Dear Dr. Castle,

I’ve been putting it off and off and off, but here it is: that piece you asked me to write about why I decided to hibernate and what it was like coming out afterwards.

You said it repeatedly, “Yumi, sometimes writing things down helps us organize our thoughts. It’s like sorting out your attic. You never know what you’ll come across.”

Well, I don’t believe I found any old scrapbooks or once-treasured keepsakes…but I did find a little bit of sanity, I suppose you might call it that. Yes, sanity. And truth.

We have a word in Japanese that means truth, reality, genuineness. It’s pronounced “shin.”

It’s this character:

真

I always found it pretty. It looks like one of those wooden hives beekeepers use, except with a handle on top. The middle part represents “compressed content”: the base, the foundations that content rests upon; and the handle, the “usability” of that content. Truth should be usable, and portable. If you can’t take it with you, what’s the point?

In fact, I suppose the hive image is rather appropriate, in a way. I’ve come to think of truth as a hive full of truth-bees. There’s the big Queen truth, and all the other truths work for her, or fight for her, or fertilize her. And what is the Queen truth? Everyone has one in their truth hive. She
might be a god, or an idea. I didn’t know what mine was. I don’t think I had one. That was the problem, Doctor. I believe I’d been carrying around an empty ideogram for most of my life. Sort of like a cat carrier with no cat in it.

We discuss my dreams at length, and I find that deeply helpful. But my daydreams are sometimes just as vivid, and they are usually flashes from the first few hours after I woke up from hibernation. Several times a day, I see these little images of the Hibernaculum. Not still images, more like mental GIFs. Decontextualized. Mere snippets. Very often it is the black ceiling of the Clock I see. I’m lying in the wake-up chair, and I’m blinking in the darkness. I’m seeing but not seeing. I mean, I am seeing, it just hasn’t dawned on me yet that I am awake. The second that does happen, wow…it’s quite an event, Doctor. At first, it feels just like any normal day. “Oh, I’m awake”…and then it hits you: “after three whole months!” You want to jump out of that chair and see and touch and feel and do everything, but you can’t. Your body just won’t move, as if you’re being pinned down by a friendly Incubus, or have been shrink-wrapped like a suitcase for a joke. But once the movement does return, which doesn’t take very long, you’re like a deer-fawn in a spring field. All energy and intention, but no direction, or coordination.

I guess that’s the most frequent image, but sometimes it’s the warm yellow glow of the Sun Room that will spring to mind, or the Van Gogh sky of the Antechamber. It is such an odd swirling blue in there, the Antechamber. I was so nervous that day. The day I went in. Butterflies in the tummy doesn’t begin to describe it. These were like Hamadrias on amphetamines. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard them, Doctor, a gardenful of Hamadrias, and the short-circuit buzz they make with their wings. It’s like electricity is crackling from tree to tree. Sitting there, in the silence, I kept thinking: “I might die in here. I might never come out of this place.” No matter how hard you try to convince yourself that it’s safe, you never really know. I mean, you can’t actually say that, not with any confidence. But I really, really wanted to do it. I think when people hibernate, they have a
vague hope something will happen in there, something will shift, or snap, and they’ll wake up renewed, changed somehow. Corrected, perhaps. And they won’t have had to do anything except take those injections. It’s not because they don’t want to act, please don’t misunderstand me, Doctor, but because they don’t know what to do. They hope—I hoped—something in the deep brain would just…take over.

It didn’t happen exactly that way. There was no revelation. Not as such. But my ideogram for truth looks a lot fuller now. I have a Queen truth, and she’s surrounded by fertile drones, and the worker bees are cleaning the combs and fetching in pollen from the world outside. I don’t know if I told you, but I’ve taken up hiking and gardening. I’m not very good at either, but they seem to fill a need I never knew I had: to step away from the world of the made and visit the earth, where stuff grows—and where the only ads are pheromones!

But, you asked a specific question, didn’t you? Why did I sign up for three months of artificially-induced and sustained hibernation in the hands of a company I really know very little about? There’s no single or simple answer. Only answers. Or partial answers.

