

Escape From Eternal Life

Michael Fridman

Author's Preface	2
Part One: Matters of Life and Death	
1. Deuterisation	4
2. Other Dreamers	9
3. Consequences	20
4. The Law of Averages	26
5. Prodigal Daughter	30
6. The Blizzard	34
Part Two: Exploring the Universe	
7. Awake, My Child	37
8. The Four-dimensional Harmony of Spheres	42
9. The Intelligent Designer	49
10. Philosophy of Pigmind	55
11. Revisionism	63
Part Three: Exploring Me	
12. The Humble Implorer	68
13. Love, Crime and Scattered Irony	72
14. A Short Excursion into the Obvious	78
15. From Jacob to Israel.	81
16. Nihilism Triumphant	87
Postscript Note	91

Author's Preface

I am at the end of my unfathomable journey into the immaterial -- oops! -- the non-material plane. Furthermore, I've decided once and for all to go back to the real regular world. This despite all the inconsistencies, suffering and bullshit that exists therein. I do leave this manuscript for the sake of recording what I have experienced and what I have made of it in my own mind. Of course, to underpin my decision to return to the material plane, I made a point of creating a *material* manuscript, although for practical purposes actual parchment and a quill were unavailable due to my current noncorporeality.

There exist two possibilities for who you as the reader might be. The first possibility is an inhabitant of the material plane, in which case most fortunate are you! Or perhaps unfortunate -- it's not for me to judge. I imagine that you will probably consider this text an excellent source for some exotic form of clinical psychosis: after all, it's in the first person! What non-material plane? you might ask, how could this be? and two very legitimate questions these are. However I certainly do not ask for anyone to suspend their disbelief, let alone actually believe me or anything like that. For reasons that will become clear, it may be better for you to consider my work as the raving of a lunatic. It would still be of enormous interest, I think, in terms of questioning how you look at the material world. If you do come to Realise, then I guess it's all the better, for you have the chance of seeing many of my troubles and pre-empting them lest they become yours too. The second possible type of reader is an inhabitant of the Otherly realm. If this is you, you'll definitely have no trouble believing me. It is empathy and understanding that you are likely to lack. After all, my departure will probably be remembered for a long time. Why did she leave? will be asked. I want this lengthy epistle of mine to be an explanation -- not a defence for I need not defend myself against anyone or anything -- as to why I left and as to why you may perhaps raise the very same questions about your plane of existence that I raise. And perhaps opt for change.

I'm shit scared. I'm scared of what may happen. I know there won't be total amnesia -- it's not like the Matrix or some simplistic scenario where I can just take the red pill or be neatly placed into the "real" world. It will be more gradual and painful. My memory of my experience won't be erased completely (and I don't want it to be), but that 'twill fade is a certainty. I hope it won't combine with wherever I end up in life to develop into a jadedness, because this is NOT why I'm leaving. Mine is a positive step, not away from the horror of spiritualism and eternal life but towards the blessed promise of down-to-earthness. With a hint of nihilism thrown in for fun.

I'm also scared of the loose ends of my life. Pesky, practical stuff. There's the necessity of leaving my dear husband once I return into his arms. I'll still remember him, and obviously he me. What will that do? And what about my memory of Greg? I know I had a plan to manage it but things could still go wrong. But I get ahead of myself and digress... To put a personal reference to the way I'm feeling now, the scriptorium is cold and my thumb aches. That I have currently no body with which to be cold nor any place to be cold in, (nor a thumb for that matter) matters not, for I feel it as intensely as can be experienced.

I apologise for the defects of the writing. This is neither a philosophical dialogue nor a scientific explanation nor an account of my feelings and relationships because my

experiences have seen an extraordinary mixture of all these and more. I've experienced these in a way that no-one from the material world would have ; so looks like I'm off the hook for being unusual. I'm also excited -- to be me, to have a body again! Remembering my former life has caused significant blood flow to my organs of chaos, destruction and playfulness, warming them intensely.

But now, to my life, my troubles and joys and my journey to the Upper Plane, as well as my hopeful future descent into the base and ignoble.

Casielle

Part One: Matters of Life and Death

1. Deuterisation

In the beginning of the last chapter, I inform'd you exactly when I was born; -- but I did not inform you, how. No; that particular was reserved entirely for a chapter by itself; -- besides, Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once.

Tristram Shandy

I was enveloped by the numbness of cold, my sense of pain gone from the lack of sensation in my limbs and instead replaced with a feeling of relief as the last of the many survival instincts give up. I did not suffer for though I couldn't move, I did not mind. Not even the thought of leaving David and Clara and my family forever made me want to fight. Not that I should feel guilty about this -- my brain no longer had the capacity of considering the people in my life. And so I lay in the snow, ready for lifelessness to kick in.

--But this is a shameless digression into the future. I'm afraid I must expand the clichéd autobiographical details first since they've had a lot of impact on my post-mortem existence.

I was deuterised in 1997 in Madrid. Just over three weeks premature I was. I believe it was the sheer eagerness of finally getting out of the dankness and seeing the world that caused this. But it did cost my dear parents much grief in the first few days of my life as a viable fetus outside the mother, for I had been born with a few minor conditions that I need not mention but which when coupled with the hasty deuterisation left me in intensive care for a short period. This then was my first introduction to the world of materialism. Modern medical science had saved me. Although my condition wasn't that serious, if I was born in a previous century or in a culture where instead of some cold objective doctor there was a warm and fuzzy local shaman, or even into a family that was spiritually against antibiotics, I wouldn't have survived. To my fortune though, I was born exactly into the context I was born into and this meant that I had experienced the warmth of my bodily processes being regulated until I was no longer at risk of death. I'd never let myself forget this.

Once I was taken home from the hospital, my grandfather did something to contradict this sober attitude. Upon us entering with the nervous excitement of a transformed family, he stood up to greet our three person party, smiled and exclaimed "What an angel! They had to have fed her more than just drugs to get her to this radiant state... It must have been manna from the seventeenth celestial sphere!" Although I wasn't aware of it at the time obviously, this introduction to him that I had was to set the scene for much of my family life. His sly smile and my mother's 'be quiet Dad' look were an apt example of the generation gap in my immediate family between the ultramodern logical seculars and the intuitive elders (well actually, elder). Shit, this was supposed to be a quick summary of my life and what's relevant in terms of my post-life and here I am rambling!

I suppose it's relevant anyhow, but it reminds me of Tristram Shandy who takes most of his autobiography to merely be born. This was my father's favourite book for a long time because it reminded him of his own family history in terms being good-natured humble aristocrats with occasional misadventures. I guess some background on my father won't hurt.

He was of Spanish origin, in fact of Spanish aristocratic origin with a full-blown genealogy that dated back many centuries (well at least in the commonly accepted chronology of the world that I now know is far from accurate) possibly to the time of the Templars. In fact when he did something my mother disapproved of, he'd justify it by joking that it was his Templar ancestor who had invented the infamous urban-mythical kiss below the belt in their initiation ceremony, "so you can't expect his male descendant to be an altar boy". This she took in good humour and it would usually bring her crossness to an end. He was definitely not stuck up about his royal lineage. He'd often poke fun at it with stories like these. In fact he used one of his family medallions as a coaster "just to put myself back in my place". I looked up the family records at one point and the history of the Titled part of our clan was quite spectacular -- much quixotic happenings and courtly intrigue to be had.

There was one story however that may have been either true or my father's fable, but the interesting thing was that he was extremely proud of it in a genuine way. Unlike most of his family history, he'd tell this one frequently to people he met -- even repeating it to us (and he usually hated the idea of telling the same story over and over again) -- without a hint of deprecation. It involved Columbus, The Columbus. At the time of Queen Isabella and friends, one of the members of the court was my father's great-great-great-etc-ancestor Fernando. This illustrious ancestor was present during the famous meeting that took place when Columbus announced regarding his plans to reach India by sailing round the world the other way. Now, this caused much opposition from many people versed in matters geographical including Fernando. I should interject that today legend has overtaken the truth and proclaimed that those opposing had thought Columbus was doomed to failure as he was embarking on a journey that would have him sail off the edge of the world and be dash'd upon the rocks of mortality. In reality, the world had believed in a spherical earth for many hundreds of years. That wasn't the issue - distance was. Columbus had thought the earth to be smaller than the current estimate, based on a combination of stupidity and biblical interpretation. If he was right, he could go 'round the back' in no time. If he was wrong, as many of the court including Fernando thought, and the current accepted estimates were closer to the truth than that of Columbus, his crew would starve before they got to India. It was no surprise then that upon hearing of this bald plan, Fernando took him to task in front of polite society by piling upon Columbus all the arguments for the conservative estimate of our blue and green sphere's size. He then called him a fool and an opportunist and exclaimed that 'twould be cruel to even send a ship full of dogs or cattle to starve in a death most unglorious, let alone a ship full of persons.

We all know what happened. Fernando was essentially right in that the crew were on their last legs by the time they hit the Bahamas. He was also right in Columbus being very much an opportunist and an unpleasant one at that, as can be verified by the history books. However, this was an outrage of a scene in court and Columbus had stormed out.

Rumours of an upcoming duel abounded but then came the permission of the queen for the opportunist to go ahead. As a result -- no duel and hence my father (and in turn I) were eventually to be born unperturbed by the ripple in the genetic pool a bullet or sword would have caused. Perhaps it was out of her amusement at observing Columbus as the underdog in the scene at court that the queen allowed such a ludicrous expedition. My father adored the story though, because of Fernando's uncompromising reverence for the truth, as opposed to reverence for the direction the current trendy ideological wind farts in. The fact that the current ideological fart (one that is contemporary with me and my time) has Fernando as a flat-earth believing ignoramus added a certain touch to the story.

After I reached the tender age of four, my family could make the move that they'd been planning for a while. My mother worked as an ambassador in Madrid, but she had grown sick of a vibrant and complex society and wanted to go somewhere a bit more tame. They chose Sweden as there was an opportunity for her to be transferred there and become the ambassador to Sweden instead. I was shipped off along with my family to a new land. There, I was subjected to a range of monotonous but not entirely unpleasant evenings where my mother would entertain the diplomatic elite of the community. I remember one particular recurring jest was with the local pastor. Whenever he was over, he'd naturally try to inject the deity into my mother's discussion of public policy, often saying that one scheme or another that my mother was in favour of would not be supported by the aforementioned deity. "Then how fortunate that we don't consult Him for our social decisions! Or we'd be in quite a bit of trouble," she'd smirk -- always the mocking realist - - at which point I'd often stuff the remnants of my plate into the appropriate orifice and depart. Adults.

She was always honest to everyone, even at diplomatic functions, but she managed to pull it off very smoothly. Perhaps that's why she was a successful diplomat. And I got tucked into bed and was played with most lovingly. But she'd treat me like the pastor when I'd entertain a reality that wasn't hers -- an interesting specimen, worthy of either pity (or curiosity depending on the situation) but nothing else.

Relief came from the country itself, and from my grandfather's tireless efforts to infuse in me the *spirit* of all things wonderful. When I was old enough to walk relatively unaided, he insisted in taking me out to the countryside with astonishing regularity. It is here that I encountered the other Sweden. Just bordering the land of the Moomins, and abounding with pristineness. Image yourself a river half-covered in ice and the whole landscape is white as death except for the greyish-green tips of the trees that show through the cover of snow. You go up a slight incline and through the last of the trees as you walk towards the river and then it hits you. A magnificent bright light. It's not the sun but its reflexion in the multicoloured ice. The consistency of the ice acts like a prism, scattering what would otherwise be an unforgiving eye-burner into a delicate ray of the colour Rainbow. You then turn sideways and up to notice the ravens happily chirping their ominous song. It feels like there is a marvellous gloom around the whole world, as if the entire universe is peaceful and still and not too overwhelmed with objects. Temperature-wise, it's a chill that's warm and forgiving due to the sun's reflection. The air is icy enough to give you the energy to walk for yonks but not so much as to impair breathing or induce asthma. This was what I remember about my grandfatherly walks. That and the stories.

We came home one afternoon and he still had the book in his hands that he used to teach me to read and to interpret pictures whenever we'd sit down to rest near the lake. He went into the kitchen before putting it away and there she was. His daughter, whose astuteness instantly picked up the title despite the oblique angle he was holding it at.

"What's that, father?"

He shuffled. "It's...just a book I was reading Cassi".

"Oh really? And what might be the title, if I may be so bold to ask?"

He declined answering because he knew the answer was coming from her.

"A Thousand and One Nights, I see. Are you out of your mind? How old is she?"

"Six according to my calculations".

"Have you any idea what that tripe will do to her? The hashish-induced fancy of perverted dreamers...What, you think she's not gonna have enough bad influences in her life as a human being that she has to learn at this age to lie and trick and conduct schemes from the bazaars of Baghdad? And not to mention the-

"-it was for her imagination. She's loving it. And I'm not telling her every story indiscriminately. Although I think the earlier she finds out about anything the better."

"My God, I can't believe what you're saying! You want to teach her about life through the ravings of some swooning lovers passing notes... And what about the stories with the homoerotic overtones, do you think she's ready to appreciate those? Not to mention the absolutely unforgivable levels of misogyny, anti-Semitism,-"

"Listen to yourself. Where's my daughter? You know, the one who loves to learn and blend in with other cultures even if she may not like many things about them. The one who among many languages learnt enough Urdu to get by as a princess in the courtly language of old Delhi. What did you do to her?"

This was the last straw and she stormed out, possibly to cry in privacy or more likely to sit and ponder before returning for compromise and reconciliation. However, to a six year old standing in the doorway witnessing these, it was a bit traumatic.

He turned to me and smiled. "It's OK Cassi. She'll be fine. And we'll go on with the stories. There's nothing wrong with them. One day you'll be able to read and understand them *all*. You do like them don't you? ". My expression adequately answered in the affirmative and the tenseness collapsed. He had been telling me many stories, this particular piece of world literature being the most controversial. The most memorable ones for my early age though were the Moomin stories which talked of the neighbouring Finland as a magikal land of wondrous creatures of small and cuddly stature, embarking on innocent misadventures. This was to become my Scandinavia -- the land of the Moomins. It wasn't the bare landscape that I loved when I was outside but it was the idea of the hidden. Who knew behind which tree or frozen stump a Moomin might be? As I grew up, they too went on their bright and sometimes melancholy journeys and through them I learnt to love this land in its beauty. Even during the death that was midwinter, when even the ravens went quiet and the stillness was torture on the ears. During the winter, you'd be frightened by the sound of your own footsteps crackling on the

compressed snow, for this would be the only sound for what seemed like light years. However, none of this mattered, for the Moomins were likely to be safely in hibernation - but if not, there were always bonfires and ice-skating and plays for them to perform.

It was in winter that I started drawing first. To ruin the chronology, I became/was/am a graphic designer so this was of some significance for me. But I was largely influenced by the atmosphere of the stories and my drawings smacked of colour. I cared little for shape (but then again many littlies do) but tones were another thing. I'd use crayons -- six different shades of gray and one of dark blue to draw the dank landscapes in the winter. That these were highly surrealistic didn't even bother my mother as she proudly showed them to most visitors to our house. During spring, when the land came back to life and colour slowly erupted, I got out my whole set of crayons and moved on from the restrictions of the grey. This led to a problem. It first occurred to me when I was about to draw a squirrel from memory (and having only seen one that day, it was unlikely to be a drawing that showcased hyper-realism). My father took me on the walk that day and he was sitting on a fold-out chair two metres away sipping some drink. "Daddy, I'm about to draw the squirrel". He smiled and tilted his head in my direction. "That's great honey. What colour are you going to make him? ". At this point, the whole dilemma hit me. If I pulled out the orange crayon and said to my father "orange", how would I know that what I was seeing WAS in fact orange? I had heard about colour blindness from my father's business partner who was colour-blind. But what if I was too? What if during my whole life, what I had seen as orange was actually what other people saw green as? I would have learnt to see the greenness of the squirrel and the evening sun and the deserts and to call that "orange". So I might have been wrong about what colour to draw the squirrel in! In fact, how was I to know any of the colours I saw were right? I couldn't describe what it was like to anyone because all I had were the names of the colours.

Being the six year old, I turned to him and started attempting to explain this (for this just became the most urgent problem in the world! nothing compared to it) through the tears of fear and frustration that built up. Nothing of sense came through although my father did realise I was confused about the nature of colour somewhat. After the teary outburst lasting a minute or so, I folded my arms and decided to finish my drawing even if I'll have to save the solution to my problem until another day. In some defiance, the poor squirrel turned out orange with pink teeth and a blue tail. Later at the house, my mother was informed of my philosophising. However, she was not that interested in the problem of qualia (at least that's what I later learnt the problem was called -- until of course my death solved the problem). Still, she told me she was very proud to have a daughter that can think for herself at such an early age. I got given some extra ice-cream (deliciously rich but ironically it was totally white as if to taunt my recent discovery) and I went to bed confused but happy. Clearly things in this land of the Moomins were strange and not everything is what it seemed. I knew I'd have to get to the bottom of this mystery.

A bit of time passed and I continued my graphical adventures with the snowy landscapes and my literary adventures with my grandfather. Then, my next major "world"-problem came along. In retrospect, it seems to have been the start of my childhood-dreamer phase so after it happened I think I was truly deuterised. It's very hard to explain though. My father was having an associate from Spain for dinner and when I was brought in to meet him he smiled and said "Oh, what a lovely girl there is. And who might you be?". Instead

of answering with my name, as he probably imagined, I took the question delightfully literally and it bothered me. Who was I? I managed to keep my excitement at finding something new to frustrate over hidden from the company during the meal, but when I went back to my room, things started to happen. My head was spinning; I dimmed the lights and thought. What if I wasn't me? What would that make me and what would I be? I tried to think of what would happen if I was someone else, say the old lady who owned the bakery near to us. My mind started circling: "if I'm not me then who would I be and if so what would this thing that is here that I think is me be?". I obviously wasn't versed in the concepts of body and mind which made the above sentence much more self-referential and paradoxical. The thought kept spinning in my head faster and faster until I had something like a brain explosion whereby everything was just there but I had lost my concept of self and for a second I was stripped of it. Although it unsettled me completely, I thought it was the coolest trick one could do at my age. I would repeat this exercise (which I dubbed "brain explosion") for fun quite a bit.

I tried to tell my family but to no avail. I've expressed the whole thing badly enough now, so imagine how weird it was then. They thought that perhaps I needed to see a psychiatrist, and so I learnt to keep my mouth shut about the esoteric from now on. This worked for they didn't follow up on their promise. Of course as I got older, my sense of self cemented and became the usual boring, stable stream of conscious thought. This means that when I tried to repeat the trick many years later, I couldn't. I couldn't remember the exact sentence (so I sorta fudged it when I wrote it out before), but more importantly I knew that I was too settled *into* my brain to do it. I had gotten too used to inhabiting this world so I couldn't explode my brain anymore. Which I thought was a shame. Of course this and more came back in the non-material plane. But it was with this self-experimentation and the idea that although my family loved me and were great about some things I had to keep quiet about other things, that I began my subsequent curiosities.

2. Other Dreamers

School was the other thing I began quite shortly after that. Try to imagine the kind of school I would have gone to. A child of progressive, relatively free-thinking progressive parents, in a progressive quasi-socialist progressive paradise, in a small progressive toy town with few social problems and much disposable progressive income. It was truly a liberal haven of sorts. No-one was allowed to discriminate on the basis of race, sex, gender (two *very* different things according to the school's ideology), sexual orientation, philosophy, mistakes or general crappiness. Not enough, the ideology against discrimination was replaced with one that disallowed discussion as well. However, no-one told me any of this and I came not knowing my rights and as a result ended up getting discriminated against.

It was probably the third day of school, ever. We sat around, intrigued, as our teacher Sandra pulled out a picture-book and began to read. It was about the animals of the jungle

and was entitled "Pancho the toucan". Pancho the toucan was a colourful and energetic bird who was quite fond of saving patches of Amazon rainforest from the evil loggers. First he encountered them in the clearing that they themselves were making. He wove a rope from the lianas with the help of Maria the armadillo and tied the loggers to a large tree. Eventually he moved on from setting to setting doing much the same with different animals to different environmental threats, but each time saving some pristine piece of South America. Needless to say, I was shitlessly bored by the end of the masterpiece. "Well children, did you like that?" Sandra asked in earnestness. Of course not, it was telling the same story about 5 times and in a boring way too. On the other hand, the illustrations were pretty, although whoever *designed* the Amazon rainforest certainly overdid the colour scheme. Why not a concise one like we have in Sweden in the winter, with only a few colours? This was the extent of my opinion and I gladly gave it to her in its totality. She stopped, almost stupefied while my classmates giggled (I think they were giggling both with me and at me). What was my problem? We needed to learn about other countries and cultures or we'd grow up intolerant. And what I said about the design of the rainforest -- the mere idea was intolerant. Didn't I know that I needed to respect other beliefs and religions or lack thereof? It mattered not that I was joking, perhaps Sandra considered someone so young incapable of joking about such things. She cautiously walked up to my desk as one would to a problem child that needs to be placated with affection.

"OK then Cassi. Maybe you can suggest another picture book for us to read tomorrow and we can also do some drawing from it."

"Sure!" I said, my eyes lighting up, "how about the brothers Grimm?". This was one of my favourites. I had an unabridged, un-politically-corrected, morbidly obese illustrated version at home which I treated most religiously.

"What? I don't think they're very nice stories."

"No but they're fun. And they have bad things happen."

"And what do you think is good about that?". She deliberately egged me on of course but I gobbled the bait.

"We should be prepared for the bad. We are children but that doesn't make us stupid or inferior. Some of us have evil stepmothers in real life!" More giggles from the class, this time increasingly with me. Sandra was stunned that I'd even heard of the word inferior. I think she was both proud of me and frustrated as well.

"Ah my dear Cassi, you're a very smart girl. But I think you have a lot to learn still." And she walked back to the front of the class smiling and continued with the next lesson.

The class's attention turned away from me back to the lesson in a split second, except for a girl a few rows to the left who kept making much-welcome eye contact. She smiled at me when no-one else noticed and I thought it was due to something I said to the teacher. But I couldn't imagine any actual words of mine having an impact. I got along with the other kids but in terms of merely getting along. I was used to having all these other thoughts on the ethereal plane (it is with almost pointless irony that I use this term -- for it is an ethereal plane in the most literal sense!) that I knew I wouldn't be able to share with anyone. So I thought that maybe we'll talk one day and I'll come over to her house and

she to mine and it'll be two schoolgirls having fun but it's not like I'd ever tell her about my brain explosions. Fortunately I was a fool on that account.

The next morning I was walking to school and as I reached the gate with the small schoolhouse about 200 metres away, she approached.

"Hi, I'm Clara. You're Cassi?"

"Yeah. Hi."

"I really liked what you said to Sandra yesterday". This was another feature of our enlightened education -- teachers were called by first names even in pre-school, and certainly in our environment of primary school proper. Egalitarianism.

"Really? What? I don't think I was making any sense. I mean I-"

"-no no" she said putting out her hand for me to stop. "Look!", and she opened the corner of her schoolbag and the corner of a very familiar volume showed through as she laughed in a clandestine delight. How wrong I was about her!

"The Brothers Gr-"

"-shhh! I don't think Sandra should know I brought it. It's the one you have don't you?"

"That *is* the one. What -I mean how do you have it?"

"Well, I like to write my own fairy tales. I know you don't. But you do draw". After a second of me not responding, she gathered the strength for her proposition. "So meet me after school and we can team up. I have a story I need pictures for."

Starting school was an ambivalent experience for me, I neither liked it nor hated it. It was just something to do in between my frolics. That day though, the classes dragged on forever. I was sure her story wasn't *nice* like the cartoons that were licensed for broadcast on our local progressive TV station! As school ended and I met her, I knew my suspicions were correct. She read bits of it and it involved a mischievous ghoul-like creature who comes to an enlightened town (where could she have possibly gotten that idea from?) and wreaks havoc, which includes tying up the mayor upside down by her feet and letting her hang from the window of a five storey building, as well as force-feeding the miserly baker a pasta dish with sauce made from 37 rotten tomatoes. I asked her about her other stories and she told me. 'Twas all quite delicious: there was death and chaos and destruction. It wasn't deliberately didactic like the crap we had fed to us through other channels of communication, but that was better; and in this way it was more conducive to children's understanding as I realised years after. In this way, Clara's tales reminded me of the Arabian Nights.

"So Clara, what did you want drawn? I can do different things but I like to draw landscapes."

"Oh, nothing special. Just the first story I told you about. With the mayor, and the baker."

"Great! We could make a whole book with a drawing on every page and a bit of writing down the bottom. Is your handwriting good?"

"No but I'll try. How do you imagine the picture of the mayor hanging upside down out the window?"

"Does that happen at night?"

"No."

"Well make it happen at night!"

"Uh...ok. Why?"

