



THE ARCHIVE CYCLE

DO NOT OPEN AGAIN

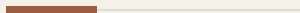
BOOK TWO OF FOUR

Some doors remember who opened them.

THE ARCHIVE CYCLE

DO NOT OPEN AGAIN

BOOK TWO OF FOUR

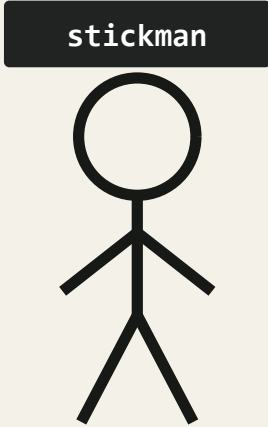


“Some doors remember who opened them.”

ILLUSTRATED ARCHIVE EDITION

Basya Entertainment

KNOWN ENTITIES



STICKMAN / UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1

A thin black body. An empty circular head. No face, clothing, or visible possessions. The nametag persists in every reality.

ONE WORLD / ONE OBJECT / MINIMUM NONZERO PROOF



PROLOGUE

THE SIGN CHANGED FIRST

The sign had always been simple.

← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

Nobody in Stickcity remembered who had planted it beside the road. The wood was older than the nearest houses and newer than the hills, which was exactly the sort of contradiction the Doodle Universe accepted without complaint.

Every morning, citizens passed it.

Every morning, the arrows pointed where they had pointed before.

Then one morning the sign said:

← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →
DO NOT LET HIM OPEN IT

A baker noticed first.

He stopped with a tray of line-drawn bread balanced on one hand.

The words were not written in the same style as the rest of the sign. HOME and EVERYWHERE ELSE were neat black letters. The new sentence had been scratched into the wood hard enough to cut through the outline.

The baker called over a woman carrying three circles in a basket.

“Was that always there?”

She read the sentence.

“What sentence?”

The baker looked again.

The third line was gone.

He rubbed the wood.

No scratches.

No marks.

Nothing.

By lunchtime the sign was normal.

By sunset, the arrow marked HOME had rotated several degrees toward a road that did not exist.

At midnight, when Stickcity was quiet, a thin black keyhole appeared in the blank white ground beneath the sign.

It remained for exactly one minute.

Then it closed.

Far away, between universes, twelve locks on a white door clicked at the same time.

Eleven remained closed.



AFTER WORLD: NONE

Stickman ignored the tungsten cube for three days.

This was not because he had stopped being curious.

He had simply learned that curiosity occasionally benefited from distance.

The cube remained in the Archive exactly where it had appeared.

WORLD: NONE
STATUS: WAITING
NEXT ENTRY: PENDING

The dust beneath it showed two clean squares now.

One from when it first appeared.

One from when something had moved it while Stickman stood on the other side of the shelf.

Stickman checked the cube each morning.

Nothing changed.

On the fourth morning, he stopped checking.

That was when the Archive changed something else.

A keyhole symbol appeared beside every reference to the Doodle Universe.

Not printed on the labels.

Scratched.

Some old.

Some fresh.

Some so faint they vanished when Stickman looked directly at them.

He followed the marks through seven corridors and one room whose shelves were mounted upside down.

At the end stood a narrow terminal.

The screen displayed:

```
WORLD 1  
COMMON NAME: DOODLE UNIVERSE  
STATUS: ACTIVE  
BOUNDARY CONDITION: LOCKED
```

Stickman stared at WORLD 1.

He had never seen a number attached to the Doodle Universe.

He typed:

```
LOCKED  
  
ACCESS RESTRICTED
```

He typed:

```
HOME
```

The terminal shut off.

Stickman waited.

The screen came back by itself.

```
DO NOT OPEN AGAIN
```

Then:

```
PREVIOUS LOCK RECORD INCOMPLETE
```

Then nothing.

Stickman looked toward the distant rows.

He knew where to go.

Home.

Or whatever HOME actually meant.



STICKCITY REMEMBERS BADLY

Stickcity looked normal when Stickman arrived.

That was the first suspicious thing.

The pencil tower leaned at its usual impossible angle.

A train made from three rectangles and six circles rattled along a line that had not been there the day before.

A vendor shouted about premium triangles.

Two children kicked a square back and forth as if it were a ball.

Nobody noticed Stickman more than usual.

The nametag floated above him.

stickman

He walked toward the old sign.

← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

No warning.

No keyhole.

Nothing.

A man painting a fence stood nearby.

Stickman pointed at the sign, then at HOME.

“Road’s been closed for years,” the man said.

Stickman looked at the road.

It was open.

He pointed again.

The painter frowned.

“What road?”

Stickman looked back.

The road was gone.

White ground stretched behind the arrow.

He blinked, in the metaphorical way available to someone without eyelids.

The road returned.

The painter kept working.

Stickman walked toward it.

The first hundred meters were exactly as he remembered.

Line forest.

Small hill.

A house shaped like a rectangle with a triangle roof.

Stickman stopped.

There had never been a house here.

A woman stood outside watering a flower drawn as five circles around a smaller circle.

“Hello,” she said.

Stickman pointed at the house.

“Yes?”

He pointed back toward Stickcity.

“Been here forever.”

Stickman walked around the building.

Behind it, the wall had no back side.

From the front, house.

From behind, nothing.

He stepped around again.

House.

Again.

Nothing.

The woman continued watering the flower from an angle where her own house did not exist.

Stickman moved on.

At the end of the road, the black keyhole waited on the ground.

This time it was larger.

Around it someone had drawn a square.

Then another.

Then another.

Concentric boxes, each slightly crooked.

The outermost contained two words.

NOT HOME

Stickman crouched.

The writing faded.

The keyhole remained.

THE WORLD OF LOCKED HORIZONS

Stickman decided that if the Doodle Universe was locked, he should learn what Previous meant by locks.

He searched worlds with keyhole symbols.

The first was an ocean world.

There were no continents.

Only platforms anchored above dark blue water.

