, and his fingernails were like talons. He was, in short, fucking terrifying. I tried to will him away, but I couldn’t seem to concentrate. He giggled and tapped the IV in my arm. I thrashed in my restraints as best I could, but could hardly move at all.

“They’re pumping you full of the good shit, I think. How’s the mind? All fuzzy?” He leaned closer and closer as he spoke. I gagged; his breath smelled like spoiled meat. I tried to focus, but I couldn’t banish him.

The next few weeks were terrible. Every so often, someone in a doctor’s coat would come in and inject me with something or force-feed me a pill. They kept me dizzy and unfocused, and sometimes left me hallucinating or delusional. My thought-form was still present, constantly mocking. He interacted with, or perhaps caused, my delusions. I hallucinated that my mother was there, scolding me, and then he cut her throat and her blood showered me. It was so real that I could taste it.

The doctors never spoke to me. I begged at times, screamed, hurled invectives, demanded answers. They never spoke to me. They may have talked to my tulpa, my personal monster. I’m not sure. I was so doped and confused that it may have just been more delusion, but I remember them talking with him. I grew convinced that he was the real one and that I was the thought-form. He encouraged that line of thought at times, but mocked me at others.
‘
Another thing that I pray was a delusion: he could touch me. More than that, he could hurt me. He’d poke and prod at me if he felt I wasn’t paying enough attention to him. Once, he grabbed my testicles and squeezed until I told him I loved him. Another time, he slashed my forearm with one of his talons. I still have a scar; most days I can convince myself that I injured myself, and just hallucinated that he was responsible. Most days.

Then, one day, while he was telling me a story about how he was going to gut everyone I loved, starting with my sister, he paused. A querulous look crossed his face, and he reached out and touched my head. Like mother used to when I was feverish. He stayed still for a long moment and then smiled. “All thoughts are creative,” he told me, then he walked out the door.

Three hours later, I was given an injection and passed out. I awoke unrestrained. Shaking, I made my way to the door and found it unlocked I walked out into the empty hallway and then ran. I stumbled more than once, but I made it down the stairs and out into the lot behind the building. There, I collapsed, weeping like a child. I knew I had to keep moving, but I couldn’t manage it.

I got home eventually; I don’t remember how. I locked the door and shoved a dresser against it, took a long shower, and slept for a day and a half. Nobody came for me in the night, and nobody came the next day or the one after that. I twas over. I’d spent a week locked in that room, but it had felt like a century. I’d withdrawn so much from my life beforehand that nobody had even known I was missing.

The police didn’t find anything. The research center was empty when they searched it. The paper trail fell apart. The names I’d given them were aliases. Even the money I’d received was apparently untraceable.

I recovered as much as one can. I don’t leave the house much, and I have panic attacks when I do. I cry a lot. I don’t sleep much, and my nightmares are terrible. It’s over, I tell myself. I survived. I used the concentration those bastards taught me to convince myself. It works, sometimes.

Not today, though. Three days ago, I got a phone call from my mother. There’s been a tragedy. My sister’s the latest victim in a spree of killings, the police say. The perpetrator mugs his victims, then guts them.

The funeral was this afternoon. It was as lovely a service as a funeral can be, I suppose. I was a little distracted, though. All I could hear was music coming from somewhere distant. It was discordant, unsettling stuff that sounds like feedback, shrieking, and a modem dialing up. I hear it still – a little louder now.