I was feeling pretty burned out at work, first of all. I’d just finished an ad that wasn’t performing well, and I was tired and frustrated. My romantic life was non-existent (my last relationship had ended a year or so earlier), and my family life had grown totally silent. We still saw each other, sat with each other, went through all the motions, but nobody was really communicating anymore. It was stagnant, all of it. Stale. I had to energize in the company of friends, but they just talked about work, or relationships, or family, all the stuff I didn’t want to talk about at all. People seem to think that if you just want to chat about frivolities, it’s because you’re a frivolous person. I’m beginning to suspect it’s the opposite. So I was bored and stuck, exhausted and unhappy. I took a vacation to Brazil, where my mother was born (you’d be surprised how many Japanese Brazilians
there actually are!), and though it was fun, everything was the same when I came back. I was just as bored. Just as tired.

I was introduced to HLS and the Hibernaculum by a friend of mine who was considering going Under. She’s older than I am, and she’d just been through a bad breakup. She said she wanted to draw a line under the first thirty-five years of her life and start afresh. That’s what hibernation was going to be for her, a line drawn through her life. It was also a donation she was making. Three months of her time as atonement. An “environmental offset,” she called it. She said she’d sleep better at night knowing she’d put her days and weeks where her mouth was. So she asked me to go with her to the Visitor Center in Hibernaculum Park one weekend, and I did, out of moral support. It was actually great fun. I’m a total geek, so I loved the whole breakdown of the process, all the VR and holographic guides, the stats and science, and the model hibernation pod, which is really irresistible for some reason—you just don’t want to get out of it. I kept thinking to myself the people who designed this really knew exactly which buttons to push. I respect that. Accomplished design is a true art form. The pod itself is just a high-tech casket, yet they made it so absolutely inviting, like a spaceship escape pod. Lying inside it—they let you lie down in it—I could imagine it whizzing through asteroid fields or something. And it’s actually very comfy. After the trip, we left through the scaled-down replica tunnel they built, and it was like being in a strange spa, or New Age meditation park. Toes in the earth, and all that. Coming out the other end, back into the sunlight—it was summertime—there it was, right before us: the Hibernaculum. I’d seen it on TV and in pictures, but never up-close, so I wasn’t prepared for the effect. The building, which you don’t really think of as a building, it seems more like an otherworldly monolith, has a remarkable presence. It gleams so strangely. I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something about it. I guess it’s the shape, and the size, and the shimmer of the water around it, and all that rambling soft lawn. It makes you feel good in a very mellow way. It’s relaxing. So we sat on the grass, barefoot, and
talked and watched the building from across the parkland. I remember wondering about all the people in there. So many people.

In the end, my friend got cold feet, and I was the one who took things further. I signed up, did the interview, went through the whole process, still thinking somewhere deep in my mind that I could just back out at any time, but soon there were signatures on dotted lines, and the house visit from the rep, and that was that: my date was scheduled. That was a real rush of excitement, actually. The countdown, I mean. You begin to wonder what it’s going to be like to not be, temporarily. You’ll still exist, you just won’t be alive. No, you will be alive, you just won’t be living. Your body knows time is passing—or so they say—but nothing is living that time, in the sense of filling it up with experience. And it’s really something to know you are about to do that to yourself, Doctor. Or for yourself. Or for the world.

It’s a radical experience, which is maybe what I needed. A jolt. Not radical along the lines of bungee jumping or skydiving, where you subject yourself to a very high fall, because you experience the fall, don’t you? You may scream all the way down, frightening all the birds, but you are in the moment. With hibernation, though, it’s even more out-there, because you are totally outside the experience. It’s like going to the edge of the atmosphere, with one foot in outer space.

If I’m honest, Doctor, I also think I did it to hurt my parents and my brother, and my friends, and everyone I knew. A big middle finger to all of them. “This is what our lives together have become: we may as well be deep in hibernation for all the good our company does one another.”