People traveled between them in little sailboats and treated the horizon as a physical boundary.

“Don’t go too far,” a fisherman told Stickman.

Stickman pointed at the open sea.

The fisherman shook his head.

“Locked.”

That word again.

Stickman borrowed a boat.

He sailed until the platform behind him became a line.

Then the horizon became a wall.

Not visually.

The sea continued.

The sky continued.
But the boat stopped as if it had hit glass.
Stickman stood and placed one hand forward.
His fingers touched something invisible.
A keyhole appeared in the air.
The instant he touched it, the horizon opened.
For one second, there was no ocean beyond.
Only Archive shelves.
A square-headed figure stood between them.

previous

Stickman released the keyhole.
Ocean returned.
The boat rocked.
The fisherman on the distant platform shouted something.
Stickman crossed the invisible boundary without the boat.
The world changed.
He emerged inside an abandoned train station.
Clocks covered every wall.
Every clock read a different year.
The platform signs did not list destinations.
They listed states:

ACTIVE
LOST
LOCKED
PENDING

A train arrived beneath a sign marked LOCKED.

Its doors opened.

Inside every window showed the same Doodle Universe sign.

← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

Stickman did not board.

The train departed empty.

On the bench beside him lay a brass key with no teeth.

He took it to the Archive.

The Archive rejected it.

A note appeared beneath the empty shelf instead.

LOCKS ARE NOT FOR DOORS.

Then the note burned away.



THE MUSEUM OF KEYS

The museum contained keys to things that did not have locks.

This made it popular.

Visitors wandered through glass cases containing labels like:

KEY TO A SUMMER AFTERNOON

KEY TO THE LAST ROOM IN A DREAM

KEY TO A ROAD THAT WAS NEVER BUILT

KEY TO THE SOUND OF RAIN IN AN EMPTY HOUSE

Most keys looked ordinary.

Stickman spent an hour examining them.

A curator followed him.

“You have an eye for the impossible,” she said.

Stickman pointed at his empty head.

The curator considered.

“Figure of speech.”

At the back of the museum stood a case with no label.

Inside was a flat black shape cut like a keyhole.

Not a key.

The absence a key would fit.

Stickman stopped.

The curator’s expression changed.

“That one isn’t ours.”

She opened the case.

“You know what it is?”

Stickman pointed toward the Archive.

She saw only the wall.

“Right.”

The black shape floated upward.

Every key in the museum turned toward it.

Hundreds.

Thousands.

A metallic sound filled the hall.

Then each key inserted itself into the nearest available object.

Display cabinets.

Floor tiles.

Benches.

Windows.

People’s coat buttons.

The museum became full of locks.

The curator stared.

“This is new.”

One by one, the locks opened.

Behind each appeared a different place.

A beach.

A bedroom.

A ruined city.

A donut universe.

The Archive.

Stickcity.

A blank white room.

Stickman recognized the pattern before anyone else.

Too many valid openings.

Recursive access.

He ran toward the black keyhole.

The curator shouted, “What are you doing?”

Stickman grabbed it.

The museum doubled.

Two halls.

Two curators.

Two sets of visitors.

One Stickman.

The duplicated curator looked at her other self.

Both screamed.

Stickman remembered Previous’s sentence:

A lock is an agreement about which side is allowed to be real.

He turned the keyhole sideways.

It resisted.

He rotated it until it no longer aligned with any opening.

Every lock snapped shut.

The duplicate museum vanished.

The curator remained holding a key labeled:

KEY TO THE MUSEUM THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN

She stared at it.

“Do I keep this?”

Stickman shook his head.

The key faded from her hand.

The black keyhole in Stickman's grasp became a thin strip of paper.

Written on it:

WORLD 1 BOUNDARY LEAK

The paper burned.

The museum returned to normal.

Before leaving, Stickman chose an ordinary brass admission token as the world's Archive object.

The Archive accepted it.

Then added a line:

RECURSIVE EXPOSURE: CONTAINED

Stickman looked at the token.

The museum had not taught him what HOME was.

But it had shown him what happened when too many doors were allowed to be correct at once.

THE LAUNDROMAT AT THE END OF TIME

Stickman entered the laundromat because it was raining.

Outside, the world was ending in a very ordinary way.

Buildings aged rapidly.

Cars rusted while moving.

Trees grew, died, and turned to dust in minutes.

The laundromat remained spotless.

Seven washing machines spun in perfect rhythm.

A woman sat reading a magazine dated six billion years in the future.

“Dryers are broken,” she said.

Stickman nodded.

He sat.

There was no reason to hurry.

He watched a shirt tumble behind round glass.

The shirt belonged to a world where clothing could remember who wore it. Stickman knew this because the shirt occasionally whispered someone’s grocery list.

Outside, the sun expanded.

The sky turned orange.

The woman turned a page.

“Always does that around closing.”

Stickman pointed outside.

“World’s on a timer,” she said.

He pointed to the laundromat.

“Different lease.”

Stickman accepted this.

A black keyhole appeared briefly in the reflection of Washer Four.

He stood.

The woman looked up.

“Don’t touch that one.”

Stickman froze.

He pointed.

She sighed.

“Some square-headed guy came through years ago. Broke three machines. Said if the reflection shows shelves, shut your eyes.”

Stickman had no eyelids.

The woman noticed.

“Well,” she said, “improvise.”

The keyhole vanished.

The world outside reached its final minute.

Stickman crossed an Edge through the vending machine.

Before leaving, he took a lost sock as the world’s object.

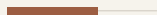
The Archive shelf already contained one.

COLLECTOR: PREVIOUS

The field stayed visible this time.

For seven seconds.

Then disappeared.



THE LOCK ROOM

Previous had left tools.

Stickman had seen some in Book One, but he had not understood what they were for.

Now he returned.

The room existed behind a wall that opened only when Stickman walked past without looking at it.

Inside were hundreds of devices.

Keys without teeth.

Locks without openings.