"So I could do it with greys and blacks of course! Oh, and then, to make things stand out, we -I mean I-can make the rope bright green."

"Bright green? But ropes aren't-"

"-it's a magic rope, silly! Do you for a minute think a real ghoul shan't be able to find a green rope to bind the feet of the mayoress?" Of course I probably didn't use those same words as all my dialogue is reconstructed, but that was the meaning essentially.

Her face lit up in a delight I will always remember.

"You're right! And it would stand out. We can even do the drawing together...if you let me."

"Sure, sure."

"But tell me first -- why do you like using black and grey and not the other colours? What's wrong with a toucan?"

"Nothing but-"

I noticed that we reached the point in our walk where I was to go off the path towards my house -- but I didn't want to. I haven't told anyone about the qualia and the colours thing before. I didn't find the idea of telling her at this moment particularly thrilling, but I knew I would and should and must and that Clara and I would be friends forever.

"Clara, I can tell you but that means not going home for a bit. Do you mind?" She was already racing towards a bench she spotted nearby and I followed gleefully. Then, I told her. It felt like a huge secret and looking back I'm sure that I felt as much trepidation as someone who's about to reveal that they're having an affair or to come out or to tell their child they are adopted or any other "secret" that is deemed a major one by our society. At that moment though, it was mine that was significant; or to be exact it was the most important one in the universe. But to my surprise Clara did not melt away into nothingness or flee in disgust upon hearing my words. Instead she put her hand on my shoulder and opened her mouth in amazement. The deal was set.

We were regular visitors at each others' houses within a few weeks. When we weren't in school we would often work on the story books. We would even collaborate on a book. At that stage, I was a crap writer and she a crap artist but it mattered not. We would literally write the words together, composing every sentence between the two of us. In drawing the pictures, we'd each have a crayon and we'd simultaneously leave marks on the same paper altering it in different ways but in a cohesive whole. As years passed and we entered teenagehood, this remained. I had the usual set of teenage issues surface and so naturally felt stifled at school, at home and everywhere. I was becoming more of an outsider with my other friends too, the ones I haven't told The Things to. I could sense a difference in terms of me having this whole other world-of-thought and not being

particularly interested in the mundaneness of my "real" world. Besides the two dilemmas I had as a child that I related, many, many new ones came up. It would be difficult to catalogue them all, especially since I've had so many of them answered after my death. There were things I thirsted for and I needed answers now. Dante was a guide that I utilised from age 13. Of course this has great irony due to what the bulk of my tale will reveal. In short, I had hoarded inside my head the strangest combination of the rational and the mystical that one would find in a little Swedish town, and I'd often seem uninterested in the outside world, much to the worry of my family. School grades were OK but I essentially spent the bare minimum amount of time to keep up, preferring to divide the rest between walking, drawing and thinking. And of course Clara.

We continued to be the best of friends all this time with absolutely no end in sight. And the projects continued. Occasionally, we'd still make up some storybook together and draw and write it in union. Being teenagers, the stories obviously evolved. Our cynicism developed considerably but you can also add to that everything else we had acquired with age and the results were often delightfully obscene. One day, the Arabian Nights came back with a vengeance.

"Cassi, do you remember all those times we'd read from the Thousand and One Nights?" she asked, "well what was so essential about the man having a harem? I think I want a male harem of my own. Wouldn't it be great? Instead of being first-class immature assholes like most guys we know, these would be men glad to serve; and I could plan our collective life together."

"You don't think thy'll be too much for you?"

She gasped. "You know me better than that! It'll be perfect. Besides, if there's a problem of awkwardness with one of the harem-guys, that can be solved by elephant trampling quite well! But I do think it would be good -- in that it would allow me the opportunity to extrude unlimited power if only for a while," she loved to invent quasi-words, "and then I could be much more in control and comfortable with who I am outside the harem world."

"You know Clara, I could sooo see you in that role. Hey, let's make a story about this! It'll have to be in a world where everything's opposite and men and women--"

"I guess. But let's make her unique. She can be a superhero. Harem Girl! And she can rule over a town and disguise herself and walk the streets at night like Haroun al-Rashid and hear what the word is about her."

"Why not? But won't it be just a story of sexual indulgence?"

"My dear Cassi, I'm ashamed of you. Isn't your mother well-versed in many languages, and specifically for our purposes Urdu? You know, the Delhi language of courtly love? I thought you'd be aware. Harem Girl will have her harem full of guys who aren't just a pretty...face...! I shall be a centre of learning and culture. While outside the walls of the harem barbarism and tribal warfare will rule, inside the harem, the men will have AN unique opportunity to become literate and then perhaps literary. They could study the classics and compose poetry, both in praise of Harem Girl and on other topics. They could even become versed in the sciences. It would be the only way they could keep up with the women who in our world are the only ones who have the opportunity to become real scholars and natural philosophers. And when the astronomical academy (which is

naturally composed entirely of women) names a new star, a messenger will race to the harem where the menfolk will greet him with enthusiasm and marvel at the findings while recording it for themselves so that they too can bask in the light of the latest discoveries. They will be grateful for the mere opportunity to come to the harem and have a whole new world opened up to them (one that they never can at home, mind you) due to the collaborative effort of many of them cooperating. And all this even if Harem Girl were an old ugly witch; which we most certainly won't make her. This will be our story. They can help our superheroine fix many problems in the land in her subtle and unintrusive manner."

"I love you! Of course you were manipulative enough not to even mention the delightful orgies even once in your speech."

"Naturally".

And so it was with Harem Girl and a whole bunch of other projects that were slightly more outrageous. We'd still manage to co-author some of them together. Having done this for so long (writing sentences together out loud) we could quite easily read each other's minds, or at least know what the other was thinking or feeling. We were joined, well, not at the hip but perhaps at the mind. All this despite me being quite the more withdrawn one and her much more playful and gregarious. We were like Narcissus and Goldmund, although I dare not speculate who was who. And then came Greg.

We were putting the finishing touches on our Harem Girl story. The climax was her with her four favourite husbands (each with both a superpower and an academic area of expertise) defeating an evil vizier in an edifice of intrigue. The vizier had an uncanny resemblance to a local politician we didn't particularly care for, both in terms of the character in our story and in terms what she was in real life. The final showdown was to take place in an ancient building, so naturally we needed to research some old, Gothicky buildings. Luckily for us, our school had a two day excursion to Stockholm, which was the closest we'd get to an old and historic building for a while. Clara and I slipped away at a particularly unbearable point and went to the city square where I started sketching one of the buildings from an isometric perspective. I was so wrapped up that I didn't notice anything. I reached out my hand to Clara for an eraser and one was handed to me, but by a hand that was nothing like hers. I turned and instead of her, it was a he.

I must apologise. Reading this talentless, ridiculous lead-up, you'll be forgiven for thinking Greg would be the love of my life, or at least that something as intrinsically fraudulent as the concept of love at first sight would occur. To reassure you, it wasn't at all like that. But he was another soulmate like Clara, another dreamer in a dank and spiritually null environment (or so thought my teenage self).

"Hi Cassi, how're the grays coming? Do you think this cold stone corner's suitable for Harem Girl to have her triumph at?"

I was already stunned by the replacement and now this?! It was too strange, I just had to play along.

"We'll just have to see once I've finished the drawing...uh-what do you think of Harem Girl so far?"

"I like her."

"You don't have your masculist sensibilities offended by it all?"

"Well no. Maybe if the entire harem world became real I'd have a problem. I mean then I wouldn't really be able to get ahead much in life. Otherwise it's pretty clever and were I in the story I'd be lining up to become one of her husbands myself."

I smiled and I knew wasn't yet time to end the charade and figure out who he was.

"So what have you to offer our humble creative work? Do you-"

"-draw? Write? No no, I'm a talentless twit, or at least that's what my teachers think of me. But I do think I can help in the ideas department. You know, the creative juice behind the operation. The motivator. Collaborator and appreciator."

"From your bullshitting skills I think you've got a marvellous career in the more cutthroat business industries here in Stockholm when you finish school..."

"I will -have a potentially marvellous career. That doesn't mean I have to embark on it. At least not just yet. So can I join the team and be on the credits?"

"Why not...but you should tell me who the hell you are first! ". Overall it was a most impractical initial introduction, just the way I like it.

His name was Greg and he lived in a fairly town close to ours. His school had most fortuitously gone on a Stockholm excursion at the same time as ours and he stopped being able to stand it at roughly the same point as we did and therefore absconded to the square. Whilst I was absorbed in my drawings, he spotted us and what we were doing. He then caught Clara's eye and after a long and confusing conversation in an improvised and semi-successful sign language across the square, he motioned for her to get up and approach. After a few minutes of talking, he decided to play this little trick -- so Clara sat on the bench 25 metres away and he took her spot next to me. As a given, I didn't notice a thing until the switch ended. I laughed so hard when he told me. It was an empirical proof of just how out-of-this-world I could get! "So Clara, what shall we do with our newfound collaborator?" I asked when she joined us again in glee. "Well I'm suspicious of people. Perhaps he has been sent by the evil vizier as a spy to infiltrate the operation and subvert the most-righteous activities of Harem Girl". "You're absolutely right!! We need to have some kind of clearance period so we can test him. An initiation if you will". Greg was watching our exchange so naturally that I was sure he'd anticipated all this.

The rest of our Stockholm excursion day was spent whiling our time away in town, and continually initiating Greg just as we intended. Once he proposed an adequate experiment on pigeons (we throw pieces of bread near our bench in a line so that the pieces come closer and closer to us, we watch the pigeons gather, wait for a brave pigeon take the piece nearest him and so forth and see how close to us they dare get) we knew he was no impostor. He was one of us. By twilight, we'd snuck back into the rooms our school was staying at, after arranging for the collaborator to visit us in our town slightly sooner than common sense dictated. Somehow we'd managed to spend most of the day away from our classmates without getting into trouble or being noticed at all. In retrospect, I'm sure Sandra noticed (it being a small school, our primary teacher stayed teaching us some subjects till late high school); but given our record of not being too troublemaking, she let it slip. Besides, getting us in trouble was a value judgement and therefore didn't fit inside the boundaries of our school's tolerant and progressive ethos.

So two became three and my Narcissus-Goldmund analogy was no longer apt. Pretty soon, Greg virtually lived at our houses. If it was at all possible, he came from an even sleepier and more lolly-pop town where everything was wholesome as gingerbread. Gingerbread was my association with wholesomeness as this is what the bakery smelt most of and our town baker was wholesomeness epitomised, as you might have figured out from Clara's first story, the baker copping it most unwholesomely within it. Unlike us female dreamers though, he had at least a plan. He was going to join the police force when he left school. When he first announced it, we were sure he was kidding. There was a police force here? For whom? It would mean that something actually had to happen first! But no, apparently when we met him at Stockholm it wasn't his first visit. He'd misspent many a day there at an age when we were in an even more protective cocoon than we were today. Apparently, things really did happen in the capital, as well as other major cities in the country.

The crappiness of his wholesome town was balanced out by his family though. Unlike mine who tried to dampen the ethereal spirit within (my grandfather got many an exasperated talk from my mother in my "formative" years that I skipped over), they encouraged some things. It was *they* who had introduced him to skiing at an early age as well as the slightly more breakneck activity of mountain climbing. In fact, it was more like glacier and fjord climbing for they'd cross the border into Norway several times a year for a weekend and would scale the inhospitable protrusions of nature's cold and bitchy side to their heart's content. Clara and I came along with them one time and it was there that I got my first case of self-blood-lust.

We were scaling this unique structure, where there were flat ice beds one above the other so a vertical surface of about 7 metres would alternate with a small flat surface to rest on. We had some experience by then and Greg's uncle -- bless him for this -- had done the Insanely Criminal: he let us go by ourselves, unsupervised, armed only with a radio transmitter each that could contact the base that was under a kilometre away instantaneously. Still, had Clara's dad found out, or even mine, Greg's uncle would probably become a former uncle. The rest areas were just big enough for one and a half people, so we were stretched out. Clara went first, taking the top flat, I'd take the next one and Greg the bottom. Then we'd all climb up one flat simultaneously and so our trio would move up a step in the icy ladder. Quite simple it was.

So simple that I got a bit bored after my third ascent and decided to climb my next 7 metre stretch at a bit of a more dynamic pace. I'd stretch up, take the hold and pull myself up quite quickly. The breathtaking view (both in terms of the Moominlike beauty and from the totally frozen air) would egg me on to soar the heights. I didn't feel reckless but just more alive, right until the moment where I slipped. I fell three metres, instinctively grasped an icy protrusion that luckily slowed down my fall instead of breaking my arm, and then fell another metre right on the flat I just started with. I was never in any real danger of dying, just some broken bones. But I avoided them all, ending up on the edge looking over the precipice with only a bloody nose, grazed kneecaps and a dull pain in my chest from the impact. By then Greg made it to my flat from below and grasped me. Clara also cried out having heard my slip. "She's fine" Greg hollered in an upward direction. And I was. Too fine. I'd felt an excitement that I rarely got a chance to reproduce. Perhaps it was the fact that the ice numbed my pain but it was uplifting to lose

control for but a second, and to come out unscathed. It wasn't some suicidal tendency though -- I didn't want to die. I wanted to live and triumph. And it would be a mistake to read too much into it in terms of psychoanalysing me as some sado-masochistic tortured soul. But it certainly felt good to come a bit close to the Grand Ultimate. My high lasted the rest of the day. Although Greg and Clara did get a sense of it, at first I masked it as much as possible even from them because this was one of those things I'd imagined I could dragged to some therapist for by my family had they ever found out; or even that in our town these were things you'd get locked up for due to them being *too* unwholesome. The best thing was that they totally saw through the mask and I didn't have to tell my soulmates. They knew that very day and I knew they did. It was an unspoken thing but I also trusted them to keep this to themselves and they promised me to do so, all without explicitly saying a thing. That was indeed special.

The three of us continued our fellowship in the best of spirits for two more years until the last year of school. Those two years were the greatest (not in the literal sense that they were the two best years of my life -- I would never make that judgement!). One particularly marked night I realised the extent of it all once more. We gathered on the side of the town lake which was only partially frozen. It was that part of the year when the sun is up most of the time and night consists of it sinking towards the horizon and creating a gorgeous sunset followed almost immediately by another gorgeous sunrise. The twilight of one follows the pre-dawn of the other and there is never total darkness. In terms of being close to a polar region, this was my favourite seasonal eccentricity. It also meant that it was "warm" enough for us to spend an extended period of time outside during this so-called night. Naturally we were prepared. I supplied three deck chairs and Clara brought nibbles-beverages and a fishing rod we promptly stuck into an unfrozen part of the lake (personal joke). As for Greg, he said he'd "organise" a treat for us. From his ease of obtaining anything under the sun I'd almost think he was involved in organised crime, but he was just extraordinarily resourceful.

"So what have you for our use tonight?" Clara asked.

"Well I knew how much Cassi and you love nature, as do I. And rumour has it that during this time of year there are packs of otters on the banks of this lake."

"Indeed there are. I'd hate to point out that it's going to be twilight right up until the moment where we'll have to leave, how--"

"Elementary my dears!" he said reaching into his bag and producing a large set of binocular-like objects. "Ladies, we've night vision."

I gasped. This was by far the most elaborate item Greg's organised yet.

"Wow that's great. Greggie, can I go first?". He handed me the pair and after instructing me briefly on their use I was away in a world of green stillness.

"Come on, you'll have to narrate," demanded Clara.

"Sure. I see...a bunch of green things" I answered and ducking her mock retaliatory punch continued. "Oh, I see some! They're over there, about 30 metres away. There's...five and four of them are surrounding the larger one. Could be a mother with pups."

"What are they doing?"

"Seem to be feeding. Take a look". We took turns for a while until tiredness set in and we put the technological marvel down and looked into the relaxing dark with glazed relief.

It was Greg who began. "I wonder what other creatures we'd missed."

"What do you mean?"

"Night vision is only a tool that lets us see what we can already see in the day at times when there is less light, and usually with movement. But there's all sorts of things that we may not be able to see."

"You mean your spirits and all? I'm sure there are 144,000 angels...or even better, djinns hovering right over the top of the lake. Perhaps I'll say hello to them. HAIL OH MIGHTY DJINNS! PLEASE ACCEPT OUR TRIBUTE OF ARTICHOKE SALAD AND BRANDY AS SIGN OF YOUR WONDROUS EVANESCENCE. Nothing. What about you Cassi, do you hear anything?" She looked at me and I shook my head smiling. Greg's pantheistic tendencies have long been the subject of our good-natured mocking.

"Oh please, I didn't mean that. Or maybe I... but no, even if you consider the very strict view, didn't they discover that the biomass of tiny creatures living in the soil and under the sea beds may be greater than that of everything else put together? I mean, there could be trillions of them right around us. Not to mention the mites that live in our eyebrows and on our skin. The world is teeming with life that we've no idea about. Why couldn't there be something beyond that, something that unlike the eyebrow mites we don't know about yet?"

"Do you think all the secret and mysterious creatures are just mis-sightings of some other mode of life, like a non-carbon-based one?" I asked, this time without intending to mock.

"What mysterious creatures?"

"Say the sasquatch and the unicorn and the... I dunno, the drop bear."

"-not what I was talking about! Oh, it's too stupid for the likes of you."

"Excuse me?"

"Well you two have always been the ones with the full head: logic AND imagination. What have I had?"

This time Clara had her just turn. "What crap! You *are* like us in this way. You're one of us and if you'd stop belittling yourself just because you haven't done brilliantly in some boring academic subject that that leech of a headmaster of yours has sucked the life out of, you'd see that you do belong here and now. I don't know by what frazzled chance we found each other but here we are, and here we'll continue to be. Just think of all we'll do together! Sure you'll go off to the capital and start kicking the shit out of criminals and we might away from here to somewhere else but what we have is beyond the mere coincidental factor of being in the same spot in space and time. Even if we end up scattered who knows where, we'll still have what we have now; not just as a memory but as an ongoing thing. And I know that in actuality we'll keep doing what we're doing together. So what if we don't have exactly the same abilities?! You my friend are so amazingly clever in being able to make something out of nothing. If I had to survive on a deserted island, I'd definitely take you; for then I'd know that I'd be completely OK. I

wouldn't take Cassi!" Some laughter. "I don't trust her after the way she handled a certain survival situation." More laughter. "Sorry folks but someone needed to get on the high horse here. We are after all finishing school and things will be different. This is our night."

It was. There was along silence after, but not an uncomfortable one at all. We were all kinda relieved to have had those things said because we knew we had to acknowledge each other right in that moment in time, on that night, near that lake, in that twilight. I was just glad that some existed who understood some of my quirks.

"So Greg," I asked, "now that we've established that you're not an inferior lackey who's only worthy to bask, or rather *bathe* in our presence, what did you mean about the forms of life?"

"Sure. Remember when you told me about your thought experiments as a child? Well I actually had one of my own, and it's started to come out again just tonight. It was when my dad took me out to Norway the first time. We took a train inside the country and I could see some birds flying along it and above it from the window. Then they had the thing happen that you see in documentaries. The migrating flock suddenly turns and changes direction but keeping formation. I haven't seen it before and I think I choked on whatever I was eating. And I thought, it's like the flock has a mind of its own. Like it was thinking - or could think - because it was organised in such a complex way. But I guess many people may wonder about that when they see travelling birds. We were going past a forest though and then I looked down to the trees and how they were arranged and I thought, maybe the world could be the same. I mean we couldn't see that the flock was 'thinking' if we watched just one bird could we? So here I was a kid on the train realising that I was just watching one piece of forest. But maybe all the forests and rivers and rocks put together were doing something amazing that I couldn't see. Maybe they were like a person because they were so complex. Or because they were doing something much more profound than I was."

"Oh my! And to think you were ashamed of this sounding stupid. Why, looks like you're quite the loony just like me. A cognitive shaman. Tell us more. How do you think this is manifested here?"

"It even comes back to traditional cultures, now that you mention the shaman. They often believe in things like rocks and trees and water as animate beings-"

"-if I can interrupt, it means beings with a soul 'cause anima is soul in Latin". I couldn't help myself.

"I never realised, cool. So anyway, maybe it's not just the world that's thinking, maybe it is in a simple thing like a rock or water or...a planet. If you look at a proper river, the currents are probably just as complex as whatever's in our brains. Maybe it could be aware of itself. We only judge if things are animate -I should say soulful- from what we're able to observe. But maybe we don't have the language to observe water and rocks. Then we could be in the middle of something incredible right now and not even know it. The rocks could be deciding whether to kill us or spare our lives. And you know, maybe there are 144,000 djinns above the lake. After all, djinns are made of air and there could

be clusters of air with such intricacy they'd make what we're talking about seem as primitive as the bleating of a goat."

Having realised -- and after two years of soulmateship! -- how much more of a connexion we have than I even thought, I hugged him with a flourish. We three stayed at the lake that night for another multitude of hours, talking of everything else under the sun. The very brief darkness came and went and we departed when it was already light.

I was all the more glad for us now.

3. Consequences

To obviate the "suspense", Greg was killed by a drunk driver a month after. It was three months before we were to graduate.

As a result of our night on the lake I'd become much closer to him than before. We saw each other in new contexts, without Clara, and talked about things I probably would not have been able to talk to Clara about, at least at that time. And then he died.

The news came in when Clara and I were together. A good omen it was, for we would have been even worse off had we found out separately. We were sitting at that bench where we first did our creative version of "I'll show you mine if you show me yours" all those years back; and we frequented the spot intensely. From around the corner my father appeared, crying. Although he was obviously upset, I'm pretty sure that he made himself cry in that moment just so that we'd get the news in advance; so we'd know as soon as we saw him all those metres away. It kinda made the suddenness less and I'm actually incredibly grateful to him for the whole way he did it. He came up to us and stopped just an arm stretch away. We jumped up, already aware. He extended his hands towards us and put one hand on each of our foreheads and mouthed it. There were bad news -- Our Greg had been killed. He was aware of the devastating significance of this and didn't try to cushion the stab in a way that would have made it unbearably worse.

We somehow had no "denial" period where we'd curse at him saying "it's not true" like you might see in many a movie; with limbs flailing and bodies collapsing and tantrums a-happening. This meant that through the very atomic explosion of immediate grief that followed, I saw my father in a new light, much like that of my childhood. It was the dad of the Spanish royal descent and of great heart, not the more down-to-mundaneness personality of the last few years. The key feature was the way he walked up to us and stood. Something very regal about that -- a dignified sorrow. We asked him to go back saying we'd be at the house in a bit. As I said before, we were sitting on the bench but once he was gone, we *was* standing up.

What else can I say about this and what transpired? Shall I give the brilliant and necessary piece of information that I was, we were, utterly devastated to our core, since one would never have figured it out without my sage guidance? There is an image of Clara and I standing there in the clearing, oblivious to the cold and grabbing onto each

other's shoulders as if to support each other from plunging into some sort of precipice. Another image of us back at the house. The implied stench of death in the air. Seems silly now but at that moment I was so offended by the fact that *somewhere out there, Greg's corpse was already starting to rot*. There was something unfitting about that -- and I was genuinely surprised that no-one was worried about this; that amongst the consolation-talk inside my house, this was never brought up as a specific subject. It was just so improper - - so impolite for Nature to have arranged for this rotting and putrefication, for him to bring Greg back down to the matter-of-factness, to this faceless arrangement of meat and bone. 'Twas a he: Father Nature; one of those abusive alcoholic fathers. That's how he appeared to me that day. It couldn't be a female. Not on that day. Not that I'm suggesting females could not be cruel - far far from it! - but on that day for some reason I felt the cruelty was male. Years later when I was reading about some bullshit Sartre "philosophy" the words "being in itself" jumped up at me. These were the core characteristics of a person -- the physical ones. Height, weight, body composition, age, race, gender, whatever else. The most basic properties that according to Sartre largely define a corpse and not a person. I flashed back to that day in my house with my family and Clara's family hovering around us and the only thought spinning around my head was the mundaneness of the meat that was my fellow dreamer. At this stage, you could sell that particular meat by the kilo; there was nothing special about it.

After this came the blurred period for me that lasted about three weeks to my recollection. Phasing in and out were real people and situations that were the ghosts and background against the foreground of my brain patterns. I went back to my routine -- including school -- fairly quickly though, quicker than people expected me to. Reading the word "expected" still brings an ironic smile to my face after all these years. However the reason was quite simple and merely a case of serendipity. It was because I cried. Well, obviously I did in that period but my routine was somewhat interesting. I'd wake up, brush my teeth, and walk onto the balcony of my bedroom in bare feet in the freezing temperature for my planned cry. Then I'd cry for about 5 minutes, but each time I did it I put in a whole day's intensity into those 5 minutes, erupting in a flood of unbridled grief. Naturally by the end of the mini-session I was empty and stopped crying of necessity. With this accidental daily emptiness, I could carry on for most of the day, building it up for the next morning. Feeling the buildup as I was doing other things was pure joy. I craved it.