But if I’m especially honest, Dr. Castle, my decision also had a lot to do with June 21, 2041. The coroner’s report put time of death at a hugely precise 21:03. Do you know why they could be so precise, Doctor? Because the first thing I did when that young man died was glance at my watch and check the time. Why, I have no idea. None. It’s such a powerful thing to watch someone die, especially a violent and unexpected death like his. Death in the prime of life. I could do absolutely
nothing to stop it. I could only be there, attendant. A human presence for him, as he went through that alone. The last human presence he felt, I’m afraid to say, was that of a total stranger. A total stranger on a warm sidewalk on a gorgeous summer evening. I tried to stop the bleeding, with both hands. I pressed as hard as I could, but the blood squelched through the cracks between my fingers and trickled over my knuckles. It was relentless, that blood. I remember the shock on his face. He’d been shot twice in the chest from a passing vehicle. I don’t think he even saw the car, much less his attacker. I was walking uphill as he was coming down. Five more steps and we’d have passed each other. The sound of the gunshots was brutal, and it echoed off all the surrounding walls and windows. It was such a violent sound, in its own right. Even if the bullets had missed, and nobody had been hurt, that sound alone would have been an act of unspeakable aggression against the world. I can still see the crows and finches and pigeons disappearing into the air. The big ficus tree across the street emptied in a second, in a whoosh of wing-flap. The man—the victim—reeled backwards and collapsed, first onto his knees, then keeled over, steadying himself on his left arm while clutching his chest with his right. As he realized what had happened, he allowed himself to slump over onto his back, and just stared into the sky. I was frozen to the spot, just watching. Everything fell deathly silent, so much more silent than you would ever expect from a city. Lying on his back on the ground, the man shook his head with disappointment. Yes, Doctor: disappointment. It was unmistakable. He was mad at himself. He frowned and shook his head so slowly, almost as if to say Dumb ass, how’d you go and let that happen! I ran to him, dropped my bag and book on the sidewalk and knelt down by his side. I panicked, I admit. I’m also ashamed to say I was afraid to touch him. Afraid of the blood, afraid of what the blood might transmit, afraid of causing him more pain than he was already in. Afraid. But I knew I had to do something. I’ve never been good with blood, but instinct kicked in, and I placed a palm over each wound and pressed. The man’s throat was flooding, I think. Maybe his lungs, I don’t know. He babbled blood and words, but I couldn’t make out what he said. And that felt so unfair, Doctor. His last words were lost in a
bloody bubble. He stared at me—he had gray eyes, this man. Gray as concrete. He was maybe late-30s, not handsome, not un-handsome. He was casually dressed, but with an edge about him. He was a criminal, I later learned, but right then, at that moment, he was a lost little boy on the verge of panic and with no clue what to do or what was going to happen to him. I held his eyes. I tried to reassure him, but I knew anything I might say would be a lie. And then, when his chest stopped heaving, and his gray eyes dimmed and rolled slightly back into his head, I just checked the numbers on my watch: 21:03. I really, really wish I knew why I did that. It seems such an odd thing to do. Maybe, like you see in the movies, I was doing what the doctors do when they lose a patient. They check the time and pronounce the person dead. Maybe that’s why I did it. I don’t know. And from the watch face, I gazed up at the gathered crowd and the halted traffic, and then, as my eyes looked around for a safe space to land, I saw an ad up on the side of a building:

_Dental laserbrush: one blue wave leaves your teeth shiny white_

Trauma is such an insane thing. It makes you want to cling to something familiar, something you know. So I stared at that ad, and I found myself taking it apart in my mind, judging it like I judge the ads I create for my job: _Humm, not bad, all things considered. The symmetry is imperfect, and symmetry’s what's supposed to make it work: the word “leaves” equals the equal sign, as in:_

_One blue wave = teeth shiny white. But the possessive your throws a spanner in the works. It feels surplus, when of course it isn’t. The your is the point, it relates it to you, the consumer. So how does an ad find a way to make the consumer feel surplus to the equation? It’s a flaw... Even so, the flow is satisfactory: blue [freshness] to white [purity]; wave [liquid, flux, impermanence] to teeth [rock-hard, steady, lasting]; one = swift, time-saving, convenient, so why not do it? Shiny is brilliance, shiny is sheen; it’s the flash in a smile—that good impression: “Love me. I’m clean and healthy. Kiss me. My breath is fresh.” Not a bad ad, except for that niggling pronoun flaw. But what’s a niggling_
pronoun flaw? And there's a dead body on the ground at my feet. Very recently departed. Pronouns all surplus to necessity.

I did two months of counseling after that and thought I was fine. I was not fine. Seeing that changes you. It’s hard to look at the world the same way afterwards. I developed an aversion to clocks, first of all, and then to ads, which was a real problem.

People are often surprised when I say I work in advertising. Maybe it’s because I’m soft-spoken and introspective. I’m just not the “type.” They expect someone brash and in your face. I have no hard sell in me; I don’t like it. But I always enjoyed making ads for things, and picking ads apart, trying to figure out how and why they worked, or didn’t, as the case may be. It always fascinated me that something so brief could get so deep inside your head. Not that ads are behavior-altering parasites or anything like that. They don’t alter anything; they merely clear the path between the buyer and what she already needs or wants. And it's a response-based artform. You know when it works, because sales figures go up. It’s quite elating when that happens. But the real reward is when people reference or mention an ad you made. Then you know you’ve hit the nail on the head. It brings enormous satisfaction. Or at least it used to. Not anymore, not after Dental Laserbrush and the mob hit on Mr. Gray-eyes.

