

THE SIGNAL

Always at 648 pm, at least on the west coast, as the sun was within reach of the ocean. Traffic would stop, as drivers pulled over to wait for it. The whisper, some called it. Setting the clock, said others, or changing the reel, or the evening howl. Jiggling the drip, the hint of spam. Tickling the phantom limb, a glimpse of water through trees. For thirty seconds a pause in another key, when a lot of brief time passed, and you concentrated or listened hard, for what?

Some people insisted that they understood, that there was a definite message, even though you forgot it the moment passed. One philosopher argued that your intelligence increased just for the moment, so that just for the moment you understood, even if later you could not grasp what you had understood. But the people who thought they had understood were rarely among the more intelligent. Some people had an impulse to draw, or sing, or write three lines of poetry, right after. And many did not. Double blind testing showed that no one could reliably tell a post-moment sketch or haiku from one produced by normal inspiration. But, all the same, people were often remarkably attached to what they had written or drawn just after a moment. These were among their treasures. Sometimes they would plan to be buried with them.

On the first day it didn't happen most people supposed, with regret or surprise, that they had been too crudely immersed in what they were doing. On the next day some mentioned it to others. On the third it was clear that something was missing, and after a week everyone knew that the moment had gone. Even probably the few who insisted that for them nothing had changed.

There was very little despair. Life had changed, as when you first go to high school and have many teachers instead of just one, or when you learn that not everyone you like a lot likes you a lot. In fact, most people were surprised by the benefits. You could get on with preparing a meal or logging on to the news or going for a run. After a few months most people hardly remembered how it had been.

A puzzled sadness, years later, when people thought back to that time, like the unfocussed memories of early childhood, a half felt regret for something that might or might not ever have happened.