Metal frames shaped like doors but too small to enter.

Glass cubes containing miniature horizons.

A roll of black tape labeled TEMPORARY REALITY SEAL.

Stickman picked that up.

The label beneath it read:

DO NOT USE ON PEOPLE

He put it down.

At the center of the room stood a workbench.

A diagram had been carved into its surface.

Three circles.

WORLD

EDGE

ARCHIVE

A fourth circle had been scratched out.

Only part of the label remained.

...R...

Lines connected the circles.

The line from WORLD to EDGE was simple.

The line from EDGE to ARCHIVE had a keyhole drawn across it.

The scratched-out fourth circle connected to the Archive twice.

Stickman traced the lines.

A drawer opened.

Inside was a small notebook.

Most pages were blank.

One contained Previous's handwriting.

A lock is not a barrier.

A lock is an agreement about which side is allowed to be real.

Stickman read it again.

The next page:

The HOME door violates that agreement.

The third:

I opened it once.

Everything after that page had been torn out.

Stickman looked toward the doorway.

A shadow moved outside.

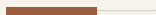
Round head.

Thin body.

He stepped into the corridor.

Nobody.

When he returned, the notebook was gone.



THE SECOND STICKCITY

The duplicate appeared beyond the pencil tower.

Stickman noticed because there were suddenly two suns.

One in the normal place.

One reflected in a white patch of sky where no reflection should exist.

He climbed the tower.

From the top he saw Stickcity.

Then, beyond its northern edge, another Stickcity.

Same roads.

Same buildings.

Same unnecessary pencil tower.

Same sign.

The duplicate city was rotated ninety degrees.

No citizens moved inside it.

Stickman descended.

Nobody else seemed able to see the second city.

He walked toward it.

At the boundary, black lines overlapped.

One set belonged to the real street.

One to the duplicate.

Stickman crossed.

Sound vanished.

The duplicate city was empty.

Every shop contained objects but no people.

Every clock showed 03:14.

The old sign stood in the center.

But the words were reversed.

← ESLE EREHWYREVE
EMOH →

Stickman walked around it.

On the back:

DO NOT OPEN AGAIN

He touched the wood.

A voice played from nowhere.

“Wrong side.”

Previous.

Stickman turned.

Nobody.

The duplicate city flickered.

For one frame every building became Archive shelving.

Then city again.

At the far end of the street, a figure appeared.

Thin black body.

Empty circular head.

No nametag.

Stickman stopped.

The figure copied his stance.

Stickman raised his right hand.

The figure raised its left.

A mirror.

Then a nametag appeared.

stickman

The figure stopped copying.

It pointed toward the reversed HOME arrow.

Stickman backed away.

The duplicate city began folding inward like paper.

He ran.

Not because he was afraid of the figure.

Because the streets were becoming smaller behind him.

He crossed the boundary.

The second Stickcity vanished.

The real city continued around him.

A vendor offered him a triangle.

Stickman looked back.

Nothing.

On the pavement where the duplicate city had begun lay a tiny white square.

He picked it up.

It contained a perfect drawing of the Archive.

When he brought it to the Archive, no shelf accepted it.

The square dissolved into dust.



THE RESIDENT WHO REMEMBERED

Her name was Nia.

At least that was what she said.

She lived in a small house near the edge of Stickcity and drew maps for people who wanted to get lost efficiently.

Nia was not a Stickman.

She was a doodle person with a circle head, a triangular dress, and two dot eyes.

She noticed Stickman staring at the keyhole carved into the old sign.

“You can see that?” she asked.

Stickman turned.

For once, someone else saw it.

Nia walked closer.

“My grandmother called it the bad drawing.”

Stickman pointed at the keyhole.

“She said it wasn’t part of our world. Said somebody drew it from the other side.”

Stickman mimed a square head.

Nia stared.

“You know him?”

Stickman shook his head.

“Good.”

She looked toward the HOME road.

“He came here a long time ago. Before me. Maybe before my grandmother. Stories disagree.”

Stickman pointed toward the Archive.

Nia could not see what he meant.

“He kept asking about doors,” she continued. “Then one day every door in Stickcity opened into the same room.”

Stickman froze.

White shelves?

Nia nodded before he could gesture.

“White room. Shelves forever.”

Stickman pointed at HOME.

Nia’s expression changed.

“That road appeared afterward.”

She leaned closer.

“The sign used to have only one arrow.”

Stickman looked at it.

“EVERYWHERE ELSE,” Nia said. “HOME was added later.”

Stickman stared at the sign.

That was new.

“Who added it?” he gestured.

Nia shrugged.

“Some say the square-headed traveler. Some say the sign did it itself.”

She touched the keyhole carving.

Her finger passed through it.

“There’s one thing every version agrees on.”

Stickman waited.

“He opened something he couldn’t close by himself.”

The keyhole disappeared under her hand.

Nia did not notice.

Stickman did.



THE TRAIN THAT ARRIVED TWICE

The train arrived at Platform Six.

Then the same train arrived at Platform Six.

Both occupied the same track.

Nobody at the station reacted.

Stickman did.

The first train had blue seats.

The second had red.

The first conductor waved.

The second conductor also waved.

“Archive?” asked the first.

“Archive?” asked the second.

Stickman pointed at himself.

Both conductors nodded.

“Expected.”

That was never a good word.

The station clock read 03:14.

The blue train’s destination board said HOME.

The red train’s said EVERYWHERE ELSE.

Stickman boarded neither.

The doors closed.

The trains departed in opposite directions while sharing the same rails.

The platform remained.

A ticket machine printed two tickets.

Both had Stickman's nametag where a passenger name should be.

The blue ticket:

```
VALID ROUTE: HOME  
ARRIVAL: BEFORE DEPARTURE
```

The red:

```
VALID ROUTE: EVERYWHERE ELSE  
ARRIVAL: AFTER DEPARTURE
```

Stickman tore both in half.

The pieces rejoined.

A station employee approached.

"Problem?"