Emotion-wise, things were quite strange. Although it may have been expected, I was never angry at him, or anyone else about it. Had I encountered the truck driver in person, I'd have probably killed him but outside of that even he didn't haunt my stream of consciousness. What did haunt me was a sense of loss I found most strange at the time. It was as if I'd lost my *entitlement* to Greg; due to the fact that in the months before, I felt like all our future interactions together had already happened. This meant that when he was dead dead dead, my multitude of pseudomemories of him in the future were lost to reality one by one. Even reading this, you might reasonably suspect that I was in love with him in the literal sense of the word; in fact I was asked this by many many well-meaners. Naturally I was evasive to them. Were I cowardly I'd have denied it to myself because it's easier to believe I'd lost a friend (even a soulmatey one) than some potential love of my life. But I was gritty enough to admit that I didn't know. Who was I to predict what kind of wondrousness or crappiness a relationship between two people may

eventuate to? It was the fact that both he and I were robbed of this opportunity to continually decide this question and many more, and have lots of fun in the process, that was the worst.

By the time I was having these kinds of conversations in my head I'd moved from a purely lost state to a more philosophical one as my latter-day ramblings show. Clara was also seemingly on the road to some degree of recovery. We watched over each other quite closely then. But it turned out that I wasn't watching well enough for she had her own ways of coping and in the process managed to slip one past me. Or at least initially -- how long could she keep something major from someone who could co-write and co-speak sentences (and indeed whole works) together with her?

"So how've you been my dear?" I asked when I visited her house at a stage when my ESP of her finally came to fruition.

"Fine. I mean considering-" she said giving a weak but spirited smile. We were in her bedroom and no-one was home. The solitude of our selves and the raw honesty of the withered trees outside spoke to me, telling me to begin it. I guess Greg's animate trees thing worked in more ways than one.

"Clara, it's me. We're alone and I think I have a pretty good idea that you have something to tell me. Right?"

"Naturally. I'm-"

"-you're uterusised."

She knew my terminology for it all but she still stopped in a mild shock. "Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't-" and in a minute she was bawling uncontrollably. I squeezed her knowing that she could manage even less of the grieving procedure in the last weeks than I had.

"Don't. We'll talk about it."

We submerged into a beautiful hour-long silence which she broke.

"Firstly, I know you'll have none of it but I'll still say I'm sorry I haven't been forthcoming."

"You're right. Indeed I *will* have absolutely none of it...Despite popular opinion, we're not the same person. You've very much your own life to live and I expect some autonomy. You gave me the signals when you thought you were ready-"

"No, no. It wasn't autonomy. It was fear of judgement I must say. I honestly thought you'd be judgmental. And that you'd be tying my own lapse of judgement to what's happened, which is probably a bit true."

"How did you think I'd judge you?"

"Not in the usual way of course. But maybe in terms that you'll say that this isn't me, that I wasn't doing right by putting myself in a fragile situation at such a fragile time."

"Isn't you? What the fuck else would it be? Why, anything you do IS you by definition! Look; I don't think it was an un-you thing. You've had more worldly experience than me in every way, and you've always managed to pull every minute of it off with a grace that I could only dream of. Do you think I'll think less of you now because some dice were

thrown and a certain improbable number came up which meant that a contraceptive method failed? I know about real innocence. I'm very aware that it *really isn't* the same thing as the sexual tameness proclaimed by the belief system of our lovely pastor down the road. Clara, you've always been my innocent. And you haven't done anything in your life to change this, especially not now."

She started up again and I gladly joined in the communal pool of our tears of understanding. Then more silence. This was the moment of my life when I looked at Clara as if for the first time and realised how beautiful she was. Although she later became very attractive by "society's" conventional standards, in these years she probably wasn't. I didn't notice anything wrong with her of course but neither did I really look. When I did in that moment it became clear that she would always be beautiful to me because of who she was. I found her attractive in the most literal and physical sense because of my prior knowledge of her. I guess I have a functional view of beauty: she was beautiful as a body in the functional context of being who she was, not as an isolated head-and-salient-body-parts on a stick. No further changes in her "literal" attractiveness would ever take away my ability to have my own breath taken away by the splendour of her real beauty. But it was especially apparent here when she was her vulnerable vibrant self, sitting on her bed, crying for probably the first time all week. The pre-fetus in her did not mar this splendour but magnified it exponentially. Here was Harem Girl and all the other superheroes of worth (as opposed to "literal" superheroes!) personified. While the human memory doesn't literally operate in photographs or pictures in the head, I imprinted something of that scene inside my head that was closer to a photograph than anything else I'd remember. And I have had the honour of pulling this image from my neurons during many a troubled time in my subsequent life. And each time I was rejuvenated.

Embarrassed of thinking such lofty thoughts for such an unforgivable length of time when there was so much else, I couldn't help myself. "Clara darling, remember what you joked to me during my more withdrawn teenage years?"

"I made an infinite number of jokes about you, you'll have to be more specific."

"Well you said that I was pondering the profound mysteries of the universe whilst most of my peers would be getting high on crack and having teenage pregnancies."

"That's right!" she giggled, "the unwittingly self-fulfilling prophecy of St Clara. Well in part."

"Yes. Of course in part. Not only because of the crack thing but because I'd never insult you by thinking of you as merely a peer."

With our faith in things restored we left the house for some fresh air and to discuss the practicalities of the parasite inside Clara. This is where the actual complications of reality came up. The father was a guy she had a brief (no)thing with a while back, and she had fled from it when she realised the extent of its (and his) emptiness. This time around, he was still as empty and possibly more. I guess here the human world diverges from the physical as in the physical you can only suck so much substance out of a place, and besides 'nature abhors a vacuum'. But in the human world, some people can keep losing substance indefinitely. At this point she deliberately hadn't told him due to a combination

of keeping her independence open and some good old fashioned spite out of who he was. I also had the misfortune of knowing who he was and it was this who-he-was that contributed to Clara thinking I'd be judgmental. Didn't change a thing about her dignity in this situation in my opinion though.

"So what are your plans now?"

"Cassi, I'd like to ask you a favour. You're very good at telling me exactly what's on your mind. I'd like you not to get too carried away with the whole unconditional support thing. I don't need it because I don't value it in its most extreme."

"Don't worry, we've talked about this. I know. If I said I'd be with you no matter what, does this mean to include some cruel or insane decisions (like going on a shooting spree) too? Yes, you don't want to be loved completely unconditionally, especially by me, because that pays absolutely no attention to who you are: you could be a complete scum-sucking-based life-form like a certain someone, or turn into one, and nothing would change. You know though that I *am* partly conditional in that I love you largely for the specific content of who you are. So tell me and I'll give you the *conditional* support I'm sure your decision will warrant."

"Good, good! I'm very much leaning towards having the baby and everything this entails. I could hand over parental rights to someone else but I don't want to decide until I actually have it and spend some time with it. There will be naysayers that will think it's not the right time in my life and the rest -- unavoidable I guess in our gingerbread and lollypop town. But I don't want my decisions hampered by the fluky fact of the matter that there is something inside me that I didn't expect. I don't want to be a slave of the unexpectedness of my situation. Of course, I'll be 'terribly inconvenienced' but I don't want to commit the -- what's the name of the fallacy?"

"Naturalistic?"

"Uh-huh. I mean it's not an example a logic professor would cheer over but it works non-literally. Just because an embryo got here at an "unnatural" time in my general life, and amongst tragedy...and from a ludicrous father -- doesn't make it bad. It's still a life that I sure as hell want to be a part in raising. I find my greatest freedom in spitting at the brutality of circumstance and elevating myself from beyond the world of the practical. If I'm meant to succeed, this baby won't be a weight and if I'm not then I'd be just making excuses if I pinned my failures on it. Besides I hope to be rewarded for the good things that I now have the opportunity of imparting to the child."

"Why Clara! I've never heard you speak so anthropomorphically of life before! Could the *spirit* of our dearly departed have been imparted on you?!"

"Oh please. Actually in a way. I'm starting to see the hidden complexity and intelligence in this inanimate world so maybe there is such a thing as some kind of karmic reward in the end, just a different way that's more non-anthropo- shit I can't even pronounce it! I guess I've already dropped my 10 IQ points!"

"Hey, don't insult a pregnant woman you strumpet!"

Another smile flickered but then she straightened herself and quickened her pace through the snow such that I struggled to keep up. She raised her index finger pointing it

somewhere into the stratosphere. "There's still the matter of our mister non-carbon-but-vermin-based life-form."

After a predictably short deliberation, we decided. There was only one option really. The father was to be informed of the fact (for honesty's sake at least but also for several other reasons I need not elaborate on). He'd then be persuaded or coerced if necessary to have absolutely no contact with Clara or the child nor any role in the child's upbringing. When the child was old enough, he or she would decide if this should change. Furthermore, I'd be the one communicating this decision to him. She could have done this but I wanted to. This was my way of consummating the fact that Clara and I were family (although it's been obvious for years). The irony is that the occasion was a child. Some friends enter a family through a baby by being godparents -- promising to look after a child if the parents died. My way of entering her family was by being an anti-godparent -- promising and making sure that one particular parent would be completely dead to the child, at least in its formative years. Boy was it sweeter and more meaningful than any godparent nonsense!

I visited him that evening. We had a very long talk under the stars, and no-one but us will ever know what transpired. All I'll say is that when I left, we were on amicable terms about the decision as being the right one so I didn't do too badly.

An hour later I walked into my house and my mother was standing in the doorway with a somewhat worried look. "There's a letter for you. It's from...well, Greg's uncle found it in his drawer after finally getting around to going through it. It was addressed to you." I was upstairs in my room clutching it before she finished speaking. I think I may have even run so fast as to have exceeded the speed of light in a vacuum thereby travelling back in time to just before she finished. Indeed, the envelope had my name embossed in it in his unmistakable hand. I hesitated but mostly from the weird contrast of moods between my anti-godparenting act and this. The envelope imprinted itself firmly in my memory: in the few seconds it took to open, the touch, texture, sound of the paper rustling and its precise weight were all vital bits of information that I processed and stored without realising.

It was brief, and completely bizarre considering that he actually wrote it -- and to top it off, it was when he was still living!

"My dearest,

I somehow had the strongest premonition that I would die. Silly isn't it and most likely untrue but if you've received this letter then it was indeed a correct premonition. In this case I'm sorry for all of this to have ended so soon. I feel like we have had an entire future of happenings and potentialities. I'm sorry they did not eventuate, that they were stolen from both of us. I can't tell you not to grieve or be sad, who am I to dictate to you, you who has known best about how to behave for so long? But I can assure you that these wondrous happenings that I've seen you partake in recently will occur again in your life. As they must for you are truly worth it.

I guess at this point in the letter nothing will surprise you so I wanna say that if there is an afterlife, I look forward to meeting you therein, whereby we can experience many more interesting things, but with the timeframe stretched to infinity.

Always remember how much I have loved you, and do still from beyond the grave.
Greg"

4. The Law of Averages

The years I described have probably been the most important to my post-mortem experiences. About the next years I'll be brief, partly because things were a tad more ordinary and partly because of David. As much as I'd have liked to draw up a full account of how I met him and fell in love and all the rest, retrospect makes it impossible. It's just too hard to go into any kind of detail, now that I know exactly what was wrong with each moment of this history. The best I can do is to recap a bit.

After Greg's letter, I managed to feel more together about everything. School was finishing and my chosen path was to continue the drawing on a more focused scale by doing graphic design. My specific destination was a university in New York that I managed to successfully apply for, having built up a portfolio of work over the years. Naturally Clara and I had to sift through everything for almost a week weeding out "inappropriate" works. I knew that when entering an institution I couldn't yet afford to be overly punchy with the messages I was presenting; I just hoped that I'd be able to do this soon enough. And so I packed my mindset up and shuffled off across the Atlantic, into the great American wilderness. Many around me probably thought I was running away from my life and everything that's happened recently. Although I planned this very university, this very country and modus operandi over a year ago, it did feel good to leave for a while. Despite the fact that I got the opportunity to polish my cynicism in America more than ever before, I was grateful for the new possibilities.

My first months were indicative of the rest of my stay. I met a few people I found amazing but with the general majority I was disappointed. It was probably to do with the luck of this particular uni, town, crowd etc. I could say a cliché: that life was very materialistic there, and a tad superficial. Maybe that was true to an extent. But the main problem was that despite the blandness of the majority of people at home, they were a step above those here on an evolutionary scale. Oh, I don't mean the New Yorkers I met were Neanderthals or stupid. Not at all. Rather it's the abstract-concrete distinction. Humanity leapt tremendously on an evolutionary scale when people acquired the physical ability to think in abstract terms. It wasn't just an increase in mental power, it was an increase in orders of magnitude. And as much as I hate to say it, the people at home were more at home in the abstract while those I met in the US lived in the concrete. It was slightly a materialistic thing but more in terms of the self. College life as I saw it was like a Humean mind that has no core self but consists only of an endless chaos of sensory and mental experiences, one following the other with no-one really home. At college this meant a stream of social gatherings, mind-altering substances, the constantly shifting fabric of relations between people, sexual adventures and misadventures and the like. That's not to say that I stayed out of these things completely, not at all, but I felt I couldn't

let the constant string of experiences overwhelm me and replace my own self. Many did exactly this. Even their academic life seemed to consist of an endless string of courses without an abstract Plan. Not that they were stupid, in fact I was constantly surprised at how bright and brilliant the students I had contact with were. So much for the 'stupid American' piece of bigotry. And this was not just college students but friends of theirs and their friends' friends that weren't at all academic. They were still very bright and I respected that. But concrete bright as opposed to abstract bright.

As for me, I thought I was the opposite. I was less concretely bright but I had the sense of context and my own thoughtly worlds that I kept since childhood. I don't think I used the library once. I just continued to draw and design and to express things. My education was twofold. The first was with courses at uni helping me acquire more techniques and practice them as well as to think about what I was communicating (crazy eh? I was there to learn and learning actually occurred as was supposed to happen!). The second was by my friends there, and by talking to people getting a feel for the range of views and opinions. This was a definite advantage over home in that here, the number and heterogeneous nature of thoughts and ideas kicked ass comparatively. This was especially true in politics. The uni would have been considered overbearingly liberal in America while people at home would have seen it as conservative to the point of fascism. My roommate's friend Katie, who I became close to, was quite involved in a few organisations both political and recreational. She encouraged me to contribute and at first I gladly took her up on it, designing dozens of promotional posters for various happenings. It was at a slightly later date that I realised the inevitable -- I was not meant for any side of the political scale, or anything like that. My inner paradoxes wouldn't allow it. The course I took in visual propaganda helped too. I could always see the hidden messages in images -- that's why 90% of advertising, both in Sweden and the US, outraged me beyond belief -- but now I could not escape it. Propaganda, presuppositions and fallacies were the cornerstones of everything I saw. My illustrated copies of the Brothers Grimm and the Arabian Nights that I preciously took with me took on a new meaning. Oh, no, I don't mean that I saw propaganda in them -- that was always the case! Rather I appreciated them *more* because at least there it was more plain, and the propaganda itself wasn't nearly as pernicious as what I saw in the "real" world. Although I continued to be close to Katie, my hobby/career as graphic-designer-for-causes was no more.

Two months after beginning uni I flew back home for a few weeks -- Clara's baby was due and I couldn't not spend those weeks with them, not after being accepted as an anti-godparent. She was even more beautiful when I first saw her. It was a few days before she delivered. It's hard to avoid the idea of the pregnant glow. Actually, she wasn't glowing but several months of a much more peaceful existence left their indelible and devastating print on her. "Cassi! As you can see I am better," her first words were, "so now that we've established that visually, you must spend the rest of the day establishing to me verbally about you and about how you're better too." Which I did, but for the rest of my stay I didn't mention the US. I didn't need to. Between us, current happenings didn't matter as much, we just continued our usual communal train of thought. It was then that I realised I wanted to come back here pretty much as soon as I graduated. Although I wasn't sure about the rest of my life, this was still my centre of emotional gravity.

She gave birth to a boy with no complications at all, delivering him to an eager room of well-wishers that consisted of her parents, myself, and two of our other close friends.

"Have you picked a name yet?" asked one of the friends (Ben I think) shortly after Clara's parents went home for the night. I smiled at her knowingly as I could mouth her response simultaneously with her, so well did I know all this.

"Of course not yet! How could I decide something like a name, that should describe something special about a person, this early? I must see what he's like first. After a few days or possibly a week his name will come naturally."

"Wow Clara," said Ben, "I never figured you to take on board any new age thing. Haven't you always thought things like this to be a bunch of crap?"

"This isn't crap, this is real. Many cultures have mystical or spiritual association with names, but you don't need to be superstitious to see that it's no use carrying one without knowing its origins. It's as ridiculous as people who wear t-shirts in a foreign "exotic" language, such as Chinese or Thai, without knowing what it says. It could be some racist drivel for all they know. How much more so with a name that you wear with you in every situation imaginable?"

"So what are our names' essences?"

She smiled and looked around her, evaluating in a way a rich miser might count his treasures (but in a less miserly way of course).

"Well what have we? Clara meaning clear and bright which I certainly hope I am today. Cassielle, angel of Saturn and Saturday. I guess that's not particularly pertinent to her life except that her folks named her thus to poke fun at overbearing mysticism just like she continues to poke fun at all that's false. Oh and there is a certain element of angelicity there. Ben, son of the south. This is true here in Sweden in the most literal of senses. But it also can also mean son of the right hand thus very aptly describing your able nature. Heidi who is a noble person just as her name means. The original notion of nobility meant one who was inbred into a callous gang of thieves, torturers and marauders. Thus, her name also signals her ability to reinterpret and transform the corrupt into the true, as seen by her nobility which is so very different...Greg meaning one who is watchful, who Cassi and I know from our posthumous epistles expected to be watching us still."

Naturally a silence followed, exacerbated by the fact that not even I knew that Clara also received an epistle. Not that I was jealous - it only validated how special what us three had was.

"So you see, I want my son to have a fitting one too."

By the time I returned to the US to resume my routine, Clara's son was called David meaning beloved which coincidentally was the name of my future husband.

I met David some weeks before my sojourn with little David. He was graduating from the school of political science. We both joked about the term political science being the greatest example of an oxymoron found in modern times. He was Katie's cousin. What other bare facts shall I divulge about him without going into the pointless and awful recollection of the details? I was pretty much taken by him straight away. He presented a nice balance to me, a fitting change from my usual thoughtscape. Like many an

inhabitant of my university he too lived in the concrete. However this did not mar him because he managed it extremely well. Furthermore, he was certainly not a Humean mind but his endless string of life experiences had quite the purpose. Although I later discovered it was the wrong purpose for me, I'll still give credit to him having one.

Shortly after we started dating, he helped me out in a major way when I was arrested. By that time I had stopped my direct promotional involvement in anything propagandish but I still accompanied Katie to some events. I also happened to have taken the role of her sanity checker, largely due to my ideological non-involvement. One time, a gathering turned into a protest which turned tumultuous. The authorities were called in and I was arrested due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, along with several hundred others. A bit like a throwback to American university life in the 60s, that's what it felt like. When word got to David, he got me an attorney who arranged bail and then had the matter resolved all within a few hours. This was indeed a major feat as the "real" protesters spent several days getting through because an already overloaded system had choked on them. This incident came to epitomise him in my mind -- he had a quick instinctive reaction which very much coincided with my well being, he was accomplished but crafty and he did it all without losing his tremendous sense of humour. By then I was in love with him -- I'm not ashamed to admit this after the fact.

A year and a half later we were married. As suspect as this may sound, looking back I can't figure out who may have proposed the idea to whom, we sorta found ourselves on the same wavelength. Which is pretty much the reason I wanted him in the first place. Everyone at college was over the moon, we made it into the ranks of The Happy Couple. Although Clara didn't say anything explicit in her letters (yes, we who drew and coloured together as kids forsook the information age for some handwritten material as adults, although the crayons only came out occasionally) she was skeptical. This was justified though, because from a description it would seem strange that I picked someone like him. She probably imagined me ending up with someone a little more out-there and alternately-wired in the brain. Perhaps a bit more like Greg. The point was that a description was not adequate so I was willing to wait till he met her.

Thinking back to the way he would talk to me in the States, the things he said, what we did, I can see how he can be perceived as a walking cliché. Perhaps he is. But he had me taken in and I knew that for me it was pointless to restrict myself to being with someone whom I had "things in common" with. What does that mean? In my case, even less than for most. Yes, he was very different in attitudes and values and tastes. But in a way that worked, or so I'd imagined at the time. Then I graduated and decided that I must return home and take him with.

5. Prodigal Daughter

"Everyone gets a nail in the mouth" Kimuri assures me.

"And everyone screams..."

"Everyone."

"Then which one is innocent?"

"The one who does not scream...Mzi, all confess! All. Even before Mugango plants the nail in their mouths. Who'd let their tongue be burnt? No Mzi, us men aren't like that..."

Safari Under Kilimanjaro

"You want to move? So soon?"

"Well, yes. I mean I always planned to return in a fairly short time-frame. Now that I've graduated though I don't see why I can't begin work as a graphic designer there. There's a good market."

"Do you miss it that much?"

"Well yeah, and I should spend time with Clara and Davey -- he's two and a half, just the right time for the possibility of influence. We did discuss this many a time."

"I know hon. Still, it's the first time you've mentioned it in terms of practical things."

"What do you think then?"

"I'm still willing. I just need some time to readjust to the idea and to make arrangements. You know I've been looking for a new magazine to transfer my column too. Perhaps something in Europe would provide both income and a good base."

"Really? Great! And yeah, there are a few English-language academicky publications in Sweden. You can find something. Definitely with your large *skill* base..." I said giggling and he joined in. I was completely over the moon then. We were going to build a life together -- ours!

Of course that whole exchange was far too conciliatory on his behalf to be normal. He was always so well-mannered. A little too much -- I don't think he was exactly in numbing ecstasy over the idea of going. I can of course manage to live with myself for dragging him out here. Had he loathed the notion, he'd have made it known.

Instead, he hunted and I hunted. Several weeks later we both bagged ourselves some gorgeous creatures of the Scandinavian snowy pine forest. We were very proud of ourselves and put up plaques with the heads of the beasts. David's was a column on political science much like the one he currently had but for a magazine in Goteborg. It was quite prestigious and distributed across the EU. He also hoped the managerial philosophy would be better than his current so in a way this was a great move for him from a purely selfish perspective. The kill I bagged was a job doing layouts for book covers and other related material at a publisher in Stockholm. This meant we could essentially move to within a few hours drive of my home town because both our jobs allowed for some work from home and we wouldn't have been tied to our respective corporate cages. When I found out about the location of my upcoming corporate cage I smiled bitterly. Stockholm! Greg and I could see each other all the time now! I could visit

him while he was in the process of moving up the ranks in the force. I could even watch him violate the civil rights of some slime-ball in the interrogation room...

Saying goodbye was surprisingly easy. Because of our Happy Couple tag (which recently got the word Married inserted between the two original words), everyone expected us to do something like this all along. It was fairly close anyway and being relatively affluent people (this being America and New York and college graduates and all) they could afford to bridge the distance when necessary. Katie promised to visit as soon as possible or when we had our first baby, "whichever came sooner". David was holding my hand at the time under the table due to a reflex and as soon as we heard this we squeezed each others hands dry due to another reflex. This was certainly not on the menu anytime soon. Perhaps I should have seen this as a sign that on the truth-level neither of us saw the other as someone we'd have wanted to start an extended family with. Then again this would be reading a tad too much into things.

Our flight was also particularly memorable and blissful. We didn't get distracted from each other for a microsecond. All energies were collated into joyously planning. I "initiated" him into the country by helping him peruse maps and pointing out landmarks and the associated Astrid Lindgren moments. I guess this was one of the things we definitely had in common from even the most doubting perspective. He could appreciate many of my quirky tastes in literature spanning to my childhood, as well as the things Clara and I created. Because I'd left some of our more controversial works in Sweden (as I mentioned it was clearly not needed for my admissions portfolio) he had yet to see them.

And see them he did, along with seeing everyone else. This was because the day after we arrived Clara organised a semi-surprise gathering for us. The gathering part was the fact that she got my family and many of our friends there. The semi-surprise part was the fact that I knew for sure this is exactly what she would do. But of course the centrepiece was the little one. Barely had we opened the door when he was hanging off my waist, puffy hands digging in and fragile feet kicking the air. "Auntie Caas!!" He couldn't pronounce my name then but it was completely understandable.

"David, look how strong you are. Careful, you'll grind me into the ground! Listen, there's someone I want you to meet. His name's the same as yours."

"Uncle David!" Immediately he too was the victim of an emerging treeclimber.

Then, She echoed from behind and came up to us before anyone else. "He's heard so much about you and - can I perpetuate a wives' tale without being a wife?"

"Only you," I said introducing her to David and vice versa.