Now, I believe this is a common reaction—you will know a lot more than I about how people react after witnessing something of that kind—but for weeks after the event, months even, I tried to find out as much as I could about the man I’d seen die. There wasn’t much in the press, other than the briefest of backgrounds: “The victim, Mr. Shane Crowe, 37, late of Hunters Point, divorced, is survived by two daughters, aged six and eight.” That was far too vague to satisfy my curiosity—hunger, I would say—for more and deeper knowledge of who he had been. So I hired a PI. Yes, I know. He was surprised too. But then, four days later, he came back telling me not to pursue the matter any further: “Crowe was a hood with ties to the mob. He has a decent rap-sheet—
assault, breaking and entering, possession of a stolen weapon—and he’d just had a drug bust kicked out of court on a technicality. The mob weren’t buying that, and figured he’d turned CI [that’s informant to you and I, Doctor]. Hence the hit. Take my advice, don’t go snooping around; you don’t want to draw any attention from people in his world.” So, for a week or two, I let it lie, but I couldn’t, in the end. Not definitively. The PI had given me the address of his ex-wife and daughters, so I paid them a visit. I was scared. They were living on the second floor of a low-rent housing project in Bayview. His ex-wife wasn’t the kind of woman who had any reason to welcome unannounced visitors, and every reason to treat me with suspicion, but eventually she understood that I wasn’t looking for anything from her, only a little sense of who her former husband had been. The man I’d seen die.

There are some human things you see everyone do, and things you see only a select few do, and maybe a couple of very intimate things you see almost nobody do. But this man, a total stranger, had had to do the most intimate thing possible with me pressing his bleeding chest in a noisy street…. It didn’t seem right.

Carly, the ex-wife, did not have anything complimentary to say about Shane Crowe, but I could see the sorrow in her all the same. Especially when she looked at her two gray-eyed daughters.

I came away feeling I had finally established a connection with the dead man. I’d met the woman he must once have loved and the offspring he’d left behind. My mistake, though, was thinking that was “closure.” I suppose that’s something else I don’t have to tell you about trauma, Doctor. It can trick you into thinking it has gone away, when really it has just run deeper, found a place farther in to hide from your attempt to evict it.

That was when the flashbacks began: auditory, visual, emotional. I heard gunshots, I saw scattering birds, I saw red effulgences, and suddenly everyone I met had gray eyes…
So, maybe it was guilt, or some weird empathy, but I think, in hindsight, deep down I felt I couldn’t go on living normally after watching a man die like that. As if watching it happen meant I somehow had to share the burden. I recognize that now, even if I still don’t understand it. I had to contribute some life, die a little too. The universe seemed to be demanding it. Hibernation was as close as I could get to settling the tab. I had to do my time, pay my debt to Shane Crowe.

So I suppose that is why I went in. But I don’t think I came back out the same person. I’m not sure whether some of me is still unconscious, still down there in the underworld. Or perhaps a new part I didn’t know existed followed me back up, like a shadow or a tethered ghost. Maybe I brought it back with me, from oblivion, and I haven’t been able to integrate it yet. The result is a glitch.

It seems I am on the blink.

I’ve been seeing ads everywhere since coming out of hibernation, and I can’t help but unpack them and judge them, but none of them seems satisfying to me. As for myself, I can’t come up with a single idea for anything. Post-hibernation everything just seems so literal. I can’t get excited about *things, objects, products*. “Here’s a candy bar. It’s a like a dozen other candy bars, but it’ll give you a sugar rush.” That’s not going to sell much candy, is it?