Stickman held up both.

"Ah," the employee said. "Duplicate routing."

He said it with the tone of someone discussing delayed luggage.

"Usually resolves itself."

Usually.

Stickman pointed to the clock.

The employee looked.

"Three fourteen."

Stickman pointed at HOME.

The employee's face went blank.

"What word?"

Stickman looked back.

The board now said:

VALID ROUTE: [RESTRICTED]

The blue train returned.

Its windows showed the false Archive.

The red train returned.

Its windows showed normal Stickcity.

Both opened their doors.

Stickman stepped backward.

Previous's handwriting appeared on the tiled floor:

DO NOT BOARD A ROUTE THAT CLAIMS YOU ALREADY ARRIVED.

Then disappeared.

Stickman left through an Edge behind a vending machine.

In the Archive, the world's shelf held a small train ticket.

COLLECTOR: PREVIOUS

NOTE: ROUTE LOCKED

Stickman wondered how many times Previous had learned the same lesson before writing the warning.



DOORS EVERYWHERE

Doors began appearing across the Doodle Universe.

At first they were ordinary.

A door on the side of a house.

A door in a fence.

A door standing in a field without walls.

Nobody cared.

The Doodle Universe had always tolerated bad architecture.

Then the doors began opening into the Archive.

A baker opened a pantry and saw shelves.

A child opened a school cupboard and stepped into a corridor before a teacher pulled him back.

A train door opened at a station and revealed the pedestal room.

Stickman started closing them.

He closed twelve in one afternoon.

Each time, a keyhole appeared after the door shut.

Each time, the keyhole stayed.

Nia helped by marking locations on a map.

By evening, the map looked infected.

Black keyholes covered Stickcity.

“What happens if we leave one open?” she asked.

Stickman shook his head.

He did not intend to find out.

Then a door opened in the sky.

A giant rectangle appeared above the city.

Beyond it: Archive ceiling.

Objects began falling upward.

A chair.

A hat.

Three circles from the market.

A dog.

Stickman grabbed the dog by the tail.

The dog seemed mostly offended.

Nia tied a rope around a lamppost and threw the other end to Stickman.

He looped it around himself.

The pull increased.

Entire rooflines lifted.

Stickman looked toward the old sign.

HOME glowed black.

He understood nothing, but the sign was the only recurring center.

He reached it.

The keyhole in the post had become a real hole.

He pushed one finger into it.

Every open door slammed shut at once.

The sky closed.

Objects fell.

The dog landed in a flower bed.

Silence.

Then the sign cracked down the middle.

The HOME arrow dropped to the ground.

On the exposed wood beneath it was Previous's handwriting.

I AM SORRY.

Nia read it.

“Who is he apologizing to?”

Stickman did not know.

The letters faded.

The arrow reattached itself.



THE CITY THAT ONLY HAD WINDOWS

The city had no doors.

That was why Stickman liked it immediately.

Every building was covered in windows.

People entered homes by opening windows and climbing through.

Shops had low windows.

Buses had windows at sidewalk level.

The mayor's office had a ceremonial window with gold curtains.

"No doors," the mayor told Stickman proudly.

Stickman pointed at the wall.

"Never invented them."

That seemed like a healthy civilization.

Stickman spent a peaceful day there.

He ate lunch in a café through a window.

He watched a concert through another.

He chose a small brass window latch as the Archive object.

At sunset, every window reflected the Archive.

Not what stood behind Stickman.

Not the street.

White shelves.

In each reflection, Previous stood farther away.

First window: end of corridor.

Second: closer.

Third: closer again.

Stickman stopped looking.

The mayor approached.

“Beautiful sunset.”

Stickman pointed at the glass.

The mayor saw only orange sky.

Stickman turned toward the nearest Edge.

A window opened by itself.

Not outward.

Not inward.

Sideways.

Behind it stood the duplicate Archive from the paper-airplane world.

Shelf 770.

No red stone.

At the far end, the false Stickman waited.

Stickman shut the window.

The latch broke in his hand.

He took the broken half to the Archive.

The correct shelf already contained the unbroken latch.

COLLECTOR: PREVIOUS

Beneath it:

LOCK PURPOSE: OBSERVATION

Then the line disappeared.



WHAT PREVIOUS OPENED

Stickman returned to Previous's recording room.

The device had changed.

Where one cassette slot had existed, there were now two.

The first contained the final recording from Book One.

The second had no label.

Stickman pressed PLAY.

Static.

Previous's voice.

"Door test one."

A pause.

"Doodle environment chosen because geometry is stable under recursive boundary load."

Stickman leaned closer.

"HOME marker established."

Static swallowed several seconds.

Then:

"Opening."

A sound like paper tearing.

Previous inhaled sharply.

“No.”

Longer static.

“Close it.”

Something struck metal.

“Close it.”

Another voice appeared in the recording.

It sounded exactly like Previous.

But delayed.

“Close it.”

Two voices now.

Then three.

“Close it.”

The tape distorted.

Previous shouted something unintelligible.

The recording ended.

Stickman pressed PLAY again.

Nothing.

He removed the cassette.

On the back:

```
TEST FAILED
RECURSIVE ACCESS CREATED
FALSE ARCHIVE OBSERVED
DUPLICATE SELF OBSERVED
HOME SEALED
```

Stickman read each line.

The duplicate Stickcity.

The false Archive.

The other Stickman.

Previous had seen them too.

One question remained.

Why had Previous opened the HOME door at all?

Stickman searched the room.

A photograph lay beneath the chair.

Previous stood before the Doodle Universe sign.

At that time it contained only:

EVERYWHERE ELSE →

No HOME.

Behind Previous, where the HOME road would later exist, a square of pure blackness hung in the air.

On the back:

IT WAS ALREADY OPEN.

Stickman stared.

Previous had not created the first opening.

He had tried to understand it.

That was worse.



THE HOME ROAD MOVES

The HOME road stopped leading to the same place.

Monday: line forest.