"I think he remembers who you are from when he was born...But Cassi, you haven't changed a bit! Sure, you're older and have grown -- up? no, what's the direction gravity pulls in?" She ducked my expected mock slap and came right up to my ear to continue her greeting, "but you're still you, *despite* supposed claims to the contrary."

Greeting, eating, mingling, exchanging, eating, drinking, indulging, engorging and more eating followed and the house split into several after-meal conversations. The one that impacted me most was about a just society. David and I along with Clara and my father

were crowded around, with Clara asking David about his work and column. This led to a discussion of David's political philosophy and his ideas about a better political system.

"David, I think I should tell you what I've thought about this for many years and you can tell me where I'm going wrong. After all, I've only been rambling this to myself while you have actual insight" said Clara.

"Sure, I'd love to hear from you. In fact I adore the opinions of those who haven't done anything to do with this academically because they're often surprisingly good."

"I think the main problem in the current political system is that it was based on the wrong principles. It allegedly values individuality and freedom (especially economic freedom, almost to the exclusivity of everything else). And this was understandable because it evolved out the back end of a most oppressive feudalism and period of ruthless monarchy. However it still dehumanises the person because it replaces the physical serf with the abstract one, enslaved to mere principles -- ones that treat him or her as a robot."

"In what ways?"

"It seems especially pertinent in justice. We have a system whose goal is to ensure fairness for the individual accused and not society. It's no surprise then that it achieves its intended aim quite well, but at the expense of society. There are no attempts at reconciliation or righting wrongs. Rather, punishment is seen as for its own sake, like an automatic reflex."

"Most interesting. I have criticised the modern system of justice as one of the most major flaws in our political system myself. Clara you've touched a topic close to my heart!"

"Then perhaps you'd care to share what your thoughts are for what we should do."

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly bore you to that extent! I'm used to discussing these things with other colleagues of mine and we all have our elitist vacuous terminology we use that would be impenetrable. I find that as soon as I start talking about these things to a real person they begin to edge away from me. I've even seen grown men flatten themselves against the floor and very slowly and subtly slide under the door into the next room!" Some laughter followed to which David responded by pointing to Clara with his open palm facing up. "But I'd love to hear from you first as I can't imagine you suffering from these problems."

"Are you sure? I think I'll have the opposite effect of largely improvising without knowing what I'm talking about."

"I insist -- plus it may inspire me to respond in a way that *won't* induce a coma."

She took in a breath in preparation and lifted her eyebrow at me. I knew this whole thing was a bit of a test on Clara's behalf of who my husband may in fact be from her perspective. But I wasn't angry with her, in fact I realised where she was heading and was eager for the results myself.

"In my opinion we ought to go back to some of the more traditional methods of justice. Ones that existed in tribal societies. That way we can have a system that doesn't create new adversaries on top of the ones already created by the unfortunate situation, nor alternatively would it subject a person to the arbitrariness of a single flawed human

being, or even a bunch, weighing the facts their case. Perhaps we need to make the defendant's conscience come into play. We always assume that the accused has no remorse, is it a surprise that this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy especially when every part of the system is wired up to reinforce this? This is done differently in some tribes in Africa. As strange as this sounds, perhaps we need to return to some kind of trial by ordeal. I've read about anthropologists' studies of the phenomenon and it seems extremely successful in uncovering the culprit and reconciling. In a usual scenario both the plaintiff and the accused have to reach into a pot of boiling oil to fish out some beans. The one who can't do it is considered...well, *shown* to be lying. And it works because of the psychological factor. The one who knows he's innocent will calmly reach into the pot and get the beans because he knows he won't be burnt. Kind of like firewalking -- no profound supernatural explanation but a psychological one which still makes it work. And of course the guilty one can only refuse out of the real fear of being burnt. This is all in front of the entire tribe of course. After the verdict and penalties, the judges also ensure some kind of reconciliation and a return to the harmonious way of life. I know people can 'fool' the test but I'm sure one can manipulate our own system in a myriad more ways. That's what makes it a good idea -- treating the accused as someone with a conscience and possibly employing a psychological test like this one."

Everyone looked at David who smiled and cheerfully replied that this was a pretty good idea and that traditional cultures have much to teach us. And this seems to endow some strange level of dignity on the process that our charade of a system doesn't.

The conversation meandered to the next topic but I caught Clara's gaze and knew exactly what she was saying. He was too agreeable, too eager to please. Of course he had just met Clara but to let her spout such drivel?!? He didn't have to insult her, just to point out a few things. The brutality often present in traditional cultures, the bigotry and repression that exist therein, the fact that for the test to work we'd have to believe in spirits and become superstitious completely to the point of abandoning the method of looking into things that has been prominent in our society for several centuries, that like torture the procedure's just as likely to yield the wrong verdict, that the facts of the matter do have some bearing on justice (somehow). Instead he took the politically correct stance that these cultures were so special. That they are all pure noble savages (a perfect example of the racism of political correctness can be racist). He took the relativist stance that there are no facts, that the guilt or innocence of someone is socially constructed so if we can find a shaman to get high on something and talk to the spirits (and what kind of intolerant fascist would dare say he doesn't talk to them?) and "reconcile", it doesn't really matter who raped, murdered, maimed, tortured.

These thoughts stuck with me for the next few hours of what was actually a wonderful day overall. I realised I had doubts about my husband, but then again I realised that these were doubts that may have been lurking beneath my consciousness for a while. It was the fact that Clara had thought of all this (of course she didn't tell me but I knew I had her intentions exactly right) not maliciously but for the purpose of looking out for me, and as an enthusiastic, enraptured lover of truth. Besides being grateful to her even if she turned out to be wrong, I realised that it was Clara and not I that had the advantage of sudden immersion in his personality, whereas I could have missed many things about David in

the chronology of my gradualness. Although I rejoiced at being back amongst everyone, my newly-formed doubt was still around when we left late in the evening.

6. The Blizzard

Suddenly, Moomin-Troll stopped in the warm, dusky corner where the moonlight did not reach and he was frightened. He felt dreadfully lonely and abandoned.

"Mum! Wake up!" he screamed tugging at her sheets.

The whole world had disappeared!

But mum wasn't waking. Her dreams, in which she dreamt of summer, became more a tad more restless and sadder, but she couldn't wake up in the end. Moomin-Troll curled into a ball on the rug beside her bed. Out in the yard, the long winter's night was still under way.

Moominwinter

We were driving along the ice-covered road and I was silent. David was chatting away about odds and ends but I stared straight ahead watching the blizzard surrounding us that was developing a healthy aggression. As we continued along the aggression increased until finally we had to stop as the road wasn't a road anymore, at least not for a while. We had the good fortune of being in a stretch where the nearest settlement was about 6 kilometres ahead, and a stretch that was practically guaranteed to be empty at this time of night. This meant there were at least no worries about a car or truck slamming into the back of ours.

"Great. Now where?"

"Don't know my long-suffering protector" I blurted out without meaning to be sarcastic. He didn't hear the remark, or didn't parse it. Or didn't show that he had.

"We can't shovel the snow. It's a white wall out there."

Indeed I looked out of all the windows to find a glorious black and white nothingness. There was no outside world anymore, just a clearly beautiful image of something like a waterfall but much slower. In fact it reminded me of my winters here as a child, where there'd be a period during which the silence and nothingness would make any creaking sound a major event. Here, there was no sense of force, no noise of crashing liquid. It was a silent and slow waterfall where you could follow with your eyes. Each magnificent instance of the waterfall, each compressed bit of frozen and crystallised water made its way down from an indeterminate height above to an indeterminate height below. Until we were snowed in. Not completely, but enough to make the car immobile.

The combination of immobility and the lack of phone reception in this seemingly forsaken place made things quite bad. We sat in the dark car cabin contemplating options for a quarter of an hour until I reported the results of my thought-creating expedition.

"Well we have a few forks in this journey of life tonight. We can both spend the night in the car and either hope for the road to clear or try reach some place in the morning."

"It would be a very cold night -- the car's already cooling down dramatically from the subzero outside. And we don't know if it won't be worse tomorrow. Next."

"OK. We could both try walk to the settlement or have one of us stay in the car while the other goes. We could find something to clear the initial snowy onslaught and hope that further along the road is clear enough to let us pass."

"Hmm. Any more ideas?"

"Nope. You?"

"No. And they're all bad ideas, judging from which we appear to be in an objectively fucked up situation. We do need to get to the settlement and not spend the night here."

We decided we had to go together as we didn't want to separate without an advantageous purpose, which currently seemed lacking. Plus finding the car again would be a challenge -- looking back the way we came revealed a road that was getting more and more subtle in its appearance. We waited five minutes for a decrease in blizzard intensity, got as many layers on as possible from the spare clothes in the trunk and disappeared into the darkness. We held each other by the waist and I realised something hopeful. It didn't matter if Clara was right about David. She could have been and perhaps he's not good for me. If this is the case there's no harm in parting ways now. If he is simply "unsuitable" then from what I know of him, I'd still love to have him as a friend -- this need not be a vicious parting. If he on the other hand was totally duplicitous then that option's out but so what? He came to this land of the Moomins of his own accord. Even if it turns out that he has no appreciation for this being the land of the Moomins, he still has a great career opportunity here. I realised I was justifying it to myself possibly to alleviate some guilt about bringing him here but it was natural because this move was much bigger for him than for me. All I knew is that whether he would be my husband, ex-friend or nobody I still had so many things in my life that I couldn't possibly be whining. I had no right when so many had undergone infinitely more trauma than me. Some have even been forced to submerge their hand in boiling oil to show their innocence! Meanwhile I had Clara and my other friends, little Davey and my newfound career as the non-propagandist graphic designer as well as the land itself. The winter wonderland that produced Clara and Greg had to have produced others as well, and even if it had not, I could still die happy with what I had.

Which is exactly what happened. Fifty metres into our journey I slipped on a piece of ice (possibly due to my thoughts taking the euphoric turn I described) and stacked it headfirst. David cried out but I was already bleeding with what was probably a mild concussion. My ankle was also the site of immense pain such that I couldn't possibly continue a 6 kilometre journey. I'll also admit I still had some semblance of a rush from the pain, not unlike the one of my earlier fall when the Three Inseparables were in Norway. However David had a much grimmer outlook.

"Well it's back to the car for you. Hook onto my waist."

"Wait, what about you? You should still go get help?"

"And leave you here not able to move?"

"Hang on, listen here. We need to get out of here now. Don't even carry me to the car, it would waste a precious 5 minutes which will be worse for me anyway. I can still walk, just very slowly, so I'll crawl to the car. I need to move to keep warm anyway. "

He hesitated for three seconds and was off after a final embrace.

"I love you."

"And I you!"

I lifted myself off the ground and turned towards the car. It didn't seem too remote -- just a few pangs and whimpers away. By the sixth step I was proficient at putting as much of my weight as was practical on my good ankle. However, the die was cast as I fell again a few metres later. There was no pain but rather a very overwhelming sense of the cold that numbed me all over and made it hard to get up. I decided to rest for a few seconds, to gain energetic momentum to rise and continue towards the car. Oh well. All of us have intentions that go thwarted. By the time those few seconds passed everything in my body was numb. Down to the internal organs I could not ordinarily feel.

I was still aware of my surroundings for a few minutes but I realised I was going to freeze, almost certainly to death. Still, I wasn't sorrowful. Perhaps it was due to the fact that my normal brain functions were a tad hampered. Sure, I regretted leaving the world so soon and was sorry for doing this to Clara and little David, and big David and the rest. There was a fleeting thought of never being able to create something that's beautiful to me, but obscene to most others, again. Furthermore, I'll admit there were many flashbacks of my life -- and they didn't leave me hopeless but gave the impression of having *lived*, if only for a brief period and with many hang-ups. All of these were very minor thoughts. The vast majority were peaceful anti-thoughts, the non-reflexive ones, the ones you can't write down in language because they never made it to your language faculty in the brain, even though you can feel them perfectly well.

To continue my gratuitous start to my story (this time legitimately), soon I was enveloped by the numbness of cold, my sense of pain gone from the lack of sensation in my limbs and instead replaced with a feeling of relief as the last of the many survival instincts give up. I did not suffer for though I couldn't move, I did not mind. Not even the thought of leaving David and Clara and my family forever made me want to fight. Not that I should feel guilty about this -- my brain no longer had the capacity of considering the people in my life. And so I lay in the snow, ready for lifelessness to kick in.

It was just like falling asleep or receiving anesthesia. Because lifelessness came, I wasn't aware of it coming; much like when you're falling asleep you're not aware of it and can't point out the precise moment. I can't even use the other death cliché of the world fading away. Fading away for whom? At the time I wasn't there to notice any fading, so it doesn't make sense to talk of fading. Like my childhood brain explosion the paradox splashed out onto the arena of life. I was there and then I wasn't. And the line between the two is the most paradoxical concept imaginable.

Part Two: Exploring the Universe

7. Awake, My Child

And many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awaken-these for eternal life, and those for disgrace, for eternal abhorrence.

Daniel 12:2

My first awareness was that I had awareness. Or to be precise that I had an awareness *once more* despite the fact that I remembered being in the process of dying quite clearly. Sometimes when you sleep or go under and return it feels like an immense amount of time has passed. In my more intense months of college I'd be getting quite the less sleep than I should and when I got the chance to sleep for 7-8 hours I'd wake up feeling that I've been asleep forever and that the whole world has passed by. This was different. Here, I truly felt an indeterminate amount of time. I wouldn't have been surprised at only four or five seconds having passed since my supposed death. Nor would a decade passing have astounded me. One thing I knew: I wasn't a body any longer.

I knew this because I was only aware of my own awareness and my feelings and my reactions, but nothing else. I had no feeling of any limbs of anything at all, no sense perception of any kind. This meant I wasn't aware of being in any particular place or time. The only thing I had to go by was me. I smiled, metaphorically of course, as I realised I was somehow experiencing the whole *cogito ergo sum* thing in a very literal and strange way. Still, one thing was for sure. If this was me (who else would it be? -- my childhood paradox seemed not to extend into this realm) then death wasn't the end but rather led to whatever this was. This was both exciting and discomfoting. The possibility of seeing *certain* others here filled me with hope and dread. As did my clear awareness that perhaps Clara and the others were standing over the piece of meat that was my body -- such introspection was luxuriously absent when I was freezing.

There was also the question of where I was. Not that 'where' is the appropriate word, but for my account to go on I must resort to an increasingly metaphoric and "anthropomorphic" language. I will thus speak of bodily things even though we know this language is merely an approximation. At the moment though I had no bodily things to, even compare to because there was nothing. "I wonder if I'll enjoy this afterlife if what I have right now is all there is..." I thought, "won't I get dreadfully frustrated and bored? Shan't I cry out to be destroyed after only a few eons of this nothingness?"

There was another aspect to my new-found consciousness. This was my natural emotional response at having literally experienced death firsthand. I guess had I access to any physical tear ducts, they would have received a hefty workout. Not that I was distraught at finding myself there. No. But there was many an emotion there. This is something you will all have to go through, dear readers. In the human world, they say that everyone deals with death differently. In this saying, they're referring to the death of others. However I know the other interpretation of the saying to be literally true. Everyone deals with their own death differently. And it's not just a matter of belief or not, whether you were actually expecting some afterlife or whether you were like me and

thought there was no reason not to expect simple oblivion. In either case, the reality of actually having realised that you have been gathered from the proverbial dust is overwhelming. In essence, it doesn't really matter what your beliefs were, it's more a question of personality. Interspersed with my aforementioned reflexions, there was a bit of a dread. Not so much at what will happen now, but at two other things. The first was that the world was very different to what I thought I knew it to be. Perhaps it was my arrogance at seeing myself in the wrong (and how!) but it was not a happy occasion. I didn't cry out at the thought of a continuation in existence but neither was I leaping for joy. The other source of dread was the realisation about the world left behind and especially the anguish caused to all those who cared about me. I literally felt that it was selfish of me to have managed to die. And I knew that this same feeling has already been felt before by many *a person*, but to a much greater extent.

As I said, I had no sense of anything. The world wasn't black or even blank because it was literally *of no colour whatsoever*. And to top this I had no feeling of any sensory organs that could have expected some input. It was like my arm falling asleep so profoundly that not only did it feel nothing but it didn't feel anymore -- but instead of my arm it was my entire self. Still as soon as I realised I might be here indefinitely I set about experimenting to see what I could come up with. "Well Cassi, let's see you use your imagination to make the most of this tabula rasa you're in." I encouraged myself thus and tried to imagine circles, triangles, colours and other shapes. I succeeded but in a very broad way, as if I was thinking of the concept "circle" rather than seeing its curvature in my mind's eye. "Good Cassi, you're making a start." I froze (this shall be the last time I take note of and apologize for an approximation). That last thought obviously wasn't my own.

Welcoming any change from the zero-dimensional nature of my current existence I attempted probing. Nothing at first. Then I had the idea of becoming more active -- I recited a poem I remembered as quickly as I could in my mind. The words came gushing out at an incredible speed -- far more smoothly than I could have done in life. While I kept reciting though I turned my attention to other words. Sure enough, they were there. There were other words present. I was not alone. Without a material manifestation, it's surprisingly difficult to distinguish your own thoughts from someone else's. "Who are you? Where am I?" I asked but there was no answer. Eventually I realised that just as I succeeded in getting the Other words creeping into my poem by looking inward, my best chances of getting an answer would be the same. "Where am I?" I asked but instead of preparing myself to receive an answer by means of sensory perception (which I clearly lacked), I looked -- nay expected -- for an answer to pop up from within my mind. Sure enough, a weak response popped up. "There's been a glitch but don't worry. Just try to teach yourself to feel me and the others and then I can start guiding you around."

A guide! "So the spirituals were true!" I blurted out to myself sarcastically. I didn't know whether to feel disappointed or not. My consolation was that this was nothing like any new age thing I heard of. Slowly slowly I continued talking to my guide but this time imagining some spatial representation of him-her-it? popping up in my head; again as naturally as before. This eventually worked as I began to feel some sort of radiation emanating from somewhere. I merely attached the responses in my head to that emanation and lo-and-behold, I had myself a talking puppet guide that I constructed all

by myself using only my own mind. I guess in this realm reality was a social construct, or at least a personalised one...

"OK, I can sort of feel something. Is that you?"

"Nope. But at least you've gotten used to communicating so I can try to explain."

"That's a pleasant surprise. So I'm dead aren't I? How long have I been dead? This is some sort of afterlife, I assume?"

"I think I'll answer in reverse. This is the non-material plane where intelligences or 'souls' as you may know them have their focus transferred back to, once the body they were focussed on expires. As for how long has passed since you lost consciousness, as you'll learn later, there is no exact answer. However in the place where body is situated in the snow, only a few seconds have passed."

"So if I'm not dead (which I'm assuming since you'd have told me otherwise), what am I?"

"Clever girl!" This was how my guide sharply diverged from the traditional angels: they're meant to be transcendent, not make patronising remarks. "Because of the extremely low temperature, you're not dead but in a state of extremely-suspended animation."

"Like one of those people who you sometimes hear about who drown to the point of losing a heartbeat and other life signs and then can at times be reanimated if the environment was cold enough? Or like being cryogenically frozen?"

"Yes, all those."

"So I can revive? Who decides if I do? Do I get to? And what am I to do here anyhow?"

There was a pause. Perhaps it was me who was tired of interpreting answers: this was a constructed conversation to a large extent.

"Aren't you embracing this a little too eagerly for someone who's never believed in any such nonsense?"

"No. Unless I'm hallucinating, this *is* real in which case there must be some kind of explanation whether I find out or not. And I am extremely eager to."

"Well you're in a bit of a pickle. As you've noticed, there's currently nothing in this realm of existence to notice. This is because your Intelligence still has an attachment to the material world because you're not actually dead. This is why your experience is so empty.

There were several moments during my sojourn in the non material world where I became immensely amused at what I found out. Quite inappropriately each time, I might add. This was definitely one of those moments. I burst out in hysterics but I kept the reason for my amusement wholly to myself. Truly, I don't think Tanaka would have appreciated the humour. But it *was* funny to picture the "Fathers of the Church" being right all along. Truly the flesh was evil and incomplete and it was the spiritual world where truth and beauty lay. Augustine was right - the material world was empty (or at least supposed to be according to my recent experiences - didn't mean it was empty to me). And yes I was most bewitched by the image of him rubbing his theological and

doctrinal palms together in delight when he first died. Then again, there were all the mistakes he made.

Eventually my guide interrupted my thoughts again. "My role is to work with problematic cases such as yours. As a result I'm to teach you how to navigate around here and to show you into the realm. However what happens to your physical body is outside your control, or mine. If you're found by your husband and revived in time, you'll return."

"So there's no explicit point to my being here?"

"Just the mechanism working its way."

"You said my case is problematic."

"Oh indeed. Most souls transfer their attention to this realm when the body dies. This releases all of their attention and therefore they are not attached to their earthly senses. They can use the whole spectrum of senses to feel everything and everyone in the realm, and to be able to do anything that is possible. With you it's different."

Suddenly it made sense for the first time and I almost jumped for joy had I been able to.

"Wait, tell me if I'm right. Because I'm still used to my earthly senses, this is what my soul expects to experience. However I have only emptiness because here there is no sensory information of the earthly kind. I could be in the middle of something really complicated and not know. There could be millions of other souls here!"

"Yes my dear, you're right. And there *are* souls here, trillions of them, every single one in existence. But you still have your privacy. Anyway as you have already realised, you can only get by right now by teaching yourself to imagine this world with your earthly senses. I'm to help you with this. But notice that you're already doing it. You're interpreting my messages as speech because this is the only way you can imagine this type of content being transferred to you. So you give me a voice. Now you should begin to tune in your other senses. You've already associated me with some light so keep going."

"Are you telling me this I'll be experiencing things by constructing them through my imagination?"

"Yes. But you used to do this every second of your life. Perception requires huge amounts of interpretation even *there*. Here you must do even more interpreting; but your interpretation will actually be less unreliable than in the material realm. And eventually you'll stop noticing that you're actively interpreting, just like on earth."

I still wasn't sure how divergent my experiences would be from what's really happening so my guide was gracious enough to provide me with an analogy. Imagine a blind man who knows about the world by groping with a stick. He's quite proficient but then he gets put into a country with other blind men. Only instead of physical sticks, they grope around with sticks that transmit ultrasound waves and thus have a reach of hundreds of metres. The blind men were also taken from the normal country one by one and they all learnt to replace their physical stick with such an ultrasound one. The ultrasound stick works in quite a similar way to the regular one but is much more powerful. Only this particular blind man couldn't use an ultrasound stick, so he had to use a regular one. Is his interaction with the world wrong? Of course not, every single fact he finds out with his primitive stick is true, because he can still use it correctly. However he's getting a very

incomplete picture. He has to go up to each object to experience it while the others need only to scan. This is the same as my experiences -- they'd all be true, just a shadow of the whole.

"So what are these other senses?"

"Oh, there are no others, there's only one sense really. It's very multifaceted. Your material senses of touch and sight etc. are merely subsets of this larger sense. Like a person who was restricted to seeing in monochrome has a sense of vision that's a subset of what you know as full colour vision."

"This means I must describe things that are conceptually outside my subset of senses using only my restricted ones. Like this person trying to imagine colour. Is this not a tad like squaring the circle?"

"A marvelous analogy young Cassi!" Of course I shuddered at the words. "You're right about squaring the circle. And it is futile if you want exactness. But if you want a good estimate then squaring the circle is possible and so is what I'm suggesting. Shall we begin?"

"I guess. But what do I call you?"

"There are no personal names here. There's no need. Names are required only when you live in a world that doesn't give full access to what you're referring to. We don't have this restriction so no names. This is the same as what I already told you: I'm not even speaking but you're interpreting this as speech. Oh and by the way there is an aspect of human folklore that's completely right. Many people who are visited by one of us report the fact that we take on a form that is known to them. The real reason however is that this is the only manifestation they can to grasp with their senses. It is *their* mind that's giving the interpretation, not me choosing who to appear as. I've made many such an appearance. So for practical purposes, my name will be Tanaka. Notice that I did not create this name but your soul did in the process of filling in the blanks."