And I used to be good at this. Truly. When you tallied all the figures, I more than held my own at that agency full of blustery, chest-puffing, chin-wagging charm-merchants. There were so many curveballs I batted right into the skyline from the eighteenth floor of that self-consciously swanky piece of real estate I went to every day dressed in such expensively uncomfortable clothes. I could do it, because I had ideas. Lots of them. Posture and charisma will get you so far, but they won’t sell product at the end of the day. I might have been a wallflower, part of the office furniture, but I delivered. Quietly, consistently, conscientiously.
My mother is Yonsei, which means she’s the great-granddaughter of Japanese immigrants. That makes me Gosei. She was born to Sansei parents in Brazil and emigrated from there to the US at the age of 21, to study at the University of Colorado. So I was brought up in America as Japanese, on one hand, and Brazilian, on the other. I could have gone into law, engineering, or medicine like most of the A students, but I'd been hooked on advertising since a young age. The ad that really clinched it for me—a commercial, in fact—was an extended Christmas ad for a leading soft drink. I was ten when I saw it.

It was state-of-the-art animation, beautifully done, with a bittersweet narrative. It was about an aging Lapland reindeer named Helmi, and her sleigh-driver, Sven. This Sven realizes that Helmi, the eldest and dearest in his train, has grown too old to work, even though she does all she can to hide the fact. The other reindeer have sensed it too, and they’re trying to cover for her, and pick up her slack. But Sven knows his reindeer, and he sees that she’s now too old to stay with the herd. So he goes into the pen, pets her and strokes her, and explains to her that he can tell how tired she is, and that they both know what has to happen. It’s time for her to go off into the Arctic alone now, to find the great big herd in the sky. “It's every reindeer’s last voyage, Helmi,” he says. I still remember it today, and it never fails to choke me up. So, finally, in the buildup to Christmas, the reindeer stops trying to hide it, accepts her fate, and slips away in the dead of night. No farewells, no tears, no drama. She just gets up while the others are asleep, and off she goes. We see her trek and trek beneath the northern lights, farther and farther away from home, into ever deeper snow and fiercer blizzards. Eventually, after days have passed, she collapses with exhaustion at the edge of a frozen lake. As Helmi lies there in the snow, her eyelids begin to droop, and ten year-old me is sitting there thinking she can’t die, she can’t! It’s Christmas, it’s supposed to be happy! And then lights appear under the surface of the icy lake. Fairy lights. They swirl about, like glowing fish, swooshing and circling, and the deer, utterly captivated, goes out onto the ice and follows them around, forgetting her exhaustion. Cracks appear on the surface, and you expect she’s going to fall
through, but she doesn’t. The lights come up through the cracks and hover in front of her. Now, I've never forgotten this part: there were green, blue, red and yellow lights, and when they came through the ice, the yellow lights turned red, the red turned yellow, the blue switched to green, and the green turned blue. I could never figure out why. Was it an error or was it intentional? If it was an error, it meant nothing. But if it was intended, then it must have meant something. But what? That was incredibly frustrating for the ten year-old me. Which was it, error or intention? Did it mean something or didn’t it? How do you ever know? It was my first brush with doubt, Doctor Castle, and it was maddening....Anyway, Helmi stares in bewilderment at the hovering fairy lights, and then we hear sleigh bells, and the sound of rushing wind. There’s a whooosh, and the thumping of hooves. The deer gazes off to the side, and we see Santa Claus in his huge sleigh, led by a train of ancient reindeer. He beckons to Helmi, and she pulls the funniest face (it always made me laugh). She’s looking at Santa as if to say: ‘Who, me?’ And he gives that trademark ho-ho-ho laugh and beckons to her again. So she trundles over to Santa and the lights blaze up and fill the screen with dazzle. In the very next frame, Santa is flying through the night sky with Rudolph and Dasher, and Dancer, and Prancer and Blixen and all the rest, and there, at the very end of the train, right in front of the bow, is the newest—and youngest—addition to the team, Sven’s reindeer, Helmi. That ad fascinated me. At ninety seconds or so (I know because I have it saved on my computer), it was long for a commercial, but it packed so much into that time. At night, as I lay in bed trying to sleep, I’d imagine myself accompanying the poor Helmi on her trek. I’d imagine the darkness, and the howling wind, and the freezing snow. I’d watch her from the woods, and once she was past the treeline, I’d watch her from a drift or crag of rock. I imagined watching her from under the ice, and from up above in the air, like a tern. I played the commercial over and over in my mind, from so many different angles, and I would fall asleep to the silent glow of those watery lights. I never forgot that advertisement, Doctor. It’s funny, though, I didn’t even notice what it was for the first few times I saw it. Soda, ostensibly. But what it really advertises is the holiday season itself, not...
soda. Yet, simply by doing that, it makes the buyer go out and stock up on soft drinks—of which the company had many.

