

Noah White

# The Cost of Effect

by Noah White

Traffic whirred outside the classroom, honking like flocks of geese late to work. Stop lights turned red in embarrassment from halting traffic, even though it was their only purpose in life. I liked watching drivers because they were so damn *bad* at it. One elderly gentleman broke the red like a fever, another turning without signalling. We needed to get these men in congress. A lady with blonde curls was on the phone, barely a finger on the wheel. I hoped she crashed.

“Pay attention!”

My head swivelled from the cars passing the window just in time to see my tutor snap his ruler against my hand, stinging like a rude comment. I grabbed my wrist instinctively, but the ruler of the ruler swatted me again, punishing me for my intuitive nature. “Don’t focus on the pain. Focus on *me*, Clarence.”

I glared at him. How was I supposed to do anything with my hands ringing like a call centre? “You’re not being fair,” I said.

“Do I have to be? I’m your professor, not your babysitter.” He took off his spectacles and wiped them with a fine, purple cloth that matched his eyes. Each cone and rod in his iris reflected certain aspects of the room that dripped with Professor Slune’s attention. The bookshelf beside his desk held decades of his regard, each page scrawled with notes that were composed of conductor’s precision. The wood floors creaked in places he often walked, his footsteps mixing with my

own. In the corner was Slune's imp, the bastard that always teased me anytime I made the slightest mishap. He rattled his cage, sending echoes and taunts around the learning space. The room was Slune, and Slune was the room, held in miniature pantheism. He held up his glasses for me. "Look at my nose through the right lens."

I did as he asked.

"Now, the left lens. Try harder this time." I hated that. I was trying. I took a deep breath and drove my eyes into the glass, breaking past it and shattering his expectations. The pain was still in the back of my head, an inkling nudging me forward. It bubbled up into a rage, a small pinpoint buzz in the centre of my skull. I despised that ruler, wanted it to burn, wanted it to sna-

Slune's nose *snapped*.

"Argh! You insolent, horrible, dastardly..." He trailed off, his eyes fixated on the ring wrapped around his wedding finger. Carefully, he traced his thumb down the bridge of his nose, restoring it to its original form instantly. My hands hadn't left my mouth, covering it up like a political scandal.

The imp howled with delight. "Yous can't evens control a simple glass test! What a spectacle!"

I gripped my pencil, trying not to turn it into a projectile weapon. "Do you want to be impaled?"

The imp paled, then returned to his foetal position while murmuring different company slogans. "The Coke side of life. Just do it. Got milk? Badabababa! I'm lovin' it!" Adverts and brand names shimmered along his wings like a billboard chameleon.

"Why do you even have that thing? He's so damn *annoying*."

The imp blew a raspberry. "No, yous is annoying!"

“Shut up, both of you!” Slune shook his head. “That’s exactly why I keep him. Your attention is the lens of which you view and comprehend the world. If you can master where you direct your attention, you will have almost full control of your own reality.”

“So the reason I broke your nose—sorry for that by the way—was because that’s where my attention was focused?”

“Correct. Localising your attention on a certain spot will allow you to shape the universe. The outcome of your attention however, is your intention. Mixing these together is called the art of Spanning. It takes both these principles to an extreme. I healed my nose, but can only tend to minor injuries.”

The hamsters on treadmills in my head started their afternoon jog. Ideas whirred and flowed through neurons that fired like glass cannons, each one splintering and embedding themselves in my brain. “So you can use this power to hurt, but also to heal?”

“Yes,” Slune said. “But Clarence, you must have one hundred percent intention if you truly want something, and one hundred percent attention to make it happen. It was easier when I was a boy, not as many things trying to grab your attention. Sometimes little bits of intention can sway the odds, but most of the time you have to concentrate. It’s hard for people now, to know what they really want.”

I liked that about Slune. He knew how to pay attention to people. I’d never had a group class, only one on one sessions. However, I’d heard from other students how he managed to spread his heed across the room, grabbing and dividing attention effortlessly. I hated when people didn’t know how to give me attention. My mom, my dad, their attention was always on my Melonie, my baby sister. Her goos and gahs

drifted off her blonde curls. She was like a sponge, and I was all dried up. “So, theoretically you could set something on fire with nothing but attention?” I asked.

“Yes, however it takes a lot of energy. That’s why it’s helpful to use tools or anchors, like my wedding ring. Having something memorable to draw attention back to your core self is immensely helpful.”

My hands fingered the key in my pocket. Back in grade school, we’d taken a field trip to a key cutting class where they showed us how to make our own house keys. Looking back, it was the perfect plan to rob a class of fifth graders and their unsuspecting homes, but to me it was special. It was the first thing I’d made on my own, the first thing I could say was done entirely by me. “Can I see the fire?”

My professor nodded. He concentrated on a few leaflets in front of him and spoke firmly. “*Burn.*” The paper smouldered, slow at first, then rapidly swirled into a blaze of intense heat. Higher and higher the pillar climbed, until the whole class radiated with universal sparks. A piece of parchment flitted away from the fiery pillar and landed on the desk to our left. A chain reaction emerged, and soon the entire room was engulfed with flame. Slune raised his hands to control the embers, but was just as easily blasted back by a burst of pure energy. Smoke made the space cloudier than a drunkard’s judgement. I started to panic. I couldn’t see Slune. I couldn’t breathe. I needed air.

I needed focus.

I steadied myself, and took as deep a breath as I could. I threw my attention across the room, blanketing it with concentration. The key hummed against my leg as I choked out the word I’d been searching for. “*Quench*”.

Instantly the heat died. The fire out, smoke gone. I could see Slune again, casually resting against the doorframe. “That was excellent,” he coughed. “Your first

test, and you've passed. You're doing well, Clarence, but you need a lot more practice. Surely you can—" My phone rang. I reached for it. "Attention, remember?" Slune said. I looked at the screen, a call from my dad.

"I should take this one." I answered. "Hello?"

"Clarence!" My dad sounded panicked. I could hear Melonie crying in the background. "Your mom. S-she's in the h-hospital. Something went faulty with her steering wheel and I need you to come quickly. I'm n-not sure she's gonna make it."

My heart sank. Ice crawled along my skin like spiders. "Professor Slune?"

"Yes?"

"Can you give me a ride to the hospital? My mom, she's..."

The wisened teacher nodded. "Of course, dear boy."

She wasn't okay. I could make her out from the ER window, half ghost on the stretcher. My dad stood next to me, my sister in his arms. Splinters of metal were lodged into her throat, glass in her sides. Trails of blood webbed across her skin like a map to the afterlife. "Clarence, listen to me." Slune's voice was dire. "You have a familial connection, meaning your attention has been absorbed by her for decades. Focus on her, through the glass. You still have time."

I concentrated. I wanted to save her, I really did. I yearned for her older years. I wanted her hair to grey, to turn whiter than her intentions. I needed her to see me succeed. Every cell, atom, and molecule in my body was on fire, intent on bringing her back. Except one.

One single fibre shrunk away from the years of neglect. "*Heal.*" Her chest shuddered. The years of feeling alone. "*Mend.*" Her jaw went slack. The years of

calling to a full room with no echo back. "*Stitch.*" My sister cried out, stealing my attention just like she stole it from my parents. "*Revive.*" Her hand dropped.

And she was gone.