So I learnt the senses from Tanaka. The whole procedure took a few hundred attempts before I became good at it. At the start he'd think of complex words or concepts and I'd tell him. Then we moved onto visuals, sounds and the rest. It was quite fun in the end -- a guessing game. Tanaka would create something, some scene or mood and I'd have to tell him. It's incredibly difficult to describe what this felt like but I'll try. Perhaps it was similar to blindsight patients are blind but can often tell what number is being flashed in front of them with an accuracy that beats random guessing. So he'd do something and I'd guess that I was seeing a blue vase being smashed. I imagined the scene with all senses and Tanaka would respond. Although I must add that of course his response essentially consisted of me "guessing" what words he was using, so this may be a sure sign for skeptics that I was imagining the whole thing and was never in the non-material plane. My defence is that this was *so* different from regular guessing. It was like the answer was under my nose but I couldn't get to it directly. By the end of the hundreds of attempts I got so used to the whole thing that my mind made a shortcut. Instead of guessing what it was and then imagining it, I just imagined. So I *saw* Tanaka standing there and he'd pull a three-headed tiger out of his coat and I'd see it and tell him "three-headed tiger, and it came out of your coat." The rest of my time in the material plane consisted of this kind of

incredible perception. However nothing was static as I'd always be seeing some manifestation of a thing, filtered through a particular concept that was present in my mind. Tanaka (and everyone else) would thus appear in a million "shells", but I knew what was what from the guessing feeling I developed. Interestingly enough despite his Japanese name, he always appeared as a Caucasian male. However I did have my suspicions as to why he was named Tanaka. I mean why I named him so.

8. The Four-dimensional Harmony of Spheres

*Voices diverse make up sweet melodies;
So in this life of ours the seats diverse
Render sweet harmony among these spheres;*

Paradiso, Dante

"So what's the deal with what you said about a certain amount of time having passed *where my body is?*" I asked as soon as we completed the sensory training.

"Time does not develop uniformly, at least based on the perspective of the non-material world."

"Does this mean that one second can pass in Cairo while at the same time five seconds pass in Cairns? But if I say "at the same time," this means we have to have our own time in this plane as well don't we..."

"You're already probing some of the more pertinent questions. Yes, time is very different here. As is space. Of course in using the worldly senses you interpret everything here in terms of the material space and time. We don't experience those. But we still have a sense of before and after."

"In other words cause and effect still works here."

"Oh don't worry, you're not about to be told off by me for something you'll do in the future."

"Good. Told off? So there are rules and *stuff?*" I said using the word in its original derogatory sense.

"Of sorts. More on that later. But back to the time concept: there exists a concept of a 'now' in the non-material world. This only corresponds to a point in the "story" of the material world. The material world is merely a four-dimensional entity. When you watch it, it grows in the time-dimension, but non-uniformly."

"Does this mean Intelligences can go back in time?"

"Yes, if you want to put it like that. However from our perspective it would merely be shifting our focus to the earlier part of the four-dimensional sculpture. This means we could go back and see any event that's happened. But not ones that haven't been formed within the sculpture of the world."

As he said these words I finally put my finger on what's been bothering me about him (because it wasn't that I actually found him patronising all the time). It was merely the overly conservative way he was expressing everything. Not that it felt like his explanations were like he was reading off a script. Rather, he was just going about everything in a very routine fashion. Of course he'd done it all millions of times before I imagine, but sometimes it felt like he wasn't really there, like he was being friendly in a formal way which in this case was worse than informal unfriendliness. That and everything about him seemed static .

"So nobody knows the future for sure despite transcending earthly time."

"Uh-huh. Actually some get to predict quite well. For instance back on earth when you dropped a ball, you always predicted it would fall down. This isn't clairvoyance, just seeing a pattern. For someone who isn't able to see the pattern though, it's a mystery. So I can predict some things about the material world that would seem clairvoyant to you but it's just a result of having access to more patterns with the full use of the senses. Oh and I can still be wrong." I would never have thought.

The four dimensional sculpture was still a mystery so Tanaka aided my imagination with a 3D example. He created a small stack of A4 size transparencies. I picked up the first and saw the picture of a stick figure in the process of walking. Looking down, each transparency in the stack was like an animation cell. I even flipped through them all to get the motion of the person walking, the turning to me, smiling, tipping his top hat and continuing on his merry way.

"See Cassi, in this example the world is two dimensional. Each cell represents the entire world at a moment in time. The third dimension is used to stack these cells next to each other. So now you've seen the entire history of the stick figure world."

"And if I just look at the first few cells that's like going back in time, to the Big Bang of this world."

"Right. Of course there was no Big Bang in either this example or in the real world... Anyway, notice also that even though we've spent a few minutes discussing this world I haven't placed a new cell on top of the pile. This means that in the stick figure world time has not moved on. However I do this now," and he pointed to the pile in a grandiose gesture and about 10 new cells appeared. "He walked two more steps so about half a second has passed."

"So what would be an example of non-uniform growth?"

This was the only time I was ashamed of a question for as soon as he made it happen I realised. This time he inserted a second figure into each cell, going all the way back in time. The world now had 2 inhabitants. However the top few cells were only half the width of the normal cell. They all sat on the left hand side and had my old man with the top-hat walk that extra step. However the new man was on the other side of the world and hence was absent from the last few cells (due to those cells being half the width). He hadn't advanced in time yet. Tanaka pointed again and a new set of cells for this man floated into the gap -- this part of the world had caught up. It was brilliant, but one thing bothered me.

"Tanaka here we -- I should say you -- are, sculpting every action of every cell. Does this mean that in our world every second is explicitly 'drawn' by various...intelligences?" As I said this the eternal chill one gets when feeling themselves at the centre of a Grand Conspiracy went down my spine. Truly this would be the discovery to end all discoveries -- we'd truly have been puppets all along!

"Hold your horses. These cells I created are just crude examples obviously. With the material world, the basic framework is provided by a set of rules. The human race knows these as scientific laws and has discovered many of them. They even got a few completely right. We can change things around a bit by actively altering something when it's just grafted to the front of the world sculpture. Gratuitousness is impossible though. We can't change the past because there are no means to penetrate the sculpture's older layers and alter them. I couldn't erase your whole life from the Sculpture completely. In another way though, you are like puppets. We have an intelligence for each one of the world's rules to make sure they are followed. Thus, when you fell into the snow it was the Gravity Intelligence sculpting your body to approach closer and closer to the snow with each coming instance in time. And sometimes these laws happen to apply to people's thoughts and acts. Does this really undermine your notion of free will though?"

"No," I said after a fairly long pause. "I've always believed there were laws even if I didn't know whether they were deterministic or not. Now that I know these laws are consciously applied by these Intelligences, what has changed? Not much. And I assume some of these can be non-deterministic as well, right?"

"Yeah. This is when there's some ad-hoc interference in the world, which is rare. But enough talk, we should go and see the material world Sculpture now."

Before I had time to agree wholeheartedly I was aware of an enormous multicoloured blob at a distance of what seemed like hundreds of kilometres. It was still too confusing to make sense of it and I could see no detail. "Don't worry, it'll be a mess but that's expected. You can't perceive the four-dimensional nature of it perfectly so if you concentrate you will be able to for brief periods. For most of the time though, you'll be able to see it as a movie of things happening in the world, past and present. Just like the traditional spirit "watching over" the earth from the heavens".

We approached further through a spaceless nothingness and I could see the dimensions of this amazing structure. Most of the time like he said, I saw the big picture: I saw stars moving and what looked like planets in orbit. At this stage it was all too confusing for me to identify what was what. Once I relaxed my eyes though and stopped focusing on anything in particular, I began to perceive it holistically. This was the most incredible thing I've ever seen. I can't describe the four-dimensional nature of it. I guess it was a hypercube that was extended in one dimension overwhelmingly, compared to the other three. But then again, no-one can actually imagine what a hypercube looks like either so I better stick to a regular object. In this case it was like a giant rod or a chocolate bar or anything else that is thin and very long in one dimension. The outside was black with scattered balls of light that I took to be stars while one part of the sculpture consisted of a scattering of multi-coloured spherical objects -- our solar system. Each sphere, each object, each speck of dust had billions of billions of ones just like it stacked up right next to it -- a true animation in the fourth dimension. *This is indeed more wondrous than any*

land of the Moomins. Oh what am I saying, this contains that very land and countless more! The closest analogy I can come up with is when you're working on the computer and it's low on resources and starts to become slo-o-w. When you drag a window across the screen it's not repainted so it leaves a trail of identical windows like the one you're dragging across the screen. You can exactly see the path of the window through the past up to the present. Here though, all objects left such a trace and not a discrete one (for the screen can only show a finite number of windows) but a continuous blur.

The result was a multicoloured multidimensional monster of beauty. The fractals you see in earthly animations have nothing on the True Fractal. Not a single jagged edge -- how could there be one? -- but a continuous interleaving of strands thick and thin, of every appearance possible. 'Twas a magnificent knot, where the rope was Everything and the knot spanned every conceivable combination of twists and weavings, stretching out in every direction, and then some, as far as my mind's eye could see.

Eventually I saw the earth. At first it was just a blue-green cylinder-like structure through the centre of the sculpture, like the lead part of a pencil. Only after staring at it for a little longer did I realise for the millionth time that the stretching part of the sculpture is time so that long cylinder in the middle is merely a planet over the course of its history. Focusing my attention on it brought an immediate shock over my senses, like a million knives of pleasantness and unpleasantness. I could see it all in theory, as I had access to all of space and time. In reality, I couldn't make sense of the totality and so had to focus on individual scenes. I saw blades of grass growing and trees cycling from acorn to oak (with complete root system) to ashes all at once; the whole lives of human beings, from sperm and egg through gestation and the repetition of the evolutionary cycle in the womb to deuterisation and those middle years between birth and their departure to the non-material. And to top it off, each part of each human being's body, movement and life was so intimately connected to the preceding it was as if there was a rope holding everything together. I saw family histories: when a family was torn apart and scattered over all the infinite corners of the earth I saw a tree of streaks of pink or brown and other colours (each one representing a body) branch out to the various parts. When there was reunion, the streaks merged and continued with a thicker, more enriched yellow or black that upon closer inspection I could see to be the 'mere' phenomenon of two or more people sharing a life together. I saw change on all the scales imaginable, from the movement of oceans and continents to the movement of legs on a termite. Everything was an open book, like I had been watching the entire history of the world (of course, I have been!) with a persistence of vision that ensured that each time period remained before my eyes, so long as I kept watching.

I kept watching the front of the sculpture which sure enough was growing outward in the direction of the future. Like Tanaka said, it was uneven in places but there was no great lopsidedness. I grossly exaggerate my watching period though. From the moment I first looked at the outer realm of the stars to the time I collapsed from mental and emotional exhaustion that comes from seeing the Big Picture, the world grew by less than a second. I knew this because a fisherman in Indonesia I noticed at the start to be casting his rod had moved the hook closer to the water by about half a metre by the end of my inspection. Of course I could have measured it by the number of footsteps David was currently taking in the blizzard or by Clara's actions. The truth was that I roamed places

unfamiliar. I felt completely unready to dare bring my attention to the world-lines of those I knew.

Seeing my utter despair at having undergone such an impossible task, Tanaka held me upright. "Had enough for now?" he said. Instead of waiting for an answer, he told me to relax my senses (like blurring your own vision purposely) and in an instant the sculpture faded leaving us with our attentions focussed on the top slice of the structure. In other words we were back in the 'present' and hovering over our planet which from its long snakelike multidimensional shape returned to its familiar spherical one, with the refreshing sight of clouds passing by and oceans turning in their beds.

"I have a question..." I managed to get out after the very welcome silence that followed. "When I saw the earth it was a rod through the spiral's centre. But with time, the earth's rotation around the sun should show. Its path should be a spiral! I remember enough about my science class in when our teacher drew such a spiral representing the earth when we were doing space-time graphs."

"You had a helluva teacher to be showing you those!"

"I did. Doesn't the rod-like nature mean that the earth is at the centre of the universe and not moving?"

"Indeed, my enlightened one. You've uncovered one of *our* greatest jokes: the most fundamental piece of "obvious" knowledge humans have about the universe is in fact a blunder!"

No matter how many times I may look back on this conversation that took place my memory is weakened because of the strangeness. I was prepared to accept this eternal life I was given without asking, I was completely comfortable with so many strange and inconceivable things being true but this was just hard to stomach. He took me to a vantage point where I observed the earth from space and what do you know it -- it was at the centre. Still. Restful. Suspended and pampered by the vast army of planets (including the sun!) orbiting around it. It was a bit like Ptolemy's scheme for the universe, but even he didn't dream of the complexity manifested therein. They didn't move in circles like the Old Science nor ellipses like the New -- nothing moved in a simple manner. Rather their wanderings seemed to my untrained eye to be reminiscent of ants or people, constantly changing directions and with no simple equation governing their path.

He told me about the equants and the *real* retrograde motion. About the celestial spheres that were much more complex than geometric spheres. About the mechanics of something as heavy as the sun moving around the centre of the universe located once more within the recesses of our humble planet. "Tell me, this centre doesn't happen to be Jerusalem does it?" I asked in exasperation at one point after being shown more and more seemingly arbitrary details, and yet here was the demonstration: I saw everything more clearly than I'd experienced at any point in my earthly life. The triumphs and mistakes of the Greats, Galileo, Newton, Einstein were paraded in front of me with great efficiency. All were visionaries, but all made as many false statements as we now know Galen made. At one point, all seemed a dream where Tanaka was a con artist and I a sufferer of an auspicious mental syndrome. The kind that leaves me so removed from reality that I'd be a good luck charm in some cultures and people would rub my forehead for their marriage

to be fertile or for the monsoon season to come in in its correct time. Or even for the donkey to be blessed with an offspring. However with more explanations this phase passed.

So what's the truth of the matter? Well, it matters little compared to other things I encountered. Nevertheless, I shall indulge, but only for a while. The universe is apparently about 58 billion kilometres in diameter, with the stars being much smaller and closer than previously thought. The stars are not expanding -- the red shift actually has another cause. The current scientific measurements of the masses of the planets are pretty much correct, except for that of the sun being off by several orders of magnitude, this from a miscalculation due to the fact that there actually is no universal law of gravitation but rather a series of laws each enacted by its own Intelligence (or soul if you will) and their interplay is something even Einstein never dreamed of. The combination of those laws leads right back to placing the earth in the centre with the planets undergoing literal retrograde motion. The true system and the modern scientific one are observationally equivalent, "or else how could anyone have navigated a spacecraft to the moon or Mars or anywhere else?" Tanaka exclaimed at one point. Interestingly enough one 'modern' demonstration that the earth rotates, Foucault's Pendulum is the result of the complex interplay of gravitational attractions between the pendulum and the various planets as they orbit *around* it. This all made sense to me in a bizarre way after a while. I realised that if *this* was testing the openness of my mind, how much more shattering would it be to re-evaluate my former life and my relationships and the nature of humanity from the point of view of the truth? This was frightening. Although I knew I'd have to deal with it at some point -- hell I wanted to! -- I mentioned nothing as of yet. My temporary silence most importantly included my dearly departed who may or may not be amongst this plane of existence. So I avoided the personal for a while and became the inquisitive scientist. I turned my attention to facts and more facts.

After a certain point, Tanaka stopped my questions about the structure of the universe, of particle motion and the true meaning of relativity: he'd had enough.

"This is all well but there's no time. Plus I've reached the limit of things I can tell you that you'll understand in terms of your senses. There is a practical aspect though: we'll ascend to the Intelligent Designer via the planets and you'll be able to hear them sing."

"What? Intelligent Designer? Singing planets? Maybe I truly *am* in hospital with waaay too much morphine in my system."

"You'll see. The Intelligent Designer is the creator of all of this, us, the non-material plane and of course the world sculpture in all its intricacies. More on that later. I said I'll ascend thee to the planets and this I will do."

"What's this about singing though?"

"As you've already gathered each animate being has a soul or Intelligence like your one here. However there are many more other intelligences governing laws and objects. Each planet in the Solar System has an intelligence attached to it, one that is particularly powerful."

"And they do what exactly?"

"They all have a purpose instrumental to life and consciousness in the universe. You already don't need to be convinced that the sun has a purpose central to life, although what your biologists have assigned to it fills only a small part of its true duties. Similarly the moon is quite obvious. Others I'll leave you to discover."

"Tell me at least one. Saturn, say."

"Certainly *Cassielle*. That particular planet observes reflections in the Sculpture's fabric and can therefore see and interpret history. It is the source of all the interpretive memories and projections into the past for every other intelligence. Sorta like a librarian if I want to consult the archives since we can't exactly walk through the middle of the Sculpture. Even now as you're contemplating your past in novel ways, it's made possible by Saturn."

By then I was virtually in hysterics. "This is astrology all over again!"

"Yes and no. Just because past astrologers had no idea about the real way the planets influence our lives doesn't mean the planets *don't*. And the real thing is completely scientific and precise of course. As for singing, each object in space fine-tunes its motion by emitting what you'll probably interpret as a musical sound. Every planet has its own key centre and chord which is the one associated with its usual motion when it's not in retrograde. For your info, Saturn's note is B flat, its chord is B flat minor seven. Now let's away."

And we were. We left the earth and ascended towards the moon and the other planets. At first I couldn't hear anything. What was there to hear? There was only the blackness of space and the immense light of the Great Light Emanator that was currently setting over a meridian somewhere in the Pacific.

My first impression was the grandness of the direct motion of the planets. 'Twas nothing like the models Tanaka showed me. The real thing is so much more dynamic and vibrant. *The sheer speed through which they whoosh through space is astounding and -- what?* As I paused my train of thought I realised that I indeed heard a whoosh, and with no atmosphere it must be coming from the planets themselves. Or rather from my mind interpreting the planets. Immediately I knew how to receive the sounds. I relaxed and just like in my sense training focussed on directly being aware of, on directly "guessing", the melody and harmony. It swooped down on me from the silence capturing my attention and tears. A haunting sound it was -- like a very far-away orchestra playing an extremely slow and polyphonic drone. *An awe-full sound*, I thought, suddenly rediscovering the original meaning of that word with glee. I was reminded of the Gregorian chant as well as other chants, but this was so much deeper and more penetrating that it took a few thousand notes before I dared to focus deeper (thus effectively turning up the volume). The bass notes were lower than any that could be heard by any ear and I truly felt them with my imaginary sense of supervibration. Everything was sustained and yet dynamic. It was then that we drifted past Mars in close proximity and I could catch its own voice.

The actual sound was interesting in the way that it contradicted the traditional mythology of the planet directly. Mars was supposed to be the bloody deity of strife and destruction. In reality, while its sound was hardly placid, it wasn't harsh either. None of the planets were. Even the radical redness of Mars was tempered by the incredibly warm sound. The

entire experience of the planet was harmonious, with all the sensory inputs working together and achieving a reputation for the planet that went beyond the concept of the god of war.

The sounds of a single planet singing is something I'll never forget. First you see the planet approach from afar and there is merely a noise. As it gets closer, you begin to differentiate several notes within it. You might be able to identify which chord it is if you know a bit about musical theory but it's still a chord that can't be heard by a material sense of hearing. The richness and all-pervasive texture of the overtones, other chords and whole melodies hinted at by this seemingly simple drone makes a whole orchestra sound like a single note. It's like Mars is playing an instrument that's millions of kilometres long, with each length of it adding layers of complexity. Then the planet goes right past you and you see that it's changing course somewhat. And you realise that the chord has changed (in both pitch and type) in the time you've been listening, only you didn't notice. In fact this occurs regularly and it takes an immense concentration to obtain the pattern. It's worth it though, being the heartbeat of the universe and all. With each moment the planet slightly adjusts its orbit and so its eternal song changes. There is no specific sense of a composer but neither is there a need for one. No forced consonance either. The planet then fades into the distance and as you turn your attention to all the orchestras of all the planets you realise that the beauty lies in the fact that the souls that operate the planets feel no need to make their contribution harmonious with the whole. By not deliberately playing in tune but just doing their own thing the planets manage to create something that feels more natural than music that's *pleasant* to the ears. There was another aspect to the music that I found truly pleasant. It seemed to have no verbal purpose. Now that I knew there was some Designer to it all, I was almost afraid of finding a universe singing praises to a narcissistic creator. However the planets weren't doing that at all. They just were. And they were doing a marvellous job about it, despite being supposedly in-*anima*-te. Certainly a better job than many living beings I knew of.

I was stunned. Dwarfed. As we kept ascending I took note of each planet and object in space. Each was different, each sang a new song. The universe turned out to have been a strange combination of the visions of Pythagoras, Aristotle, Dante and Maimonides on harmony, astronomy and music. No matter how much crap I saw in other aspects of the non-material plane, this was probably my favourite part of the world. I didn't mind it at all. In fact I was laughing and crying carelessly as we ascended further and further into the Outer Songs. Too bad my guide was no Beatrice.

9. The Intelligent Designer

"Where to now?" I naturally asked after we completed our circuit.

"Shortly I'll take you to see the Intelligent Designer who will tell you more about the conditions of your stay here."

"Oh indeed. So what, there is a God after all? At least I know neither Christianity nor Islam are true or I'd be in the hellfire with much poking and torture and the pulling apart of limbs -- all metaphorically speaking of course! -- which I don't think this is, as annoyed as I may be at some of your ideosyncrasies, Tanaka."

"No, it's not. There's no God. There is however an Intelligent Designer who created the universe and all the Intelligences and everything there is."

"What's the difference?"

"God is something infinite and perfect. Humanity made God up to obtain an ultimate all-encompassing solution. The Intelligent Designer is a finite, imperfect being -- just a very brilliant one quite clearly surpassing the rest of the universe put together."

"Mistakes-"

"He does make them." Despite all the strangeness I witnessed about the universe thus far, I was sure the Designer had neither male genitalia nor a Y chromosome to be legitimately called a *he*. Two possible explanations followed. Either Tanaka was putting things in a way he thought I'd understand (and I'd also have to interpret his message as a 'he') or he was doing it to annoy, to confound rather. Although I've already let some of my annoyance at his conservatism show, I didn't want to call him on this one so early so I went along for now.

"Let me speculate. I trust *he's* not omnipotent in terms of being able to create the logically impossible. What about total physical power?"

"There are some limitations but for our purposes He *can* do practically anything. Whether He *shall* is of course another thing."

"Good. So pretty much omnipotent. Omnipresence he must have because all the souls are omnipresent here, even you and I because we are not in any particular location (as we have access to every point of the space-time that already exists). Am I on the right track?"

"Yes, by all means continue to speculate and I'll correct you."

"So which attributes are left for which the Intelligent Designer can be different to the human God?..Omniscience. Makes sense: with non-omniscience, even being the smartest being in the universe, you're bound to make some mistakes. And it does seem like the world has...one or two glitches."

"It does, although many of these are a natural consequence of the rules put in place and the Intelligences that enact them."

"I don't want to seem like a mutinous one so soon but putting rules in place whose natural consequence is a glitch would itself be a glitch wouldn't it?" I continued after his silence.

"Now there's probably at least one more of the traditional attributes we should discuss to figure out where this Designer stands. What about omnibenevolence?"

"This is a more difficult one. Morality is pretty much something made up by the human race to suit certain purposes. With regularity, His purposes differ from those humans made for themselves - and this results in consequences that can easily be seen as immoral from a human perspective."

"What, like famine and molestation?"

"Most of the time the world runs as a machine according to deterministic rules, of which these would be an occasional consequence. I meant for instance that when I take you to Him, what He will decide for you may not necessarily be the same as *your* sense of what a just fate for you would be."

"So there is a hell?"

"No no. There is no punishment for the sake of itself. There are consequences to certain bad actions that while rectifying the situation feel punishing to the perpetrators. But again this is because conscience like morality is created by the soul for itself. This was my point, if your Majesty will allow me to return to it. When you strip away your human bullshit, morality is really the natural order of things. Put a bunch of selfish organisms to live in a world with a resource and they will most of the time evolve their behaviour to share the resource according to some ordered system that would maximise their survival rates. This is natural justice. This is something the Intelligent Designer cannot avoid following because it's just what happens. However in some instances following *this* conflicts with what you or I might believe. But the Intelligent Designer sees things from within a much broader context while we're more concerned with local goodness."

I immediately got the impression that everything was swell except for the Ultimate Question. For most people this would be where this Intelligent Designer originated from. This was on my mind too and I asked it. But I was more interested in another question, although it is very related to the first. Did the Designer have free will? If it (or he as Tanaka would have it) created the laws of nature, why did it seem like it had to follow them? If it was the first cause of everything whence were its essences or features derived? And if we were the necessary outcome of this (even if we're really Intelligences and not mere bodies) how exactly are we moral agents?

When I blurted all of this out, Tanaka smiled. Different souls are different, he said, and when they get introduced to the non-material plane they are concerned with different things. This question however (or at least the first part) is something that not a single Intelligence has failed to ask. That's why a special 'box' has been prepared which the soul may enter (ie. shift attention to) to obtain the answer. That and my series of questions had no answer in a language. Eager to get a break from my guide and venture out on my own if only for a while, I enthusiastically imaged the box. Being in the non-material plane it wasn't inside the world sculpture which meant it wasn't at any particular location in the world. But as you have already fathomed, dear reader and interpreter of my psychosis, it was possible for souls to create experiences in this plane as well. Ones that allowed for interaction too, like Tanaka's Smashing of Vases. The box was therefore interpreted in my mind as something familiar. A phone booth. A simple one but with walls that were solid at the bottom and with *tinted* glass at the top. I needed some privacy. There was a buzz in the "air" and the phone rang. I entered and picked it up and immediately the Grandest of Answers fell into place.