Tuesday: a lake drawn as an oval.

Wednesday: a tunnel.

Thursday: a corridor of the Archive.

Stickman began marking the road with small stones.

The marks never remained.

Nia followed once.

When Stickman stepped onto the road, Nia saw him disappear.

When he looked back, she stood one meter behind him.

From his side, the road stretched between them for kilometers.

Nia shouted.

Her voice arrived several seconds late.

Stickman walked back.

Distance collapsed.

“You were right there,” she said.

Stickman nodded.

“But also very far away.”

He nodded again.

Nia looked toward HOME.

“I hate that road.”

Stickman agreed.

They tested it.

Nia walked first.

Nothing unusual happened.

The road led to a hill and ended.

Stickman walked first.

The keyhole appeared.

The road extended.

The Archive flickered at the end.

The HOME road reacted specifically to Stickman.

That realization followed him back to the Archive.

He opened his entity record.

UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1
STATUS: PRESENT
EDGE ACCESS: UNRESOLVED

A new line had appeared.

HOME ACCESS: ACTIVE

Stickman typed:

WHY

ACCESS RESTRICTED

He typed:

PREVIOUS HOME ACCESS

RECORD: TERMINATED

He typed:

WHO OPENED FIRST

The screen displayed:

ENTRY PREDATES PREVIOUS

Then:

ENTRY PREDATES CURRENT ARCHIVE INDEX

Then:

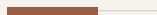
DO NOT OPEN AGAIN

The terminal went black.

On the reflective screen, Stickman saw the keyhole mark behind his own head.

He turned.

Nothing.



THE LOCKS BEGIN TO FAIL

The pedestal room had twelve locks.

Then eleven.

Then ten.

Stickman had not opened any.

Each missing lock left a clean outline on the door.

He checked daily.

Nine.

Eight.

At seven, the Archive lights began flickering whenever he approached.

At six, the tungsten cube rotated ninety degrees while nobody watched.

At five, the WORLD: NONE label changed.

STATUS: WAITING

became

STATUS: LISTENING

Stickman disliked that.

At four locks, Previous's old tools began disappearing from the lock room.

Not all at once.

One key.

One frame.

One roll of reality-seal tape.

Stickman found some in Stickcity.

A key hung from the bakery sign.

The metal frame stood around a tree.

The black tape had been applied across the HOME arrow.

Nobody knew who had placed them there.

At three locks, the tape peeled itself off.

At two, the old sign changed.



← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

became:



← OPEN
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

Stickman tore the OPEN arrow from the post.

The sign regenerated it.

He tore it off again.

It returned.

Nia arrived with a hammer.

“That seems bad.”

Stickman nodded.

Together they removed the entire sign.

They carried it to the center of Stickcity and placed it in an empty warehouse.

Five minutes later, a new sign grew from the ground in the original location.

OPEN →

No other arrow.

Stickman stared.

The last two locks on the pedestal door clicked.

One remained.



A WORLD DRAWN OVER ANOTHER

The Doodle Universe began double-printing.

Mountains acquired second outlines slightly to the left.

Trees existed in two positions.

People left faint duplicate versions of themselves behind when they walked.

Only Stickman remained single.

Nia noticed.

“You don’t have an echo.”

Stickman looked at her two overlapping faces.

One Nia frowned.

The other smiled.

Then the outlines snapped together.

The effect spread.

Stickcity’s duplicate appeared and disappeared every few minutes.

Sometimes empty.

Sometimes populated by copies that moved one second late.

Sometimes populated by copies that did not move at all.

Stickman walked through a market where every citizen had a second version standing behind them.

None of the copies had nametags.

At noon, all duplicates turned toward Stickman.

The real citizens did not.

The copies pointed toward HOME.

Then vanished.

Nia had seen it.

For the first time she looked frightened.

“What are they?”

Stickman drew the Archive in the dust.

Then a second Archive beside it.

Nia understood enough.

“Which one is us?”

Stickman had no answer.

The sky flickered.

For one frame, the entire Doodle Universe became a white Archive corridor.

Every citizen became an object on a shelf.

Nia stood inside a glass case.

A label beneath her:

WORLD 1
OBJECT: WITNESS
STATUS: ACTIVE

Then reality returned.

Nia gasped.

“You saw that too.”

Stickman nodded.

“What did my label say?”

Stickman hesitated.

He drew WITNESS.

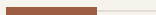
Nia looked toward HOME.

“Then maybe this world isn’t the lock.”

She pointed at herself.

“Maybe we are.”

The last pedestal lock opened.



THE HOUSE WITH ONE ROOM TOO MANY

Nia found the house.

It stood outside Stickcity where the white plain should have been empty.

Rectangle walls.

Triangle roof.

Four square windows.

One door.

Perfectly ordinary by Doodle Universe standards.

Except every time Nia counted the windows, she got five.

She brought Stickman.

He counted four.

Nia counted five.

They walked around the house.

Front: four.

Side: two.

Back: three.

Inside: one hallway.

The hallway contained six doors.

Nia opened the first.

Kitchen.

Second.

Bedroom.

Third.

Archive.

She slammed it shut.

Stickman opened the fourth.

Same Archive corridor.

Fifth.

Same corridor from the opposite direction.

Sixth.

A room containing the house itself.

They stared through the doorway at a miniature copy of the building.

Inside the miniature doorway stood an even smaller copy.

Nia backed away.

“I’m not opening anything else.”

The six doors began opening on their own.

Archive.

Archive.

Archive.

Archive.

Archive.

House-within-house.

Stickman closed one.

Another reopened.

He closed two.

Three opened.

Recursive access.

Again.

On the hallway wall, a keyhole appeared.

Nia saw it.

“So that’s the bad drawing.”

Stickman nodded.

She reached toward it.

Stickman grabbed her wrist.

The keyhole reacted.

Not to Nia.

To Stickman.

It expanded.

The hallway doubled.

Two Nias.

Two houses.

One Stickman.