In the Hibernaculum, as they prepare you for the process, they leave you in these cushy reclining chairs. That’s where they give you the first sedatives, to put you to sleep before administering the real hibernation-inducing drug. My heart was pounding. I was sweating out of fear. I actually felt I was going to back out at the very last minute, which would have been really embarrassing. So I closed my eyes and remembered Helmi. I played the commercial over in my mind, all the way through. The last thing I remember before blacking out was watching those lights change color as they rose up through the cracks in the ice.

I will never know what sort of existence I had inside the Dome between April 31 and July 31, 2046. Sealed up in Pod 813, Aisle 16, like an Egyptian mummy waiting for the sun ship, time just ticked on by. Strangers took care of me. Computers read me inside and out. Was it lost time? I don’t think so. I suspect—and suspicion is all it can ever be—there was a lot more to my life under hibernation than any of us could imagine. Perhaps not you, Doctor. I think you know that very well, which is why you study us.

Emerging from hibernation is such a thrill. You feel more alive than ever before. Your mind and body thrum with vigor. Your senses are keener than you remember them ever being. You’re like a tourist who arrives in a wonderful city and wants to gobble it up in one go. Every experience is like a superhero discovering a new power. For the first weeks, you look forward to everything and dread nothing at all, because nothing is a chore. Everything is exciting in its own strange way. Appetites are out of control. You barely sleep. You throw caution to the wind. You know all this, Doctor, because you have compiled several hundred hours of Sleeper interviews, but I have to say it, just to understand it. You behave quite impulsively. Often out of character, too, because character is the last item of clothing you put on in the morning of your overall becoming. And sometimes you
can forget it altogether, if you’re in a hurry, like you might a hat or scarf. Some friends loved the wild new me, while others were quietly appalled. This, as you know, lasts about a month, then decreases substantially. If they are actually accurate, the statistics are frightening: compared to non-hibernators, a recent hibernator is 80% more likely to crash a car, 72% more likely to suffer a drug overdose, 95% more likely to seek an abortion, 105% more like to contract an STI, and 88% more likely to suffer serious bodily harm. Some of us become “thirty year-old toddlers,” as you put it.

Then come the dreams, the flashbacks, the…let’s call them sensations.

When I first came out of the Hibernaculum, I ate everything in my path. But, as the dust settled and my digestive system started to complain, I realized I had to lay aside the hamburgers, the saucy pastas, and all the greasy junk, and start becoming more selective. So I went looking for alternative food sources—vegan was definitely out—and after a while studying options I found one I really liked: insects. I'm especially partial to crickets, though I'll also go all out on a bowl of mealworms or skewered locusts. It sounds gross, but it's protein—practically guilt-free protein—and it tastes a bit like seafood, which is a bonus. You can’t go wrong with farmed insects. They’re healthy, sustainable, and no-one feels any sympathy for the deceased. It's creepy-crawly shitake, I guess. I found this fantastic little stall on Stockton Street, called Winsects-in-Wok, run by an adorable Yosei called Nakamura. He’s in his sixties, but works like a whirlwind. It was the steam from the woks and smoke from the grills that caught my eye, before I even came within sniffing distance of the food. Steam and smoke are kindred perceptions, and Nakamura-san’s stall produces both in tremendous amounts. Today, rising plumes mean nothing. Nothing at all. They used to mean a great, great deal. Smoke curling from a fire or a stack meant warmth and food where there was none before. Smoke rising from a village meant a raid or war. Smoke ascending from a temple meant communication with the divine, the translation of the physical into the immaterial. No such
lofty meanings now. All gone. Gone. But that was how I spotted Winsects-in-Wok from afar: from its plumes and wafts and drifts and curls of dense, warm air, and water.

I was unsure at first. Insects, really? Aren’t they dirty? Unhealthy? Plain yuck? We’re conditioned to think so, I suppose, but eating them makes perfect sense. I read somewhere that, if you were to add up all the earth’s biomass, the combined weight of all living creatures, ants would account for twenty per cent of that! One-fifth! So why don’t we eat ants? It just makes sense. They’re a near endless supply of protein. Nakamura-san does some first-rate cutter ants. They are absolutely delicious. So crisp and full of flavor.