"Oh," I muttered, putting down the handset and leaving the booth. Was that it? That was it. All wrapped up nicely. No paradox, no impossibility. Just knowledge of exactly how the Intelligent Designer could have come to be. Disappointing, really. Not the explanation, it was adequate although I obviously can't set it down (human language

won't do plus it really *is* too small to fit in the margin). The mere fact of receiving one was disappointing.

"Now what?"

"Now that you're starting to make sense of the Designer, you're off to meet him. I'll image the entrance to the hall and then you just ascend. I'll wait for you outside."

"Marvellous" I said without hiding the relief at yet another break from my non-Beatrice.

I became aware of a gorgeous earthy smell as I found myself on wooden steps. My Intelligence or soul (or hallucination) was at the entrance to a large hall made entirely of wood. This was it, perfect proof of the degree to which I was using my own senses to make my own sense of things. I'd imagined that other people who were frozen to death would have all imagined some kind of building, but each one would be different. I wasn't looking for a palace with an opulent radiance emanating from the Inhabitant. So what I got was something akin to a Viking dining hall, raised from the ground level but not too much, and very plain.

I ascended, entered the door and sat on the empty wooden chair. There was another chair opposite me. Both chairs had straw for softening purposes. A small table with two mugs of mead. That was it, the rest was empty. Alas, alas, so much wasted space in my sensory interpretation of me being received by the Designer! It was sitting in the other chair looking at me. I say looking when I mean 'being aware'. I had endowed it with no gender, as well as no human figure. It was a strange blob of fluorescent lights of different colours. Meanwhile I knew that had I seen an old man with a beard of flowing whiteness or a Greek warrior goddess or Kali devouring infants or Gaia swirling the earth's waters and imbibing them with her feminine energy or any other such form I'd have been enraged to the point of utter distraction.

"Welcome Cassi. How do you like my creation?"

"Thanks. Um, I knew the rainforest colour scheme was overdone by its designer since I was little! And now I know I was right. Other than that, the creation it's very nifty and interesting. I've only seen a few things though."

"I know. And how's Tanaka. Still patronising?"

I smiled. "You may not be omniscient but at least I know you're not senile and you know a bit of what's happening in your realm." A silence, which I tried to patch up. "Sorry, was I being disrespectful? Then again, I can only think the thoughts I am thinking and you'd probably know them anyway and-"

"Don't worry, I appreciate the honest manner. Actually few people speak to me like that. Perhaps because most come here after spending their earthly existence following a belief system that idolises me as something I'm not. Well actually it creates a being that doesn't exist and then their expectations of that being are falsely transferred to me. No matter how I put it the end result is often some serious grovelling! I bet if you wrote down our conversation and showed it to some people most of them would never be able to stop themselves from imagining me as a man in a flowing robe, of my voice as male. Old habits die hard."

"Oh yes, I've been meaning to ask. If this is how things are, what's the deal with religion?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well how true are they? And how did they originate? And why do you continue to allow them -- why not reveal the true state of things?"

I knew instantly that the Designer smiled in response, despite the blob not showing any movement. There was just a warmer feeling about.

"You're impatient to discover. Good, because you may not have much time here."

"Yes, I was told there'd be some sort of decision. May I hear it now then?"

"Don't see why not. There will be no bending of rules for you. You won't get to decide whether you go back or not. That will be decided by material circumstances. David's still in the blizzard, if he finds you and you're saved then you'll be debriefed and your attention returned to your body. If you die, you'll have to be retrained a bit because this will free up the full spectrum of your senses and you won't need to be using these visual and verbal approximations. Until such time, you're free to roam around as much as you want. After one more session with the guide."

"Roam free? You mean others don't-"

"Oh, they are free because they are not restricted to doing one thing at a time. But all have tasks. For those who are embodied, their task is to be embodied. Once that job of theirs expires, I assign them others. You think poor old Tanaka would have chosen to guide newcomers around?"

"No...no. So I won't have a task...yet. What's the task of being embodied then?"

"You may as well ask me what's the purpose of the universe. I'm not being sarcastic, I will tell you. The two statements actually answer each other. The purpose of creation is to actualise the inherent beauty, complexity and potential of structure and consciousness. Sounds wanky, I know. But then again you can't appreciate what this means to the extent that I do. Initially, I created Structure and Consciousness only. These were the Intelligences, every single one in existence, including you. This allowed for some stunning possibilities because they were differentiated. Hehe, as an aside you can at least rest easy that the real universe isn't relativist. I soon created a hierarchy where there would be tasks that are essential to this realisation. However because this is my first and only universe and I ain't all-knowing, I made a mistake. There was much wasted potential."

"How so?"

"There were few restrictions. My world had no suffering and therefore no reason to be noble. There was no lack of resources because none were needed so Intelligences had no reason, no motivation to extend themselves. The cynics of the human world have been saying for centuries that heroism and free will aren't worth the suffering that exists in the world. How wrong they are. They don't know the true mechanisms of it though. They don't know just how valuable it is to have a restriction."

"But couldn't there be much less of the more gratuitous things without the loss of...restrictive potential?"

"Oh yes. I and my assistants have made many mistakes which we're constantly trying to fix. It's hard because of the complexity. But you'll be amazed at how actually successful the material world is to provide the restrictions."

"So you needed a material world to restrict?"

"Yes, there needed to be some concrete framework. If everyone was just floating around like we are now, consciousness and awareness and structure would be at a very low point. The focus of an Intelligence in a state of perfect freedom would be evaporated in a thousand directions. Trouble is needed to actualise potential just like compression is needed to explode gunpowder."

"That sounds an awful lot like a quote from one of my favourite fictional abbes."

"Yes, Faria. The Count of Monte Cristo's one of my favourite books."

I gasped. "Sorry but I hardly imagined the creator of the universe having favourite books."

"I'm made of the same stuff you are, there's just more of it. Anyway, essentially this is the worldly scene. As I said; the purposes of the universe and of embodiment refer to each other. The purpose of the universe is to be embodied. And vice versa, although it may take you a while to figure out the reverse. The Intelligences all know what goes on in the world and still, the free ones practically beg me to be shifted to human form. The current waiting list is 300 years because of the limited number of human bodies. I bet none of the cynics believe that."

"I do! Although I was never *that* cynical. So there is reincarnation?"

"There could be. In practical terms, each Intelligence is allocated one earthly lifespan due to the limitations. There have been some notable exceptions though which I've granted for special purposes. However, with time, I may begin a project whereby more bodies are created which will allow me to give everyone a second turn, or beyond."

"This is amazing. You haven't told me about the religion thing."

"True. Well of course some of their teachings are right. The ones that say there are souls and that death isn't the end. Of course they're completely off the mark about the nature of this soul. It's not mystical in that nothing is, everything is there for some discrete reason. Also there's no heaven and hell as you've obviously seen though and material life is *not* a mere test. Um, which other ones are right in certain parts? The ones that say that the angels are actually jealous of human beings for their nature that is more flawed yet has more potential. *Some* of the ethical teachings can be considered a good idea. For many religions, even less than 'some'!"

"So they're mostly the product of people? Have there been no revelations?"

"Very very few. And there's a good reason, the same reason as why we don't reveal the true state of things. It would take away the restrictive nature of material life. We've tried it before with some poor consequences. Plus there are no practical reasons to reveal. You wouldn't expect an education system which places each person inside a library and tells

them to read everything and come out with the totality of human knowledge, would you? Not only would it be impossible, it's just not needed. Similarly we don't need to reveal things that you've been put into the world specifically to forget, if only for a very specific purpose...Anyway to finish rather abruptly, now you know what the deal is for your current sojourn here, you should go. Come back if there are problems. As you can imagine I've all the time in the world."

I got up, smiled again nodding and left. Part of me was very uplifted. I always felt that the greatest strength of my life lied in my flaws and restrictions. Now I had confirmation from a good authority that this is exactly what my humanness is about. But I was also a bit troubled with the Designer. It was a bit arbitrary: it could have been me in that role or anyone else. I'm sure there was much dumbing down in the way It presented things to me but perhaps there were bigger problems with the world than an unskeptical person would imagine after hearing and seeing the same things. I knew I'd have to deal with that later, along with my other Burden to Come.

10. Philosophy of Pigmind

The idea that computer simulations could be the real thing ought to have seemed suspicious in the first place because the computer isn't confined to simulating mental operations, by any means. No one supposes that computer simulations of a five-alarm fire will burn the neighborhood down or that a computer simulation of a rainstorm will leave us all drenched. Why on earth would anyone suppose that a computer simulation of understanding actually understood anything?

John Searle

By the time I walked down the steps of the humble hall, Tanaka was waiting for me. I motioned for him not to speak for a while and we floated in silence away from the place of my audience. I dived back into my stream of consciousness. The main idea that puzzled me actually, was the way the Designer described consciousness. It was still a bit confusing: what the difference was between human consciousness and soul consciousness (and for that matter animal and mineral consciousness), as well as how the soul inhabits a body and the rest. Knowing that I'd be free soon as the Designer had promised (unless it was a liar) made it easier to prepare myself.

"Tell me about soul-stuff then. I already know how many of the physicists and cosmologists were (and are) wrong. But what about all those who have spoken of the mind? Because from what I've seen it looks like the real world has the old haunting of dualism about it -- a ghost that is my Intelligence inhabiting a machine that's a body in the physical world."

"You're right, it is like that. Of course in this way the anti-dualists are wrong. But it's not that simple. Many of the things they said were right. I'd have to describe reality of what

an Intelligence is as a mixture of the various 'schools'. For instance, although souls exist, there's no inexplicable mystical nature about them. They are Intelligences that are caused to be intelligent by being made to follow certain rules, like a human brain or a computer or the universe. It's just that those rules are much broader than the ones that govern a human brain in the same way that the senses of a human are restricted compared to those of an Intelligence. These are two sides of the same coin."

"So do you know the rules that govern a soul? I mean in terms of knowing exactly how this soul-consciousness works?"

"I most certainly do. And you'll be able to too, once you die and are freed of the restriction of the human mindset."

"Hmm...what is the restriction? The Designer said the purpose of a material life was to restrict the soul. Wait a minute! I guess the restriction isn't just being placed on a planet with less than perfect health and wealth. The restriction is also to do with restricting your thought patterns, your senses and thereby your self. Right?"

"Cassi, you've yet to be wrong in a major way in any of your musings. Yes, that's why your own self feels a bit different in your current state. Without any connexion to a body it will feel much more different still. But I know you're still bothered by all this soul stuff. I'm sure there are a myriad paradoxes you know about. Well they can all be solved because this whole universe happens to work! So out with it."

For the first time, my inexplicable antipathy to my guide lessened. At least he knew who I was. And didn't find this 'who' objectionable.

"I guess I could bundle several of my questions into the one. See, if there are these Intelligences, how does the neural structure of a brain fit in? How do we inhabit a body AND control it? If the processing occurs in the brain what on earth is left for the Intelligence to do?"

"Right, right, slow down. I'll just- this is hard to explain while your mind is still embodied. Here's an analogy. When you're driving and you go under a pretty low tunnel, have you ever ducked?"

"Sure."

"Now if you ducked your head, are you likely to have been thinking that the top of the *car* might hit the tunnel or the top of *you*?"

"I guess the top of my self. What does that mean though?"

"Only the fact that in driving you've expanded your sense of self to embody the car."

"But I do this without thinking!"

"Exactly. The analogy shows how easy it is to transfer your focus of attention to an Other, even in the already-cramped existence of personhood."

"So this is what happens when an Intelligence inhabits a body? It just contracts its sense of self to coincide with a piece of machinery that's made of meat instead of metal?"

He nodded. After a second though it sank in and I was still dissatisfied.

"So who's thinking the thoughts? If the soul focuses its attention to a body then...if the body's thinking by itself and the soul only *focuses* on the thinking that's already happening -- then there is something else that's conscious. The soul's merely fighting for control of a conscious host like a parasite! Or it's just a spectator. On the other hand if it's the soul that does the act of thinking then what need for the brain? Our Intelligences could restrict themselves and gain all the fucking potential they could possibly dream of by being embodied in a car, a rock, a leaf."

Tanaka shook slightly from a mild chuckle. "You're the first one to have amused me so. That's a great question."

"And the answer?"

"Human consciousness is only possible if it is embodied, if it's done through this complicated structure of a brain connected to a spinal chord and the rest. This is how the restriction on the soul is enforced. You can't just tell a soul to think only human thoughts if it's able to do more, because it's too hard to *just do it*. That would be like telling you to think only in atomic propositions each having one predicate and two arguments. You won't be able to just change. So the soul takes control of the body. This is just like the Intelligences that are responsible for gravity or other physical laws. When you're born, your Intelligence gets jurisdiction over all the biological and cognitive laws governing your body. In essence, you're shoved at the end of the world sculpture that's being created, at the particular point on space where you are in the womb. And so you begin. So the answer is a combination of your two possibilities. When you control a body, all you do is act out a program. You follow the rulebook of thought which says exactly what neurons can fire when, how to work out what the body is to do next and the rest. So you're thinking for it precisely *by* acting out the mechanism in the brain."

"If that's it then whence the?-"

"-that's not it. I've yet to relate to you the good part. In the process of acting out the mechanism of consciousness, an interesting side effect happens, which is in fact the point of the exercise and the only thing that's stopping it from being idle manipulation of limbs. You come to empathise with this rulebook. You get so used to acting out these thoughts, which are very simplistic from the perspective of what your Intelligence is capable of, that you *become* those thoughts. You then construct your self to be entirely in the material world. That's why in the first few months of a person's life, the soul becomes so accustomed to its new existence that it forgets that it's only a visitor. Or rather it gets so wrapped up in the task that it ceases to notice it's actually performing an activity."

"So babies can still sense that they're Intelligences acting out an algorithm?"

"Yes. And it's understandable. The rulebook of human thought has the feature that things start off very simply in babyhood and then they build up and interconnect in ways you might never have imagined. When an Intelligence has less on its plate it can still keep track of itself as being positioned at the top of the four-dimensional Sculpture. As things become more involved though, this realisation fades away."

"But how can you get so involved in doing a procedure that you become the procedure itself?"

"Easy. You've experienced the same thing on another level. Remember long division at school?"

"Most unfortunately."

"It's just another example of an algorithm, just a very simple one with less than five steps. But remember yourself preparing for the test where you had to use it, a major test too! Your maths teacher made you do lots and lots of examples until you became fluent with the rules and they became automatic. Do you remember another stage coming along?"

"Yes! Although I've successfully blocked it from my memory you've jogged it just as successfully. After everything was mechanical I began to develop an intuition for it. To feel out things about the problem. It seemed stupid to feel this about some five line maths problem but by the end I sensed the numbers and process as a whole. It wasn't like I was just mechanically following the steps (although of course that's what I was doing). The numbers were *real*, I felt them like I can feel parts of my body without thinking about it mechanically. I felt the numbers arranging themselves. I felt the gradual refinement of the answer until a quotient arose."

"Looks like you missed your calling as a pure mathematician... You can see though that by restricting yourself to a few simple operations that are a small proportion of *all* you can do, you can experience a new profound brilliance in them that you'd never have gotten if you used all of your abilities at once. Now multiply this feeling by millions and you'll understand what it's like. At first, the soul is just following the rules. You can see logically how the crying and babbling of this rotting flesh you're in charge of are the natural result of the impulses the brain receives but you're not yet involved in the procedure. When you start to remember your conscious expressions though is precisely the moment that it works out the inner profoundness of the crude patterns of human thought. And of the laughingly primitive senses too. Of course in its realisation, the soul is following its *own* computations, its *own* rulebook. But the human experience allows it to perceive some of its own thoughts in a new light."

We paused our conversation and then I realised we were walking along a path in the forest. How very metaphorical. Still, it was great to be a part of all these amazements. I visualised my human thoughts being a small part of the whole of my Intelligence, like a magnifying glass that can only work on part of an image but allows that small part to be seen on a whole new level. Then it occurred to me.

"Then material consciousness is like a patch! A fix to the inadequacies of this other spectacular consciousness that's supposed to be unfettered by the world. It's a fix to the angelic state of being that's seen to be so superior by many an owner of crystal shops around the world dressed in flowing light-blue robes"

"The Designer did tell you that he discovered the worldly solution only after the Intelligences became too unrestricted and thereby unfocussed. In essence, they were bums..."

We continued along the path that began to look like it was climbing the side of a mountain. At this point I remembered the singing of the planets and something felt comfortable. Unlike some of the things the Designer brought up, I really felt good about this consciousness system. I remember during life I often joked to Clara that I secretly

hoped there was a God and an afterlife just to see the look on all arrogant atheists when they got there. Just like I hoped there was another reality, different to all the world's religions simply so that all arrogant theists could also obtain a look on their face that would be comical to observe. Turns out I was right in both respects, and both sides of these debates were right too. I hope I wasn't the arrogant character in my own travels in eternal life but the fact that I was curious spoke against it. In any case, the secular scientists and the mystics were both right and both wrong. The world was in reality an idiosyncratic but beautiful combination of the two, a kind of transcendental materialism. And I didn't feel bad for my years of contempt for the ad-hocness of some of those crystal shop owners with flowing robes that I'd met. In many of my musings I was wrong as were the best and worst minds of the millennia, but there was no shame in being wrong like *that*, not if the wrongness was for the right reasons. Still, there were a few loose ends that needed to be secured before I could truly sing the praises of the newly found world order.

"Firstly, how do other machines fit into this? If human consciousness is just a matter of following the rulebook, was artificial intelligence right? If someone builds a computer that follows the rules would it be conscious?"

"Frankly I'm surprised you'd ask this. As you already know, like every physical action in the world, the operations of the computer following this rulebook would need to be executed by some Intelligence. And just like when you shifted your focus to your body by simply following its peculiarities, the Intelligence that would happen to be assigned the role of sculpting the computer in space-time would inevitably take on this role and produce something that's essentially the same as human experience. It would calculate the electron flow of the circuits in the computer just like you calculate your own neural impulses. And just as you eventually came to embody a piece of meat as a natural consequence of your operations so this would occur in a computer. Minus the whole meat machine of course. The metal would then be embodied."

"And animals? And the objects we call inanimate? Have they consciousness too?"

"Well you've already met a few pieces of gas and rock that are conscious in Mars, Saturn and the rest. In practice though, very few nonorganic objects have enough complexity for a soul to embody them. The Intelligence that are in charge of moving tennis balls during a match don't empathise with the tennis balls nor do they come to think of themselves as the tennis balls in the same way as happens for humans. A tennis ball just doesn't have enough features: it has bounciness and gravity and spin factoring into its happy travels. But there's not much more. For an Intelligence to embody the tennis ball (in other words for it to be conscious), it needs to have factors that allow for learning, self-reflexion, examination of its own states; all things you may traditionally associate with humans. So most objects aren't like that. If you have too many restrictions the soul will not reach any new potential because it will simply be too cramped. It would be like asking you to pour your whole self into the process repeatedly adding one to a number for years on end. That wouldn't be a restriction that causes you to flourish, rather it would be atrophy. And many animals also don't lend themselves to the same level of soul-empathy because they have fewer mechanisms. Those in charge of worms don't become embodied but again as things become more complex the animals *are* embodied as a natural consequence and hence are

conscious. And the souls operating them get the perks of having their selves restricted, also as a natural consequence. But perhaps you'd like to experience this directly?"

"How exactly? I mean if to become embodied in an animal I have to do all the mechanical work, I'd have to know all the relevant laws of nature which I most certainly don't. I assume they're out of bounds for my current state of mind."

"They are but you can still experience something."

Immediately we were back at the Sculpture, at the end that represented the latest state of the universe. I deliberately sought out my home country and after a short perusal found the situation I so callously left behind. My own body was still lying in the snow not moving, but obviously I was alive. I then happened to find David walking in the chaos with a determined grim smile. From the fact that he was still less than a kilometre from me, about an hour must have passed since I was taken. There was Clara asleep and little Davey in his miniature place of abode. Just as I was about to stop myself from sentimentalising further anyway, Tanaka patted me on the shoulder and pointed to another part of the sculpture's surface. I spied another Intelligence floating beside the Sculpture busily working in her creative endeavour. As I realised it was a "her" my imagination immediately cloaked her in loosely clad and comfortable attire -- I knew she was relaxed in performing her task with no affectation present. My elation at seeing another One besides my guide (and my creator obviously) was tempered when upon closer inspection I saw other Intelligences slowly appear in my mind's radar. There must have been hundreds of billions of them sitting on the sculpture's surface. They stretched all along it and I immediately got a sinking feeling. So this is what it was like to be completely overwhelmed! I realised that they were there all along -- but the process of spotting one had made my senses aware of countless more. My imagination couldn't keep up. This means instead of imaging their individual characteristics such as appearance and clothes, they all appeared the same. What stays in my mind is the immensity I saw. There could easily be one soul for every living creature on earth, insects included, and there'd still be billions left for every imaginable law of nature or locality. Imagine being able to look at the head of a sewing needle and see the lattice of atoms like those pictures with an atomic microscope. Then extend thy gaze outward, oh gentle reader, to encompass the whole needle, then the hand that holds it, then the body (all the while keeping your attention on each individual atom) and then house, county, country and world. Now instead of each of those atoms, imagine an Intelligence that you can feel to be as elaborate as the most intricate of creations. This poor exposition of mine can serve as a taste of the sensory overload I got when seeing all these collaborators. Tanaka touched my shoulder and pointed to the original woman again as if to tell me to focus on her. When I did, because of the shift in my focus the rest faded into a much more transparent and manageable state.

"You'll have plenty of time to gaze when you're left to your own devices. For now, just go up to her and watch. She's a manipulator and her sphere of influence includes some creatures, furry and otherwise. There you'll be able to focus on. When you're done I'll tell you the last essentials and be on my way."

By then I'd already tiptoed halfway to the woman, who I realised was to be called Brianna in my projection of her. She half-turned and nodded. This was the other thing to

get used to in the non-material plane. Although cause and effect held, communication seemed weird to someone like me who was still used to having to actually talk to people. Others seemed to just *know* things. I'm sure she knew more about my conversation with Tanaka than I did.

"Holding up ok sweetheart? Not letting him bother you too much?"

"Uh..no. He said you'd be able to-"

"Yeah, I'm responsible for several creatures. So you get to pick." I realised my initial vision of her wasn't judicious and she was altered to a woman in her late 50s with a croaky voice from smoking for many a decade.

"Pick. An animal to possess?" I blurted out for the sake of making some ironic voodoo-related remark. What kind of beast shall I shift the focus of my attention to though?

"That's right. Any time now."

"What about a dolphin?"

Brianna launched into a typical laugh for her age and condition whereby her deep voice started to erupt in spasms which had a degree of worldly cynicism mixed in and then escalated to a proper coughing fit. "Dolphins! Trust me you don't want that now. Not while you've still got that human consciousness happening."

"Why not?"

"That's right, I forgot that most people consider them cute or advanced. Nasty pieces of work they are. Violent too, against their own. Guess what species invented gang rape and domestic violence and organised crime before the first humans walked the earth? They also have an elaborate clan structure and spend much of their time in inter-clan warfare, exterminating civilian dolphins too, ripping out babes from already-terrorised wombs, tearing the elderly to shreds, you know fun activities. All the cutesy frolicking accounts for less than 10% of their day to day activity. According to my estimates of course."

I was speechless, not knowing whether to be amused at her mannerisms or worried what other unpleasantness I might uncover.

"Wait, I have an idea that's just right for someone like you! A wild pig."

"Sure. What do you mean someone like me?"

"Just that we rarely get folks here who still have a connexion to the material world. What did you think I considered you some delicate flower that wouldn't be able to stand any situation?" Before I could respond, she pulled me in and stood me in front of her so I was gazing in exactly the same direction she was and stilled my head so I transferred all my empathetic abilities to a single point in the sculpture.

I knew I was a pig from Brianna's saying so but failing that I'd have no idea what I was at all. After all, pigs don't know they're pigs. This I can vouch for from my very very personal experience. I didn't even know how old or young I was or what gender. There was nothing to compare it to; I could feel my soft belly, my legs, my strong skeletal system around my back and some kind of genitalia but any further awareness of these eluded me. Pretty quickly, I even lost my awareness that I wasn't aware of what kind of

pig I was. It took only a few minutes as a pig to forget all that and to exclusively sense the pigness.