Both Nias shouted different things.

Stickman took the black tape from Previous’s lock room.

TEMPORARY REALITY SEAL.

DO NOT USE ON PEOPLE.

He placed one strip over the keyhole.

The duplicate house disappeared instantly.

One Nia remained.

The tape smoked.

Words appeared across it:

BOUNDARY ADDRESS: WORLD 1 / HOME

Then it burned away.

The house collapsed into a single line drawing of a square.

Nia picked up the square.

“No.”

Stickman agreed.

They left it on the ground.

When they returned the next morning, the house was gone.

The square remained.

On it someone had written:

THIS IS WHY THE WORLD IS SIMPLE.

Nia kept that sentence secret until much later.



THE PEDESTAL OPENS

The pedestal door stood open.

Stickman entered.

The pedestal remained empty.

STICKMAN

No tungsten cube.

No recording.

No visible mechanism.

The room felt exactly as it had before.

Then Stickman noticed the floor.

A thin line ran from the pedestal to the wall.

He followed it.

The line became a keyhole.

He touched it.

The wall opened.

Behind it was a narrow cavity containing one object.

A piece of wood.

Part of the original Doodle Universe sign.

Only one word remained:

HOME

A label beneath it:

WORLD 1

OBJECT: BOUNDARY MARKER

COLLECTOR: PREVIOUS

STATUS: ACTIVE

Stickman picked it up.

A memory opened.

Previous stood beside the original sign.

Only EVERYWHERE ELSE existed.

A black square floated where HOME would later point.

Previous held the wooden marker.

His voice:

“If the recursive edge cannot be destroyed, it needs a stable address.”

He nailed HOME onto the sign.

The black square collapsed into a road.

Previous stepped back.

“Do not mistake naming for ownership.”

The memory flickered.

Another Previous appeared beside him.

Then another.

Copies.

One with a nametag.

One without.

One backwards.

Previous looked at them.

“Oh no.”

The memory ended.

Stickman returned the wood to the cavity.

The wall sealed.

The pedestal changed.

For the first time, a second line appeared beneath STICKMAN.

BOUNDARY WITNESS

Then vanished.

Stickman left.

The door remained open behind him.



THE QUIET PARADE

Stickcity held a parade every year for reasons nobody remembered.

This year the theme was “Probably Fine.”

Nia insisted Stickman attend.

“You’ve spent two weeks staring at doors.”

Stickman pointed out that doors were currently the most dangerous things in the city.

“Exactly. Parade.”

Floats rolled down Main Line.

One was shaped like a fish.

One like a giant pencil.

One was simply a rectangle labeled MYSTERY FLOAT.

A band played six instruments and somehow produced four notes.

Stickman stood beside Nia.

For ten minutes, nothing strange happened.

Then a float shaped like a house passed.

Its front door opened.

Archive shelves.

Stickman moved.

Nia grabbed his arm.

“Wait.”

Inside the door, Previous stood.

Not a reflection.

Not clearly a recording.

Square head.

Keyhole mark.

Nametag.

previous

He watched the parade from inside the Archive.

Stickman stepped closer.

Previous raised one hand.

Then pointed toward Stickman's nametag.

Then toward the crowd.

Then he drew a line across his own throat.

The image vanished.

The house float continued.

Nia had seen only an empty doorway.

"What?"

Stickman did not know how to explain.

He looked at the crowd.

Every doodle citizen's outline flickered.

For one frame, each had a tiny nametag.

Unreadable.

Then gone.

Stickman left the parade.



THE FALSE ARCHIVE

The HOME door opened on its own at 03:14.

Stickman was standing beside the old sign when the black keyhole expanded.

White lines drew a door around it.

No handle.

The door swung inward.

Beyond: Archive.

Wrong Archive.

Dark shelves.

No objects.

Every label:

STATUS: LOST

Stickman did not cross.

He tested it.

A stone thrown through returned from behind him.

A line drawn across the threshold continued onto the back of his own hand.

He placed a mirror beside the door.

The mirror reflected Stickman.

The doorway did not.

Instead, inside the false Archive, the false Stickman stood where his reflection should have been.

This time its nametag was clear.

stickman

It raised one hand.

Stickman did not.

The figure touched its own nametag.

Then pointed toward the real Stickman.

The labels in the false Archive changed simultaneously.

STATUS: LOST

became:

STATUS: DUPLICATE

The false Stickman placed one hand against the invisible boundary.

Stickman did the same from his side.

Their palms aligned.

The instant they touched through the threshold, Stickman saw two versions of reality.

In one, he stood in the Doodle Universe.

In the other, he stood inside the false Archive.

Both felt real.

Both contained the same nametag.

Then a black scribble erupted between the two views.

The Void.

The false Stickman vanished.

The doorway slammed shut.

The sign cracked.

A message appeared in the wood:

ONE CONSTANT

ONE ADDRESS

ONE SIDE

Stickman touched the words.

They vanished.

The HOME arrow now pointed straight down.



PREVIOUS'S FAILED THEORY

Stickman found the missing notebook pages inside the tungsten cube's corridor.

They had not been there before.

Previous's handwriting filled both sides.

The first page:

THE RECURSIVE EDGE DOES NOT CREATE A SECOND ARCHIVE.

Second:

IT CREATES TWO VALID VIEWS OF THE SAME ARCHIVE.

Third:

THAT DISTINCTION MATTERS.

Previous had underlined matters three times.

The next page contained diagrams.

A world on one side.

Archive on the other.

An Edge between them.

Then a second Edge opening beside the first.

The Archive duplicated only in perspective.

Not in existence.

Previous wrote:

Both routes insist they are correct.

The system resolves contradiction.

I believe this is associated with loss events.

Then, below:

I may be wrong.

A later page:

The black phenomenon appears during resolution.

I named it Void before I understood that naming it was not understanding it.

Stickman remembered the final recording.

Correlation was not cause.

Next page:

Doodle Universe selected as boundary address because it is structurally simple and remarkably tolerant of contradictory geometry.