About two weeks ago I was at the stall for lunch, and I suddenly started hearing that characteristic sound from my recurring dream. The sound the pod lids make when closing—sulumpf, sulumpf, sulumpf. I looked around, startled. I kind of froze there for some moments, with a cricket in my mouth, waiting, listening. I was at a stall near a fish market in Chinatown, so it’s not like anyone was using a Hibernaculum pod, and I couldn’t think of anything else that made a remotely similar sound. It’s such a unique sound, from a unique thing. That was the first time I heard sounds and words that weren’t there. But it’s happened a lot since. Auditory hallucinations. The piping sounds of my queen truth bee, asserting her dominance in the hive. I saw it on a video once, Dr. Castle. Virgin queens, not long hatched, will make this shortish piping noise. It’s a war cry of sorts, calling the other virgin queens to fight it out with her for the throne. Recently mated queens will also do it to dissuade any possible challengers. My queen truth doesn’t pipe, or toot, or whatever else you might want to call it. My truth bee sulumpfs. And I can actually hear her.

So, this queen truth, what is it? It’s that each individual human being is just a field bee, and our importance is no greater than that of a field bee, no matter how many flowers we fertilize out there in the world beyond the hive, or how much nectar we bring back and deposit through our dreams. The hive is what matters. The hive is the collective unconscious, or whatever other word
you might want to use for it. The queen bee is the beating heart of our species’ memory and imagination. She’s where these two are actually still the same, before they differentiate into times past and future. Our waking lives are just time spent in the field, gathering nectar and spreading pollen. Dreams are how we deposit the day’s gathered nectar, to feed the hive, and the rest is just plain sleep spent crawling over each other in the buzz and thrum of unprocessed existence. When I hibernated, I spent three months closed up in a comb, sealed with wax. I went back into the hive I came from.

And that’s it, Dr. Castle. That’s my truth, and I find it liberating. Knowing that my waking, conscious existence is just a small part of something so incalculably bigger and more beautiful, to which I contribute and from which I benefit, took a huge weight off my mind and body. It made me feel free. It put everything in perspective for me. So when I came out of hibernation, I could sit with my parents for hours on end, saying very little, discussing almost nothing, doing nothing at all, and it didn’t feel stale anymore. It felt rich. It felt full. And I could sit in a park, or a bar, or a coffee shop and listen to my friends go on and on about boyfriends, children, bosses, whatever, and it felt nice. They were field bees talking about the flowers they’d visited, the birds they’d escaped from, the weather they’d encountered on their forays outside the hive. I was no longer bored or triggered or rankled by any of it. I’ve actually begun to enjoy it.

Most importantly of all, Mr. Shane “Gray-eyes” Crowe doesn’t haunt me anymore. The fact that I witnessed his death no longer weighs like a curse, it feels, in fact, like a gift he gave me. I got to share in one of the two most momentous events of any human’s life.

The downside is that the hive keeps calling me back. I can hear it. The hive won’t stay in the dark anymore. I can hear it beckoning to me over a bowl of mealworms.

*die Freude Beer. Keep Cool, Blow a Lid.*
Have you ever tried Freude Beer? Should be just up a psychoanalyst’s street, I’d have thought. You may have seen this ad. It’s one of mine. It’s a very simple ad, but effective. I won a prize for it, actually. Two contradictory meanings brought together by a three-letter ambiguity. Blowing a lid is usually the exact opposite of keeping one’s cool, but thanks to the range of meanings of that little word “lid,” they can actually make perfect sense together. It’s a language game, as Wittgenstein would say. What “blow a lid” means depends on the language game it appears in. See, that’s how precariously the meanings in our world sit together. It’s a huge tangle, and you attempt to straighten it out at your peril. I don’t even try anymore. I’ve stopped doing it.

The other day I went into an expensive clothes shop. It’s something I haven’t done since a month or two before going Under. I always used to buy brand names. It’s kind of expected of you once you enter a certain wage bracket. I wasn’t a flashy dresser, by any means, but what I wore was always quality.