To describe my time burrowing in the earth and running in the bushes as indescribable would be an understatement. It was a bit like my first experience of being disembodied when nothing existed in the outside world. This time, the disappearance was inside me. I saw things, poked things and ran on top of things. When I changed focus back to the Upper Plane, I'd remember these things and identify them as bushes, branches, sticks, rocks and so on. But within pigness they didn't have names, nothing did. There were no general categories. Everything was just there. After gaining my control over the pig for a few minutes (in reality Brianna controlled it but my focus on the process made the experiences my own too just like Tanaka had said) I stopped burrowing in the dirt and ran on the path. Life was good. I was less alarmed then when I died. Sure, I lost most of my concepts but it didn't feel unnatural. I also lost the concept of worry, which would also explain it. What I did possess was an endless craving for more. The berries I filled myself up with around the corner weren't enough. Nothing ever was. I could always use more food. And my pigness could have definitely used more sex because in my embodiment which lasted about half an hour, the pig didn't mate. I'm very glad -- for experiencing that would have been just too uncomfortable. I still have the remnants of bigotry from my human mind. But I could sense the urge to eat and mate throughout my time there. These urges didn't make me suffer though, they just motivated me to continue my foraging.

I moved around the forest feeling the leaves under my hooves and playfully seeking out various scraps (yes, I had an idea of playfulness, not as a concept obviously, but as something my royal pigness regularly partook in). Despite the craving there was no sense of urgency. In fact time as we know it wasn't. I had two encounters with other animals and I had no idea which preceded which chronologically. Both were with other pigs: the one with a wild piglet which bolted once it saw me and the other with a full-grown boar. I froze and casually lowered my centre of gravity. No need to explicitly think, it came naturally. The best way of describing our actions is that both I and the other boar were sussing out the situation. What would have been strange to me the human is that I had no malice. In a split second I'd decide whether to fight or run or to commune. But the possibility of an upcoming gladiator extravaganza didn't fill my pigbelly with butterflies. It was just something to be done. I wished no harm on the boar, I was just ready to do whatever's appropriate. In this particular case, we approached each other to start sniffing. Only when I remembered all this back in my own state did I realise how much I relied on smell. In fact thinking back, I have absolutely no clear visual memories but I can describe the scents quite well. I could tell from the heat emanating from the boar's skin that he'd been in the sun and from the smell of the patches of dirt on his hair (a moist earth but not too moist) that he'd been in an area nearby, an area I remembered to have a similar dirtsmell. Then, the encounter was over as neither of us had reason to stay. I remember making the decision (my only one in my pig experience) to go to the place where the boar came from, so I tottered off. Soon thereafter, Brianna patted me on the shoulder and my gaze wondered from the pig to the grass, the road, the clouds and eventually zoomed out back to me standing beside her. Just like being embodied in a person, I didn't forget that I wasn't really a pig but I stopped realising it, until the realisation came back just like that.

There was absolutely no filthiness or greed to being a pig but no higher concepts either. I did get some sense of performing honest toil when I was the pig, an indescribable pride. There was something about the whole animal experience that stemmed from its lack of abstraction -- it was benign. This was marked because the natural counterpart to this lack of abstraction was the concreteness of some people I remembered from college, but they were usually less benign. Still, I was glad not to have been made a dolphin gang rapist.

"Brianna, I realised something."

"Everybody always does."

"When I was being explained the reason for becoming embodied, I had a voice inside me. It was the voice of the problem of evil that asked how being born as a child who is to die before age one (certainly before one can extend their consciousness through living in the world) or a creature that would suffer greatly would extend anyone?"

"And now?"

"I'm still as angry about atrocities as I've ever been. But now that I've felt a tiny bit of what it's like to be embodied in a restrictive context, I've realised how valuable *any* experience within that context would be. Even if something very painful were to happen to me when I was the pig, I'd still consider it very worthwhile."

Bidding Brianna goodbye, I returned to Tanaka, determined to make the most of our alleged last session and see if there was anything else that's amazing about the world.

11. Revisionism

That is the law of the spirit for ever more. To grow according to the will of God! To grow out of these cracks and crannies, out of these shadows and darknesses, into greatness and the light! Greater," he said, speaking with slow deliberation, "greater, my Brothers! And then--still greater. To grow, and again--to grow. To grow at last into the fellowship and understanding of God. Growing.... Till the earth is no more than a footstool.... Till the spirit shall have driven fear into nothingness, and spread...." He swung his arm heavenward:--"There!"

The Food of the Gods

"Ask away."

"I already know a bit about the true history of the world. There's initial creation of Intelligences and then the subsequent sculpting of the material. But after that it's a blank. How did it all arise? To what extent have our ideas about our origins been correct? I mean I already guess that evolution didn't happen because, there's a Designer so-

"Says who? It most certainly did. Just not exactly as imagined. What happened was, or rather what's still happening is-

"Wait, can we start chronologically and go through the whole history thus far? It would make more sense and we'd get through this more efficiently."

"In order? Well sure. Where to start?"

"How old is the universe?"

It satisfied him not to merely tell me the answer. He had to show me directly. Although I think he was mistaken with regards to my supposed calling as a mathematician I think he may have had a missed calling of his own: some pedantic science lecturer who makes his students do everything themselves to the dot and tittle, all out of an ideological opposition to spoon-feeding. Thus, he took me back to the Sculpture and said that it was up to me to come up with an estimate. Floating to the top, I sat for a while observing how time was added to the universe. I needed to see the speed at which the Sculpture was growing. Naturally I also checked up on David's lack of progress and my own piece of Cassielle fillet mignon cutlet in the freezer that was the Swedish countryside. As I watched the uneven but steady addition, I realised that I made a horrendous blunder. Like some corny line out of a movie I laughed at my silly self saying "you're not thinking fourth-dimensionally!". Indeed what did it matter how *fast* the sculpture was growing? In my time here, two hours passed on earth. But what did this have to do with the age of the universe? If the Intelligences were to take a break, time would effectively stop until they went back to sculpting but this wouldn't change the age. What I required was a conversion ratio: what length of sculpture a certain time period (say a year) represented. I decided to pick a decade as my unit of measurement: years were too small. For this I had to find some event 10 years ago. My 14th birthday party would do nicely. It took a surprisingly short time to locate it, perhaps because I had no physical restrictions in scanning the sculpture and knew what I was looking for: Clara's outfit for my party that year was outrageous enough to be seen from all this immense distance of both space-time... I then estimated the distance between that event and the top of the sculpture. *Lucky for me I've left the material world and can just estimate the distance by sight rather than use some weird Minkowski space-time formula.* My estimate was 10 million kilometres. It is of no use to try and explain how I could estimate such a large span. Nor is there a point in me explaining what exactly this constituted (was this sparse or spread out? was I surprised at how large the number was or how small?) because we run into the pesky problem of the extra dimension which shalt haunt Thee oh Reader 'till Thy demise. So let's just say I wasn't far off and a year in the universe was physically expressed in a million kilometre stretch. Trust me. I then returned to Tanaka where we could both observe the entire thing from a vantage point. After a much shorter delay I guessed the entire length was just over 18 billion kilometres.

"Wow, the world's only 18 thousand years old! If you're still pressing the whole evolution thing really did happen, I'd adore to see how you can explain the quick transition from pond scum to the Rolling Stones..." I cared not to explain to him if I was comparing or contrasting the two.

"I *am* still pressing. But you wanted chronology so let's. Yes there's a much shorter time frame involved. The first millennium or two was dedicated to some very quick transitions. From star dust to the planets; most of the physical world we finished sculpting in that timeframe. However there was no conscious life to complicate things

and the processes we were dealing with had the structure of being extremely slow and gradual, so we could afford to squeeze them into a much tighter piece of space-time. Kind of like you can compress a book consisting entirely of the letter q into a single line because there's little variation. Because of the added complexity of life, we've had to stretch out the same processes of star combustion and nuclear reactions by a factor of several million. So had the world not been sculpted but ran without design or reason it would have taken longer. In fact it would have taken the same length of time as the current human estimates because they assume uniform growth."

"Right," I exclaimed noticing one phrase of his stuck in my mind. Design or *reason*?!!? But I had time to mull over this later. "So was there a Big Bang?"

"No. As I said before, there was no Big Bang as there was no need to it. The Designer could create a Sculpture with some basic elements right there and then, so that's what happened. The earth was created first as a coherent structure. Then the sun and the other planets of the solar system, followed by the space junk and finally the several billions of stars as the background. Kinda makes sense because the earth was to be the origin of consciousness which was mostly the point of this material craze."

"Sounds an awful lot like Genesis."

"Will I make you feel better by pointing out some differences? Genesis has plants preceding the items of astronomical significance. And of course the evolution thing: the order of species is pretty close to modern biology and quite different to any creation account that doesn't mention evolution."

"Oh and there are stars light years away? I just thought since the earth was at the centre, this might be wrong too. Then again there is the 58 billion kilometre radius you told me of before."

"You answered your own question then. The stars are far away, but only up to 58 billion kilometres."

"But then what's the point? Why waste all the space? And the energy to move these through such tremendous arcs every night?"

"Don't worry we haven't run out of non-material oil and coal. Actually these are trivial with everything built in. Only a few Intelligences deal with the stars, not like the planets. Furthermore, this is space and energy that *will* be used. Did you think this earth business is the pinnacle? No my dear, the Designer has big plans for this world. This is merely the beginning of the beginning."

Naturally I felt goosebumps around my throat and back as I empathised with the utopian writers of the early 20th century. For a brief moment, I saw statues of human giants with flowing hair. Interestingly my vision of their appearance lacked racial overtones or Aryan propaganda. Who'd have thought the world of thought had changed since the early 20th century? Anyway, these gargantuan men and women reached up to the gas giants and dwarfs and they had that intense look of... I quickly stopped my irrelevant daydream.

"So we have earth, planets, stars. They come into motion. What next? Life?"

"That's right. I guess you'd want me to reveal the evolution part to you now. Well as you know the Designer isn't omniscient. When He figured out the Intelligences needed some

physical embodiment and the rest, He didn't know exactly how this was to be done. There was a vague idea: from his own contemplations he knew the aims could be achieved by organic carbon-based structures of varying complexity which had certain other properties. But the specifics weren't to be theorised. They had to be tested. This was -- is -- evolution. Natural selection was the Designer's own way of testing each step, making sure that each new feature does what it needs to. Only instead of random mutation we have the benefit of an immense Intelligence and several billion lesser ones deciding *which* mutations to produce. So the process took much less time than with random meaningless variations."

"The first life was bacteria I assume?"

"The simplest of the simple. So simple no traces had been left. This was already a breakthrough because it was like nothing else in complexity. Within a few hundred years the basic birds and mammals appeared. Another breakthrough because bacteria can't be embodied but these can, as you can testify by your excursion to the natural pig farm."

"True. And then the primates and humans I imagine. Just like I'd learnt but in a smaller timeframe and more directed right?"

"Pretty much. So we have the world being 18 thousand years of age. The solar system was in place by around the year 200. The outer stars by the year 1300. You were right, it took ages to set up but now it's clockwork. Bacteria by 1500, first birds by 2000. The period of mammals by 2400, higher primates two hundred years later and your favourite homo sapiens sapiens by 3000. Which leaves 15 thousand years of human history."

"As I said, the human race is 15 thousand years old. There has been no missing link between person and ape found because there isn't one. You know that each modification of evolution was planned and implemented. Well when the Designer got to the higher primates of the day, he knew that this was it. He finally had a piece of meat that performed all the basic functions that he needed for embodiment to be consummated. So he made a slight departure from the regular evolutionary trick of making a quick fix or a patch. He made quite a few changes and homo sapiens sapiens was excreted out the other end. This was only one of less than a dozen times where this tremendous jump happened, but it was surely the most important and *seminal*. With a fantastically increased brain, ability and tendency for upright movement and increased differentiation between four limbs into the two groups you've grown to personally know and love, the person was ready.

"It was a most smelly and ill-behaved group. If you imagine a gang as people acting on their animal instincts when they do something nasty. You can then conceive what it was like for such a gang when there was no civilisation to cultivate *any* non-animal part. There was one crucial thing though -- a capacity for language. The brain could finally form abstract concepts and use a system which despite still being physically restricted and very simple was potentially infinite. This was the trick and it turns out the Designer was right in his good and bold works because by the first generation (where several thousand humans were present) there was some kind of sense of society and morals and justice that just spontaneously arose like some medieval scientists thought insects arise out of goo. And goo it was, of the most fallible and mortal kind. Life expectancy of a human was at first drastically lower than the great apes. More organisation and language

and social structure at first meant simply more of a chance to kill others at a greater efficiency. However this goo produced most marvellous results. Eventually.

I didn't press further about the details for the moment. There was absolutely no need. However I did muse about the reality of evolution. Turns out that instead of being the nail in the coffin of the idea of design, it was instead the most marvellous execution of design that anyone could have thought of. Even without a designer, I never saw the processes of life as purposeless. They may have not been congruent with my own purposes but so what? There can be such a thing as an inferred purpose, just like when we say "this hailstorm's out to get us". Evolution had many inferred purposes even if there was no central one. Now that I learnt about the central purpose, nothing changed except for an increase in the degree to which I appreciated all of its purposes, and all of our purposes as natural and beautiful extensions. My prior mistake, *our* prior mistake was taking local observations (that often had elements of mindlessness and cruelty within them) and then extrapolating to the whole. A perfect example of how wrong such an extrapolation can be is the other marvel I saw - the combination of mindless and purposeless processes into a purposeful mind. Of course if you infer to the whole then the whole process is mindless, useless, cruel and depressing. The reality was that it was extremely purposeful. In fact, this, this was what I'd give the Designer an award for. An intergalactic Nobel prize. Because it was a case of a flower blooming out of the dungheap. And then turning into a magical fairy-grove.

He snapped me out of my inner journey. "Unfortunately I lingered too long and must depart -- plenty of new stranded Intelligences just like yours to welcome. The rest you can find out from me at a later stage I guess. Adieu."

And he turned around and quietly hobbled away with a slight limp. The path was long, stretching all the way to the horizon that I imagined and I watched his every step not wanting to tear myself away. There was of course the fact that I got to tolerate some of his grumpy intolerableness. My most pressing reason however was that I knew that I'd be free the instant he disappeared from my field of vision. This freedom meant making a visit I was unsure of. I dreaded it - there was a sinking feeling in my imagined stomach thinking of it. So I kept looking at Tanaka's departure, stretching it out in my mind until the dot was no longer a dot, all the while thinking about the fascination of the world's true nature and how it had an arbitrary aspect despite having more purpose than the Grand Narrative of the world I learnt about. Or perhaps it was because reality just gained purpose that it also gained arbitrariness.

After even the remnant of the dot was no more, I finally allowed myself to direct my attention to another part of the non-material plane but with a strange emptiness in me.

Part Three: Exploring Me

12. The Humble Implorer

"Karamazov," cried Kolya, "can it be true what's taught us in religion, that we shall all rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, all, Ilusha too?"

"Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!" Alyosha answered, half laughing, half enthusiastic.

"Ah, how splendid it will be!" broke from Kolya.

The Brothers Karamazov

Before I set about my task, I drifted more freely into the world of other Intelligences. I went back to the Sculpture, by now knowing full well how to move about or transfer attention to pretty much anything. Relaxing my eyes I stared until the myriads of Intelligences appeared again. My random staring was of course to avoid being completely overwhelmed -- I wanted to train myself to be aware of everyone and everything. I had to stop and restrict my focus on one or two Intelligences about 5 times because seeing them all became too much. The sixth time however had me moving my awareness from soul to soul while feeling relatively natural.

This time around there were even more souls than I perceived with Tanaka because after I got used to the ones that had connexions to the world, I opened my eyes to the others -- ones that were unattached. Again it only took a few tries to be able to perceive all this without fear of the great light (or the great darkness, depending on your interpretation) searing me.

The grand array of Intelligences was even more bewildering than last time. There were trillions attached to the Sculpture. I could tell which ones were embodying humans. They were the most absorbed in the world, ones which I could not have spoken to if I tried (obviously people on earth aren't usually aware of their other realm of existence). Actually, some were a bit more open, about a quarter or a third of all the human souls. They must have been the ones who were asleep, I concluded, with sleep being a phenomenon that allows the Intelligence to transfer at least *some* of its attention to the nonmaterial plane. Unfortunately this meant that all the crap I've endured in the world about prophetic dreams and visions and the soul being returned to the body at night after meandering through a thousand realms were all true, if only in principle. Still, I comforted myself in the fact that people into astral projections don't know what they are talking about. And communication between entities during dreams is far more intricate and nonmystical than they could have imagined.

My other element of surprise was how few human souls there truly were. The vast vast majority were not. They were enacting other aspects of the physical universe. As a result, most were not embodying anything (except for some animals but those, while being more numerous than the humans, were still a miniscule proportion of the rest). These could speak to each other as a result of not being embodied and I could speak to them, which I spent some time doing. I had perhaps seven or eight conversations that

merely got me comfortable to the idea of other Intelligences but contributed nothing to my understanding of the structure of the world, or my own place in it or my current mysterious state of being. This was exactly my goal -- I've had enough of detached learning. While I was still no closer to finding out who I really was in this Upper Plane, at least I knew I'd soon synthesise and form some new reactions to the peculiarities of the universe that I recently discovered. And these reactions *would* say a lot to me about me.

There was one ironic thought I had looking at the humans as being an overwhelming minority. It reminded me of this incident in college. By then I was completely skeptical of any religious teachings. But because I hated anti-religious dogmatic bigotry as much as I did its reverse, I was still open to responding to some as interesting insights. One of those was that during an assignment about Buddhist art I wandered off the pragmatic research path to read some random teachings therein. The one that struck me was about the realms of existence. Although humans weren't placed at the top by any means they were truly the most blessed as only a human could achieve enlightenment but *not* a higher being. Furthermore, being born as a human was an amazingly fortuitous event. The Buddha compared it to a turtle swimming in a random place under the ocean. An ocean that also happens to have a wooden board floating somewhere with a hole in it the size of the turtle's head. Being born into a human existence is supposed to be as improbable as the turtle swimming up to the surface of the ocean to find its head coming exactly through the hole of the board that just happened to be there. Although I loathed much of the Buddha's other utterances there was something that rang true about that one. By being stuck in humanity I was part of a minority of living beings, a minority that could experience the indescribably agonising depths but also unparalleled peaks. These were part of the same package and even during the worst of times in my human life I felt it was a fortuitous package.

I was ready. It took only a short time to be able to locate Intelligences and I was immediately drawn to Greg's. I realised though that he was drawn to me at exactly the same time. Of course! I wasn't the only one who could locate others. Surely souls which had the full senses could all sense me to an even greater extent. He must have been aware of my visit here and my sessions with my male Beatrice and he knew when I was ready. It is here that my visual imagination became its sharpest: after all I've spent years looking at Greg as Greg, so it wasn't surprising that I could only see him in his worldly form here.

We were at opposite ends of a rocky plateau staring at each other. The lump in my throat inflated to unmanageable proportions. I looked at him and looked and looked, not daring to take a step towards. He was also looking and smiling with an eerily beautiful and sublime expression. It was obvious that he was waiting for me to get used to this whole scenario in my own terms. Unexpectedly I didn't. This felt just so wrong, the whole situation. Crushing the cockroach of hesitation that appeared under my heel, I marched up to him and put up my palm for no embrace to occur. Instead, I took him by the hand and dragged his willing non-body into a room that conveniently appeared nearby.

Like the room of my meeting with the Designer, it was surprisingly bare and inauspicious. Exactly what I needed. It could have been some tribal yurt or log cabin in the most austere north of Sweden. In fact there was only one chair in the room which was precisely the number I needed. Within an instant I placed Him in the chair and took a few steps away from it. There was literally nothing else in our shared space except a window

staring out into a white openness that was decorated only by the horizon. Perhaps also a few cobwebs in a few corners. There was plenty of space for me to pace around though. Sitting in a chair that was dwarfed by the surrounding plainness, Greg appeared to me like some poor soul about to be interrogated by the Gestapo, or a pre-Soviet exiled dissident brooding in his Siberian hovel.

I began.

"Please don't speak. I'll speak and maybe you will afterwards but not now...I don't know what to say. But I have to -- this all must come out. After I'm finished, I'll go to the Designer and demand to be put back into my rotting piece of flesh with no memory of this and even to be destroyed upon my death. Or failing that, to be destroyed here and now, and have no part in this nonmaterial world. This I realised in the first few seconds of seeing you here.

"I'm sorry for the poor manner I'm speaking to you in, and for this looking like an interrogation but this is what it must be. And you can't respond as that would only make it worse. The reason I'm going to tell you my reason for leaving is because you have the right to know. In fact I want you to know because of how much I love you. This despite never wanting to see you again, or rather knowing I don't have the courage to be in your presence. And I'm sorry if this is all unexpected but honesty shall be mine.

"Did you expect for me to run up to you? To embrace you? Perhaps hang off your neck sobbing 'Greggie, Greggie' all the while babbling about how much I missed you and of all the great things we'll do together now that we've been reunited? Well this is not the case. I did miss you. More than anything or anyone in the world. But I can't see anything for us to do now that we've been reunited. It hurts me to feel this way but it's true. You know I've had other people taken from me, both family and one other friend but it was nothing like losing you. You also know that I was only affected for a month before I "returned" to normal life but I've felt It follow me everywhere I went. You know I've seen everything since then through the lenses of us -- what we could have experienced and what could nevermore materialise. Perhaps this was why I chose David -- he was different enough from you to at least minimise the possibility of doing my own comparisons. Not that I would have wanted our relationship to extend beyond the soulfriendship we had. Still, the mere fact that you were gone meant every relationship I could conceive with a man - nay, with anyone at all - romantic or not, was seen through you because you *weren't*. You popped up everywhere: boys playing had your laugh and irreverent manner, my grandfather had *your* ability to do things the way he wanted and always come out unscathed because he was doing them for the right reasons. The last one was all the more interesting because it was a feature of him that I was aware of years before I met you, but your way of doing it took over. It became primary because you were not. I mean that you were not in existence, not that you weren't still of grand importance!

At this point I had to let out three or four sobs.

"There was one comforting thought though. This was that I would never see you again. I guess this would be strange to most people but I think you'll understand it at least now. This thought was the source of my greatest agony but it was ended up being my comfort. The mere idea that I was suffering because this is how things were supposed to be, that I was rightly devastated because my devastation was *real* -- these things legitimised all my

suffering and supported me. I had many a dream where you would reappear and I was dumbfounded and hurt all over again. There was of course the fear and anguish of re-living my loss. As well as the other fear and anguish that you'd be taken from me once more, and that my degree of nothingness would escalate to the point of impossibility. Those were normal, perhaps most would have such thoughts. But the most pressing, biting, gouging feeling was that it seemed not to make sense to have you again after all I'd been through. After all Clara and I had been through. It would have cheapened a great majority of things I've felt ever since you died. Standing here I know those feelings were true. And I feel horrible but I'm suffering much more now than when you died. All this because I adore thee so.

"As soon as I found myself in this realm of existence, my heart sank a bit as I realised that what were only brief and sketchy moments of anguish could potentially turn into an endless reality. At least back at home, in the world, I'd have those dreams very occasionally. I'd also wake up from those probably with some tears but I was fine because I wouldn't remember the worst parts of the dream and after all it was a dream and nothing more. I still had the fact that you were truly gone to make whatever pain I felt on this account real and meaningful. Here I realised that all of these luxuriousness could be gone. I didn't even inquire from Tanaka as to what happened to the Intelligences when they weren't embodied anymore because I didn't want to know the answer. If I had to face it, I'd do so on my terms. I now know just by looking at you that getting back your full superhuman range of senses hasn't changed you much. You're still you. Which is good because then you can hopefully understand all I'm saying.

"Still I had to face The Thing as soon as I was free, for to do otherwise would be true cowardice. But staring at you here and now made me realise that every apprehension I felt about this meeting were true. I had a sense of closure in my non-closure whereas this finality is the most insecure position of all to be in. I had meaning in my nihilism whereas with this Grand Plan that made everything worthwhile all meaning disappears and I don't want to be a part of this plan anymore.

Realising I was literally standing over him pointing a most accusing index finger I backed down and let some silence come.

"I'm sorry. I know your fault this isn't. Yet I can't help blame you even if just a little bit. Although I thank you for your letter, you're not off the hook completely! Perhaps it comforts me to be mean and illogical here. All the while knowing you'd understand. Anyway I don't need to tell you what I find wrong with this whole Designer's Plan, the consciousness, the Intelligences, embodiment and the material world. You already know. And I've vented enough, I love you and I'm sorry to mar this meeting with so much hurt. I guess just like your death had this effect on me I'm having this similar effect on you. Perhaps last meetings just can't be devoid of this atmosphere, otherwise things would be even more pointlessly jolly. But now I can at least reciprocate. I can say, I'm very very grateful for your contribution to my life over the years both when you were there and afterwards as parts of you lived inside my head. You must surely have watched over me too. So I'm also grateful for the continued love you've provided. I must smile at the fact that you still exist for your sake (and because I think you have a most wondrous being or Intelligence or whatever you call it). In terms of how this relates to me though, I must forever be silent. I feel too close to you to pretend otherwise. So...adieu dear soul."