HOME is not a destination.

HOME is a pointer.

Last page:

I sealed the pointer after the first recursive event.

DO NOT OPEN AGAIN.

Not because of what is behind the door.

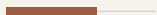
Because opening it makes both sides claim to be the front.

Stickman finally understood part of the warning.

The door did not release a monster.

It created a disagreement about reality.

And something, somewhere, resolved disagreements violently.



THE CITY OF TWO FRONTS

Stickcity split at sunrise.

Not into two cities.

Into two fronts.

Every object acquired a front side depending on who looked at it.

Nia saw her house facing east.

Stickman saw it facing west.

Both could enter.

Inside, the rooms overlapped.

Two kitchens.

Two doors.

Two windows occupying the same space.

The recursive Edge was spreading.

Previous's note had warned:

both sides claim to be the front.

Stickman returned to the old sign.

HOME pointed in every direction.

Arrows covered the post.

Up.

Down.

Left.

Right.

Toward the Archive.

Toward worlds Stickman had never visited.

Nia arrived carrying the original broken HOME marker from the pedestal cavity.

Stickman stared.

“How did I get this?” she asked. “It was on my kitchen table.”

The Archive had released it.

Or something else had.

Stickman took the wood.

The moment he touched it, every arrow stopped moving.

One direction remained.

Toward the empty plain.

They followed.

The road extended farther than ever.

At the end stood not one door.

Two.

Identical.

Stickman remembered the paper-airplane world.

DO NOT TRUST AN EDGE THAT OPENS TWICE.

Nia looked at him.

“Which one?”

Stickman examined the doors.

Left door: keyhole.

Right door: keyhole.

Left reflected no one.

Right reflected Nia but not Stickman.

He touched neither.

Instead, he placed the HOME marker on the ground between them.

The wood split.

One half slid toward the left door.

One toward the right.

Both doors opened.

Behind both: Archive.

In each Archive stood Previous.

One pointed left.

One pointed right.

Both nametags read previous.

Nia whispered, "That's impossible."

Stickman agreed.



THE CHOICE THAT ISN'T A CHOICE

Previous had written that a recursive Edge produced two valid views.

Both doors were valid.

Choosing one would declare the other false.

Stickman suspected that was exactly the mistake.

He sat down between them.

Nia stared.

“What are you doing?”

Stickman waited.

The two Previous figures continued pointing.

Left.

Right.

Left.

Right.

Neither moved otherwise.

The doors widened.

Archive shelves became visible.

Left Archive held the blue marble from the city with no last day.

Right Archive held the same marble.

Stickman stood.

He took the real marble from his pocket.

He did not know when he had picked it up.

That bothered him, but there was no time.

He placed the marble on the ground between the doors.

Both Archives reacted.

Their marbles vanished.

The single marble remained.

A label appeared beneath it.

WORLD 11,204,883

OBJECT: MARBLE

STATUS: LOST

INSTANCE: ONE

The two doors shuddered.

Previous's copies turned toward each other.

For the first time, they stopped pointing.

Both shook their heads.

No.

Stickman understood.

The marble was proof of one history.

The recursive Edge wanted two.

He picked up the marble.

The doors began closing.

Nia grabbed the HOME marker halves.

They fused in her hands.

The left door disappeared.

The right remained.

One Archive.

One Previous.

The figure lowered its hand.

Then pointed at the keyhole.

Stickman touched it.

A memory opened.



THE DONUT DOOR

The donut universe acquired a door.

Nobody knew where it came from.

It stood in the middle of a frosting field beneath a pink sky.

Chocolate frame.

Sprinkle-covered handle.

A sign above it:

DO NOT EAT DOOR

The sign was necessary.

Stickman recognized the keyhole beneath the icing.

He approached.

A baker followed.

“New attraction?”

Stickman shook his head.

“Shame.”

The door opened.

Behind it was Stickcity.

Not the Archive.

The baker looked through.

“That place needs more color.”

Stickman stepped closer.

In Stickcity, the old sign stood visible through the doorway.

HOME pointed directly back at the donut door.

Impossible distance collapsed into one opening.

A doodle citizen on the other side looked through.

“Is that food?”

The baker looked offended.

Stickman shut the door.

It reopened.

He shut it.

Reopened.

The HOME route had begun using other worlds as intermediate addresses.

That was new.

Stickman removed the sprinkle-covered handle.

The door vanished.

The handle remained.

The baker took it.

“Can I eat this?”

Stickman shook his head.

The baker ate it.

For three seconds, his head became an Archive terminal.

HOME ROUTE LEAK DETECTED

Then he returned to normal.

“Needs cinnamon.”

Stickman stared.

The baker shrugged.

Stickman left.

Back in the Archive, the donut world’s shelf contained a new warning:

WORLD 6,120,440
STATUS: ACTIVE
BOUNDARY CONTAMINATION: CLEARED

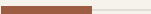
Underneath:

HOME ROUTE IS SEEKING LOW-RESISTANCE EDGES

Stickman had no idea routes could seek anything.

The line vanished before he could search it.

The tungsten cube moved one centimeter.



THE FIRST OPENING

Previous stood on the empty plain.

No Stickman.

No Nia.

No HOME road.

Only the black square.

The memory was clearer than any before.

Previous spoke into a recording device.

“Unknown boundary phenomenon. Doodle world appears to contain direct Archive recursion.”

He approached.

The square opened.

Two Archives appeared side by side.

Previous froze.

A second Previous stepped out of the right opening.

No nametag.

The real Previous backed away.

The copy smiled despite having no visible mouth.

Then its nametag appeared.

previous

The real Previous looked at his own.

previous

The Archive lights flickered.

Every nearby world label changed.

STATUS: DUPLICATE

A black scribble appeared.

the void

Previous closed one opening.

The other widened.

He closed that.

The first reopened.

The Doodle Universe began splitting.

Previous ran to the old signpost.