But this time I tried one of those really trendy stores. I don’t know why, I just did. They have an interesting concept: the clothes are very plain, either white, or black. You pick the model you want (dresses only: short, shorter, and even shorter). Once you’ve picked your “canvas”—that’s what the assistants call the dresses—you go into a viewing station, where they show you all the possible art you can have uploaded into your dress. Yes, you upload art into the actual fabric. And it’s not static art, it’s animated. I’m sure you’ve seen somebody wearing it. It’s the flash tattoo concept applied to clothing. The agency I used to work for was even considering producing uploadable ads for “walking models.” I think some of the larger companies and agencies are already doing it. Anyway, I sat there in front of this huge screen, and flicked through all this “wearable clothing content.” They call them WCCs. It was a very interesting experience. Some of it was awful, some of it was gorgeous, some of it was funny, and some… I don’t know, whacky might be the word. But the interesting thing is, I came across a piece called "Oakocoon," which I found
mesmerizing, and very pertinent to me. I could easily watch that loop play over and over for hours on end. It’s a drawing, black lines on a white background, and it begins with a scraggily-drawn winter tree. Leafless. Hanging from a sturdy branch is a person-size cocoon, apparently made of mummy bandages. Beneath the cocoon, in what seems like roving parkland, is a wooden bench. The snow thaws, the grass grows, and leaves begin to sprout on the branches, and as the tree fills up with foliage, the cocoon begins to shudder and wriggle. When the bough is super heavy, the cocoon starts to unravel, sending its occupant—an androgynous figure—rolling downwards like a circus performer, until they smash the bench underneath. The androgyne stands up, stretches, and wanders away across the field. They have a lion’s tail, which wags merrily as they go. The twenty-second black-and-white loop ends with the bandages fluttering in the breeze as the leaves start to shed and a snow blizzard whites out the screen. Then it all begins again. I bought it without even looking at the price tag. It took the assistant all of four seconds to upload the loop into my white mid-thigh, one-shoulder tube dress.

I overpaid, naturally. I’ll probably wear it only very rarely, as it’s a party dress. I would never have bought something like that before (never been the mid-thigh sort). But I just don’t care what people are going to think anymore. If I want to wear that, I will. If I don’t, I won’t.

That’s another major change there has been since hibernation, Doctor. I feel less burdened by other people’s expectations and more in tune with my own desires and needs. I know what you think, Dr. Castle. In hibernating I took a drug that won’t wear off. Perhaps that is true. I can’t stop going back there, to Hibernaculum Park, to the Visitor’s Center, to the Dome in its moat. I’ll sit there, watching it, and it really galls me to think that some other bear is sleeping in my bed: Pod 813, Aisle 16. I know how silly that sounds, believe me. But it’s a strong feeling. As though that pod belongs to me, and I belong to it. Some days I’ll wait for Walk-out. That’s when the Wakers come out after hibernation. I sit near the trees where the Ferryman keeps his boards. You can get a
good view of the grove mouth from there. I like to watch the people taking that path, as it rekindles a little the way I felt that day. I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. And it always makes me wonder if I might not do it again sometime. Yes, Dr. Castle, even after all the changes, dreams, and hypnagogic hallucinations, there’s a part of me that wants—yearns—to do it all over again.

Is that crazy? You think so, though you never use that word. You say you don’t know what it means, so you don’t use it. I should follow your example, because I don’t know what it means either.

Well, I suppose writing this piece has been a bit like a good spring cleaning for my mind, and I think my spring-cleaning is almost done, Dr. Castle. But there is one question you asked that I haven’t answered yet. You wanted to know if I’m happier or less happy since hibernating, but I don’t believe the before-after comparison is possible, because what constitutes happiness for me has changed since I came back out. I used to see happiness as having achieved the state where everything, or most things—or just enough things—were as you wanted them to be. And that’s why I was unhappy. Because nothing seemed to be the way I wanted it to be. But now I know that happiness has nothing to do with how things are. It’s deeper than that, and independent of it. Maybe happiness is actually knowing that. Maybe it’s knowing that the state we’re in is that we’re all worker bees, working on a huge hive-building project, and that is all we really have to do: keep doing our part, and trusting that we’re instinctively making the right moves, moves that help the hive…

I hope this letter helps you in our work together, and helps me keep moving forward.

I want you to know that it has been extremely helpful to me to think this through, to write this out, even though I did not want to do it. Yes, all those excuses I gave you were, as you well know, just excuses.

My sincerest thanks,
P.S. I wore my Oakocoon dress to a party the other night. It was its maiden flight. It drew more eyes than I am accustomed to, which was uncomfortable at first, but soon I realized it was the art they were staring at. And it was remarkable. At first I felt disappointed, then proud of my good taste in “wearable content,” and finally strangely confident. You see, that loop was showing them exactly who I am. It was 真 (Shin) in a dress. That androgyne hatching from the cocoon was me, and them, and everyone else in the hive when we sink into dreams. I was showing the world my reality, my truth, as usable, portable, wearable content. Naked and clothed at the same time, I danced till I dropped.