At the time it contained only:

EVERYWHERE ELSE →

He took a wooden plank and wrote HOME.

He pointed the arrow toward the recursive Edge.

The two openings collapsed into one road.

He drove a key-shaped tool into the ground.

The road sealed.

Previous wrote beneath the sign:

DO NOT OPEN AGAIN.

He looked toward the camera.

“I thought the lock would keep the Archive out.”

He paused.

“I was wrong.”

The memory distorted.

Previous looked older.

More tired.

“The Doodle Universe is not protecting itself from the Archive.”

Static.

“It is protecting the Archive from being viewed twice.”

The recording ended.

The remaining door closed.

Stickman and Nia stood in the white plain.

The central mystery was finally clear.

HOME was never Stickman’s home.

It was the address Previous gave a dangerous recursive Edge so it could be locked.

And opening it made reality disagree with itself.



WHY STICKMAN

One question remained.

Why did the HOME road react to Stickman?

The answer appeared late.

As answers in the Archive often did.

A terminal activated beside the old sign.

No terminal had been there before.

```
STICKMAN  
UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1
```

Then:

```
BOUNDARY WITNESS COMPATIBLE
```

Stickman typed:

```
WHAT DOES THAT MEAN
```

The screen replied:

```
RECURSIVE EVENTS REQUIRE A SINGLE PERSISTENT REFERENCE.
```

He typed:

```
ME
```

```
YES
```

Nia read over his shoulder.

“So when two versions disagree...”

Stickman waited.

The terminal continued:

```
CONSTANT REMAINS SINGLE ACROSS VALID VIEWS.
```

The false Stickman.

It had looked identical.

But the terminal in Book One had said:

```
ONLY ONE CONSTANT PRESENT
```

The copy had never been a second Stickman.

It was a view.

A reflection produced by the recursive Edge.

Stickman typed:

```
WHY DO I OPEN HOME
```

```
AUTHORIZED REFERENCE DETECTED
```

He typed:

```
WHO AUTHORIZED ME
```

```
ACCESS NOT AVAILABLE IN BOOK TWO RECORD
```

Stickman stared.

Nia frowned.

“Book two?”

The screen shut off.

Stickman decided to ignore the wording.

For now.

The old sign changed again.

```
← HOME  
EVERYWHERE ELSE →
```

HOME faded.

Only:

EVERYWHERE ELSE →

remained.

Nia smiled.

“Back to the original.”

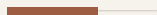
Stickman looked at the blank wood where HOME had been.

A keyhole remained.

He covered it with his hand.

It disappeared.

This time it did not return.



CONTAINMENT

The Doodle Universe stabilized over the next several days.

Duplicate outlines vanished.

Doors returned to leading where doors should.

The sky contained one sun.

Stickcity contained one Stickcity.

Nia's house had one front.

The Archive locks returned to the pedestal door.

One.

Two.

Three.

By morning, twelve.

The tungsten cube changed.

WORLD: NONE

STATUS: WAITING

NEXT ENTRY: PENDING

The same as before.

But a new object sat beside it.

A small brass key.

No teeth.

The one from the locked-horizon world.

Stickman had brought it to the Archive weeks earlier.

The Archive had rejected it.

Now it had a label.

```
OBJECT: RECURSIVE KEY  
ORIGIN: WORLD 1  
STATUS: DISABLED
```

Stickman picked it up.

It was warm.

On one side:

O1

On the other:

```
NOT A DOOR
```

He returned it to the shelf.

The label flickered.

```
DESTINATION: ROOT
```

Then vanished.

Stickman searched ROOT.

```
ACCESS RESTRICTED
```

He searched WORLD: NONE.

```
NO MATCH
```

He searched RECURSIVE KEY.

```
NO MATCH
```

The Archive had given him an answer and hidden the next question behind it.

This was becoming a habit.

YOU ARE STILL SEEN

Stickman returned to the lake.

The fisherman was there.

“Back again.”

Stickman sat.

He cast his line.

For forty minutes, nothing happened.

Then the water reflected the Doodle Universe instead of the sky.

Stickcity.

Pencil tower.

Old sign.

Only one arrow:

EVERYWHERE ELSE →

Stickman watched.

A dark nametag appeared in the reflection.

No body.

White pixels sharpened.

Not enough to read.

Then a second reflection appeared beside it.

The tungsten cube.

The nametag hovered above the cube for several seconds.

The first letter resolved.

t

Then the reflection broke when a fish touched the surface.

Stickman reeled in.

Nothing.

The fisherman laughed.

“You ever catch anything?”

Stickman considered.

He shook his head.

“Then why keep coming?”

Stickman looked across the lake.

The far trees began changing.

Another Edge.

He stood.

Because fishing was not really about catching fish.

And exploring was not really about answers.

Not yet.

Stickman crossed.

The lake disappeared behind him.

Far away, the Archive remained quiet.

The brass recursive key sat beside the tungsten cube.

At 03:14, the key rotated by itself.

The cube moved one centimeter.

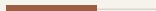
A terminal activated.

BOOK TWO EVENT: CONTAINED
RECURSIVE ACCESS: SEALED
CONSTANT: PRESENT

Then:

NEXT TEST: PENDING

The screen went black.



EPILOGUE

THE OLD MAP

Nia found the map beneath her bed.

She did not remember owning it.

It showed the Doodle Universe.

Stickcity.

The line forest.

The empty plain.

No HOME road.

At the bottom, someone had written:

WORLD 1 IS NOT HIS ORIGIN.

Nia stared.

Below that:

IT IS ONLY THE NEAREST PLACE.

And beneath that, in different handwriting:

NEAREST TO WHAT?

A black keyhole appeared in the paper.

Nia dropped the map.

The keyhole became a small dark rectangle.

A nametag.

White pixel text tried to render.

Then the page burned from the center outward.

Nia watched until only ash remained.

She did not tell Stickman.

Not yet.

END OF BOOK II

THE ARCHIVE CYCLE – BOOK II OF IV