Although I sort of knew he'd understand, another part of me feared that he wouldn't, that he would try talk me out of it, telling me I don't know the whole story and that there's so much more to experience that would make me take back my words immediately; or (far worse!) that he *would* be very hurt and that this would damage his existence in the nonmaterial. This would have made me feel even worse. None of these things happened though. Instead, he slowly got up and walked towards me, still respecting my original request by not uttering a word. He knew silence was the best way he could show his support. The atmosphere was the exact opposite to the one I experienced when watching Tanaka depart. As Tanaka's figure slowly shrunk I sensed negativity slowly coming toward. Here, as Greg's figure approached, I felt negativity dissolve as I finished my burden and could be extinguished in peace (if there was no way to go back to the blizzard). Still, he surprised me by ending his walk right opposite me.

Instead of uttering a word like I almost expected (or hoped for?) he kissed me on the forehead. This, this was the most searing experience I had in the Upper Plane, making the music of the planets crumble to nothing in comparison. The kiss had so much love and understanding and acceptance compressed into it that I was numbed at the fact that he had understood all I said (and more importantly all I didn't!) and still poured forth goodness not rejecting me. Lasting who knows how long his kiss ended and he opened the door and was gone, leaving me in the bare shack with only the glow I sensed.

13. Love, Crime and Scattered Irony

Walking out of the shack I realised that I still needed some time in this world. Of course, I was still up for demanding re-embodiment with amnesia or annihilation. But there were things that I actually wanted to get done first. For instance I still wanted to find out about the true nature of evil in the universe. How was it mandated? What was the true origin? And I needed to see the consequences.

I scanned the infinite array of Intelligences and randomly directed myself to a few. These I spoke with and they directed me to others and so forth. By the end of my mingling I knew where to go.

The goal was to see some souls that had committed supposed wrongs while embodied. There was a kind of fascination with being face to face with evil (if in fact there was evil), much like a classic interview with Charles Manson. Also this was essential in me forming a final opinion about this world. I've seen the beauteousness of the four dimensions, the musical harmonies and the intricacy of embodiment. It was time to see the dark side. I chose two souls with very different pasts. One was of a woman who had poisoned two husbands over the course of a decade. Clearly she was a manifestation of the Fallen Woman archetype, with Adultery and Licentiousness thrown in. All in all an interesting exploration into archetypes. The other was of a man who butchered his wife and three children while in a rage. Again an archetype, this time of the Horrid Brute. And

both were necessary, for only between them did they have premeditation and sudden anger, as well as the obvious gender stereotypes.

The woman, Tina, appeared pretty much like a traditional Black Widow with an impeccable dress and lips that combined beauty and cruelty. She sat in a plush chair and looked at me with a smile that hid nothing. For a second I swear I saw her casually twirling a ribbon in one hand and her exposed shoulder housing a curly tattoo of an "A". Until that is I realised that this was *my* archetypal imagination going wrong. Of course *all* of my senses stemmed from my imagination parsing and interpreting some non-material events but this was rather more blatant. The man was Fernando (ironically, the same name as that of my father's illustrious ancestor who flew into a rage before Columbus). I knew that the name was part of the archetype of the fiery jealous Spaniard. He sat in another chair next to Tina looking slightly sheepish with some sweat on the hair above his forehead that he'd constantly brush away from before his eyes. Good. This was exactly what I needed. I could have picked some more interesting cases. But I needed to look at some sexist and racist stereotypes, because then it may just be easier for me to navigate the minefield. That and these incidents actually happened so my companions weren't exactly unblemished.

"Well ask away," Fernando began. "We know that you invited us here to hear us talk of our...misdeeds. What would you like to know?"

"OK, how was your childhood?"

"If you're implying *it* was because of my childhood, then no. I wasn't abused. Perhaps a bit neglected. I mean my parents were working long hours and I was home alone. As were all the kids in neighbourhood."

"And you interacted with them?"

"Huh? We played." That response got me off my high-horse quite nicely.

"I know this sounds silly but I'm still interested. Did you -- did you ever hurt small animals or torture them as a child?"

"I stepped on a few cockroaches."

"I did" Tina exclaimed out of nowhere her eyes darting toward us. "Unlike Fernando, I was from an affluent family. My mother could afford to stay home and be a mother. I guess I was spoilt but only a little. I was used to getting my way, that's for sure. What happened was that our dog had puppies and they were all fine except this one who kept crying and howling and whimpering. It drove me absolutely crazy. I must have been about 6. On the third night I could take it no more and went to it, picking it up and squeezing. I told it to be quiet in a firm voice. Unfortunately for it, it didn't understand. I squeezed a bit more. Nothing. By then I was gripping it tighter and tighter and it went quiet. I *only* wanted it to be quiet. But at the same time, I was at an age where I knew that squeezing it would kill it. I mean as I was doing it, it registered somewhere in the back of my mind. I guess I pushed it away because my main concern was for it to be quiet. Which brings us back to me wanting to get everything my way."

Stunned by this spontaneous confession I nodded in her direction and continued speaking to Fernando. "So your childhood was less than idyllic but normal. Then what?"

"Pretty simple. It's not four dimensional sculpting, or should I say it's not rocket science, for the benefit of your earthly senses," he said winking. "I was pretty unsuccessful at school and left quite early. Apprenticeship. Then a job as a cobbler. I was in a small town that still had cobblers, I forgot to say. Anyway I fell in love with a girl and married her and had children and all that boring usualness." I shook my head vigorously at this, ashamed of and trying to smooth over my initial condescension. "Then I began to lose customers as the small town got smaller and money was a struggle."

"Nothing serious?"

"You're looking for an explanation for what you know I did. Sorry but I can't provide you with a definite one. I did not turn to gambling or alcohol or prostitutes. Just became worried that's all. Then during this worry period my dear wife got into a bit of an argument with me and started hurling ridiculous exaggerations about what state I've been in lately. No more ridiculous than the things I said to her I guess. But something happened and I lost it. The mysteries of the human mind rulebook. I don't remember it clearly but I stabbed her and the kids. And then slit their throats. Don't ask me if it was all a blur, everyone asks me. It was. I came to and realised what happened and for the next five minutes I wailed so loud the neighbourhood was outside my window. I tiptoed around the options of turning myself in or doing everyone a favour with the same knife. Fairly quickly I decided to face up to what happened and you can cut to me sitting in the police station in your mind. Biggest thing that happened in town in years."

I was shocked at how little I was shocked. It was partly the desensitisation of having lived in a material world that is so often brutal. But there was more, being in this plane changed things. I could see parts of the Sculpture reflecting what he had said and it seemed so...natural. Like it happened without an explanation.

"What about me? I can also tell!" said Tina.

"Very well, what indeed *about* you?"

"I grew up to be fairly successful in business. I married young and soon felt trapped. He didn't exactly turn out to be what I imagined at first when I was high on the hormones of infatuation." I smirked imperceptibly to myself. But I wasn't bitter. Not anymore anyway. "So I researched some poisons because I slowly blossomed to hate him and so didn't *just* want out of the marriage. Still I deliberately picked something where he wouldn't suffer. Too much. Then a few years later the same thing happened. You wonder why I didn't learn?"

"Actually no I don't. Nobody does. All the time I mean. Plus I'm sure husband number two wasn't exactly a clone of husband number one."

"Very true."

"So what happened to you both?"

"In the Sculpture or here?" asked Fernando.

"All of the above."

It was Tina who began. "After the second murder the detectives finally got onto me and noticed a pattern. I did quite a good job covering my tracks, it wasn't something crude

like hemlock. But I did make mistakes and they eventually got me. They made a case, it was a big uproar. The Adulteress Poisons Again. I think that was an example of an actual headline. That I did not remain faithful to the husbands I despised clearly went against me despite this being the late 20th century. I was convicted, which was fair enough because I did it and the police managed to gather some pretty convincing evidence. The rest is history. I was incarcerated for 25 years serving the two sentences concurrently. Then came parole due to the fact that I was an angel in prison, and did my PhD and taught inmates in all the educational programs. I got a new lease on life and eventually found myself an amazing third husband who I remained in blissful communion with until my death. I managed to disguise my past from him quite well too, it was my only case of deceit since prison."

"Well it's a fairly major one at that!"

"True. But what else was I to do? And here...here I'm ok. There aren't any problems. I had sociopathic tendencies from childhood. These were directly caused by my family situation and by the structure of my brain. So here I'm not viewed as being at fault because I was merely following the physical structure and impulses of my brain. Embodiment is often a chance to learn despite being restricted by a certain degree of determinism. And learn I did."

"You mean just like I can learn from watching a character in a movie despite having no control over her or him?"

"Perhaps. So this was my life. And I did learn from my comeback into society, and the fact that I overcame some pretty horrible deeds of my past."

"And you Fernando?"

He smirked and stopped caring about his sweaty hair. "The opposite. A larger than life attorney came from the big city to defend me. I wasn't morally culpable. I had a dissociative episode. I couldn't remember. Nothing in my physical life could be pinpointed as a cause. This was all true. These facts saved me there because I was acquitted and went on to live for another decade before dying of a drug overdose *caused* by my constant self-injecting to attempt to do some dissociation of my own about what I did. But these facts buried me here. If nothing physical contributed to my anger then it wasn't my mechanical following of the rulebook. It was *me*. My Intelligence. Or so it must have been. Where else could the evil have come from? Sure I had some factors from my past but they were hardly conducive to slitting the throats of loved ones. I remember only the start of the incident and it was like I don't know where it came from. So now other souls tend to avoid me. Who wants to commune with an Evil one?"

"Is that your only punishment?"

"That and the torment that it *must have* really been me that was evil not the circumstances. Where, where else could it have come from? I ask myself this constantly."

"...unlike Tina who is lauded."

We talked for a bit more and I left the pair. Neither of them creeped me out or seemed disgusting or anything like that. But here again the explanation made me feel like it was all for nothing. I guess it made sense. The purpose of evil according to the Designer is to

challenge the world, to compress consciousness into an even tighter space so that the gunpowder explosion is even stronger. And this evil must operate by (and be caused by) mechanical rules, just like everything else in the Sculpture. Something that wasn't caused by these rules must be the Intelligence getting carried away. But so what? I guess in our world we may do the opposite. We generally consider premeditation to be worse. The nonmaterial reality makes sense and it's not worse or more arbitrary than our one -- but it's not better either. By the Designer's method, morality is all a game, material life being an opportunity. And it wasn't much different to the shaman's ordeal described by my husband, at least in degree of arbitrariness. Thanks to the nonmaterial game, there was no overwhelming tragedy in either Tina's or Fernando's crimes because it was all part of the 'act' that boosted some consciousness somewhere to a higher level. And while I could understand this perfectly it still seemed empty. I guess this was something the non-omniscient Designer was still working on.

There was only one antidote to this emptiness. I had to visit some material of substance. I had thought of seeing Clara for quite a while during my stay here. Each time I had the thought, there was always the added sense of revulsion at spying on her most-inner sanctum. That's why I was so enthralled at focusing on the embodiment of a pig but was less eager with a human being. Especially one I was so close to. It seemed more sane, more respectful to visit a stranger. Walking a mile in a stranger's shoes, I'd have no preconceptions and they would probably feel less exposed had they known -- because there'd be no expectations. But with someone I was so familiar with, it was different. Part of me felt like I was checking up on her. Like I was suspicious about the extent to which all we had experienced together was authentic; and suspicious about how her inner and outer experiences away from me differed. But it was a convenient lie, for of course I had no suspicions. I had nothing but joyful anticipation.

I changed my mind when I put myself in her place. If it had been her who had the opportunity, I would have gladly offered my *being* for her full inspection. I knew I had absolutely nothing to hide from her. Any negative thing that would have come out as a result of Clara thus inspecting me would only have been more readily resolved because of the inspection. I knew this because I knew who we were, and that nothing would have changed who we were to each other. Clara would also have found so much that was positive in me, things I could never express. Or wouldn't have the strength to. It was then that I realized it was a welcome thing for me to do it to her. Plus it was completely in line with what she said to me on That Day. This was my one true chance to show that I love her not blindly but exactly for who she is. I was kicking unconditionalism in its seemingly seductive yet ultimately troublesome buttocks.

I shifted my attention to Her sleeping in her house that I left but a few material hours ago when she first met, and uncovered, my husband. Of course in my sweeping glance I also observed David almost reaching the settlement. He had perhaps a few hundred metres to go. It was all happening! Once I eyed the sleeping one though, my other thoughts were obscured. I guess because she was sleeping her hold on the material was more tenuous, meaning I could have appeared to her Intelligence directly and communicated on a conscious level. This I didn't want to do. Not now. Especially not if there was a good chance my body may die -- such an appearance would have been in poor taste and contrary to what I knew of her.

Instead I focussed on her body. There was of course little David sleeping in a tiny bed on the room next door. She had troubles with him before but the transition away from the terrible twos into the slightly more manageable threes made this nocturnal split possible. So she had solitude. Her head was slumped in a downward direction, slightly hanging off a relaxed neck. Her toes wiggled. And of course her body appeared so very unravaged by time and life. Several years since her pregnancy she had retained all the innocence she had then. And gained some too. But her breathing wasn't naive. I found it very worldly. It's just that being worldly and aware of every aspect of existence is generally viewed as something almost in opposition to innocence. All my life I knew that was bullshit but now I had firsthand support for my intuition (like all the other things I've obtained firsthand evidence for in this plane). Clara had experienced so many things in life -- of much greater scope and unbridledness than me -- but she was unstained. Her lips were so very different to Tina's. I mean there's the obvious difference in that Clara hadn't yet acquired a husband, let alone poisoned two. But in a way she had done things that this plane may have found more shocking than Tina's "physically determined" murders. The point wasn't the act: Tina's act was of course cruel but it was exaggerated in her society by remnants of a Victorian mentality. Clara had also done some cruel things (of course in my eyes they could never compare to Tina) but her lips did not show this, nor did they reflect Tina's haughtiness.

I realised I was now going beyond the physical. I also felt myself gasp. All my original reasons for seeing her melted away as the reality was completely overpowering. I was taken away from my currently-jaded state of being and drowned in a tornado of epiphanies. All of my thoughts about how great she'd turn out to "really" be were confirmed a thousandfold, and then shattered due to being too puny. The real her was just that much greater. Perhaps if I had inspected other people they'd also be as great. But all I cared about for the moment was that *she* was. There absolutely nothing to hide and nothing to be hidden. And I didn't breathe a sigh of relief because I knew I was never really suspicious. I already had an intuition about each wondrous thing back in the real world; seeing these things was just confirmation.

Disclosing much more of what I saw there would be impossible. Not only is it incredibly hard to verbalise but it really would be breaking her trust. Not that I think she'd mind, I think there's nothing I could possibly say that she would be ashamed of -- even the bad (especially the bad) was still part of the totality of her. It's just that if I disclosed more, *I'd* feel like I was breaking her trust even if she wouldn't. All I can say was that Clara was so full of love that it was almost scary, but it wasn't of the soppy or creepy or heavy kind. There was a tremendous sense of playfulness mixed in, an irreverence that was more fitting to her good nature than any reverence would be.

To love without losing one's sense of irony. Sound's better as a purpose than what I've seen here.

Of course there was the pesky question about determinism that was raised with my criminals. Do I only love her for who she happened to have turned out to be? By determinism or coincidence? Unlike a similar question in this nonmaterial plane, out there it didn't bother me at all. Out there, there was no purpose, no grand plan. She did not have any specific role to fulfill so the lack of explanation for the nature of what it means to be human wasn't as much of an issue as here, where there *was* an explanation.

There is one last thing I must share, because it was essential. As soon as I realised this glory of materialism (or at least materialism in the vicinity of this one particular person) and made sense of her, something happened. I noticed that I wasn't seeing her body anymore, nor had I been for the last moments of my contemplation. After all, all of my visions were constructed. But I switched to constructing her not out of limbs and meat and bone but she became just a blob of essence. A bit like the Designer but much better, much more palatable for me. I could feel how her body would have looked like. But just like when I had to change my imaging of Brianna to have a smoker's cough, I now *had* to imagine Clara as just a blob of love with bits of irony scattered here, here and here.

14. A Short Excursion into the Obvious

Once more, my awareness was only that I had awareness. There was nothing else. My parsing of the nonmaterial had faded. I had retreated into my original post-death state voluntarily, largely because I had to ponder. First though, I had to leave some of the shackles of the nonmaterial world.

This time around I enjoyed the nothingness a lot more. I guess knowing that you know where you are helps, as does the ability to bring awareness back, to awake again. I was truly relaxed. I had never been in a sensory deprivation tank or anything like that during my material existence. My usual downward gaze upon all things spiritualist didn't extend to this though, I merely felt a bit apprehensive about the whole exercise, like it would send me crazy. Here, I wasn't crazy. Perhaps it would help to describe one difference I realised then. Whenever I tried to calm my mind on earth there were a trillion thoughts popping into my brain and the more I tried to calm it the more it was unleashed to a greater and greater extravagance. Because I wasn't used to consciously constructing reality as much on earth, when my bedroom lights went out while I was a kid, this conscious construction would come back with vengeance. 'So you've kept me at bay during the light!' it would whisper to me, 'the darkness shall be my canvas to operate'. Which it did, often leaving me with an hour of sleep and bags under the eyes at school the next day. Here though every second of my existence *was* conscious construction. I took the sensory perceptions that extended outside the narrow realm of senses I was used to and then mapped them to ones I was more familiar with. Hence the sights sounds smells and pangs of the good and poor variety. Naturally the little demon or homunculus in my head that previously used to be able to overwhelm me at a moment's notice was less vigorous. In fact I had only to stop deliberately constructing this nonmaterial reality to end up in this state.

It was refreshing, an icy bath without the numbness or pneumonia. The relaxation was immense: like stretching out each and every one of your muscles and tendons to the point where the knots disappear and then further and further until they melt away completely. It was also the time I was most completely alone with myself. One thing I have always disliked is people who constantly need stimulation from the external world. Not that I'm some anti-extrovert, not at all. But I feel that if you're uncomfortable when left only with

your own thoughts, it doesn't say much about them. In fact it suggests that you find yourself rather unpleasant, and that's never good. I wasn't exactly lost in myself but I felt that I needed no external world at all for the time being. In this state I could finally take a step back and decide.

There was no doubt that there was much that was beautiful about this creation, this world. For starters it actually wasn't as repugnant and counterintuitive as most non-materialistic accounts of the greater universe. The Designer was not a vicious egotistical being that punished arbitrarily and for the most trivial of infractions. I mean trivial in terms of how the human comes to know them. I didn't even feel the problem of evil here as much as the diehard atheists would have me feel. There was no urge to call the Designer a bad parent, guilty of child abuse, or yell out and curse all the wrongs that have happened. There was even a purpose to the whole thing that wasn't laughable or cruel. And yet -- it wasn't as good as the good old nihilism I was privileged to be a part of. At least there, there was some sense of finality to it all. It wasn't a game or a plan and that meant more than the most meaningful of games or plans. I guess I was an anti-eschatologist: I was uncomfortable with the *mere idea* of a final purpose, of a climax to this endless universal story.

It was then that I knew that annihilation would have been most cowardly. I had no business being defeated by the meaning of this world if I still had the potential to have my own. For once, I truly understood one thing the Designer had told me: the Intelligences *were* jealous of human existence. Or at least they should have been. Most I've met (and there were plenty of encounters that were immaterial to my account so I didn't speak of them) didn't seem to mind being here at all. All the worse for them. Having experienced the smallest part of angelhood I knew I wanted to come back down to earth. The Designer was right, only a human existence provided the necessary restrictions. But I, Cassielle, added another qualification to that while I floated in nothingness. Only a human existence could provide one with the meaninglessness to become something. At least when tempered on the current naturalistic scientific climate prevalent in the material world. I truly was luckiest of the lucky.

Before I could act on this obvious revelation I felt I needed to have another obvious revelation: testing and confirming my suspicions about my husband. Like my journey into Clara, I sort of knew what to expect out of this journey. Nevertheless I needed to see for myself.

This time my sensory perception lasted but a split second. I didn't even need to visualise the Sculpture, my focus went straight to David by then already walking into the settlement having reached it in the most adverse of conditions. It then immediately saw both much and little by scanning his worldline back in time for several decades, not noticing everything but seeing the overall locus of body and mind and of course perceiving scattered incidents. Realising that there was more to be explored my focus then darted away from the material to the actual Intelligence that was implementing David. Seeing more and deciding that no more needed to be seen, my inner gaze returned.

Despite my foreboding, or because of it, I did shudder. A part of me wanted it to be false, wanted him to be the true love of my life. However this was clearly not the case, and there was no shame in stating this to anyone. Including him if I ever got the chance. It

was quite simple. It wasn't that he didn't love me. He did. There was definite sincerity in that just like in my feelings for him. The blunt truth was just that his affection was completely unsuitable. And yes I was mistaken in the various stages of our relationship right up until the last few months. There was some indescribable degree of falsehood in it all. Not that he ever explicitly deceived me, it was much more scattered and covert than that. Like Clara's conditional affection thing, I had my own hangups about human relationships. My soapbox was manipulation. I did not loathe it entirely as a behaviour. In fact I expected some from everyone, and a special kind of manipulation from those close to me. I myself will not shy away from manipulation; in a certain context it truly is more appropriate to a relationship between any two people who are close than the detached granting of complete autonomy. So it wasn't that he was manipulative (for so are all; and I expected *some* manipulation). It was that his was out of context. His was part of a much more pragmatic life plan than I thought. For instance his hard time at his original job in the US was not because of the assholes around him. Rather it was him that was the asshole, always trying to get ahead for its own sake. He still cared about his work and about those around him but not in the way I thought. During our move to Sweden he approached dozens of companies I didn't know about and set about weaving a contingency plan, just in case I didn't make it, or *we* didn't make it.

I could list dozens of incidents, none of them important when taken alone. Together they were fatal in establishing that David was duplicitous, and clearly not who I thought he was. Or rather he wasn't who I thought he was at the beginning. He most certainly was who I suspected he might be by the last few weeks of our marriage.

The info didn't depress me. I think I already lived out that depression back in the world when I had my initial doubts. It was almost a relief, a sense of closure. I certainly didn't hate him nor have any negativity about him, just the knowledge that this shouldn't be and the sooner I part ways from him the sooner we can both go in the directions we intend. There was of course the sadness of wasting much of my time when I could have been doing something that would have turned out to be more meaningful. But I wasn't ashamed. Just aware of the possibility of a whole life after my current husband, a meaningless materialist existence that other cultures would have labeled as pure hedonism. But for me it would have more substance. So I decided. And then things became incredibly easy. It didn't matter where I ended up. There, I had endless opportunity to be lost in the wondrous world that a single human being that I saw represented. And to think of multiplying this wondrousness to other beings! And here, I had the Outer Songs to listen to, the harmonies of the planets to hear with eagerness. Really, these were two sides of the same coin. I was entranced with Clara because of Mars's song and I could appreciate the Song from knowing Clara. In other words it was my own mind, my own interpretation, that was the key to what the world is like, both here and there.

15. From Jacob to Israel.

You need to spend time alone to find the balance, the middle ground. That's what I always do, because I am a Buddhist.

God in Southpark

The Designer's building appeared before me. Once again it wasn't the palace you might have expected the average "vision" of the Designer to have. It wasn't my original Viking hall either. Instead I was standing on a dusty unsealed road somewhere in the wilderness. Surrounding me were dry bushes with thorns that indicated the bareness of life in the plants. The sky was overcast enough for there to be no highlights on anything I saw. *This is the first time I've experienced the sky here.* The other thing that struck me was the silence. It was the wilderness but no beasts cluttered the space between the horizon and my eyes. The upper half of my environment was devoid of any kind of birds, not even those of prey. With an increased wonder (as to what my projection of the Designer could have meant this time), I looked ahead trying to find the building.

I was standing within thirty metres of a hut made possibly of straw or reeds. It was circular and had a sloping conical roof. I couldn't see the entrance from this angle, nor could I tell what kind of place this could possibly have come from. Southeast Asia? Africa? It mattered not. The hut marked the start of a few rows of huts, less than a town but more than a bare settlement or base camp. The road continued through the huts for about a hundred metres ending in a larger rectangular hut. There it was. The hut of hegemony. I could even tell this from its shape due to the corners and straight lines symbolising a certain harshness and rigidity that dominated the unimposing arcs of the lesser huts.

With some trepidation I began to walk through this array of living space. Of course it wasn't living. The first thing that yanked me back to reality was the sight of heads. I was finally within the line of sight of all the entrances and they *all* had human heads hanging off the front of the entrance. Not on spikes but just hanging and still, there being absolutely no wind to disturb their verticality. I shuddered at the increasing ominous symbolism. Not only were there heads but there was a definite progression. The ones near me had their eyes and mouths closed. The ones at the Hut of Hegemony had both eyes and mouths open all the way, the ones in the middle halfway and so on. I paused, not daring to step further until I made some sense of this. At the same time I noticed the actual road and my uneasiness shot up again. It was meticulous. Like someone had swept it very regularly to protect it from any random variation or chaos of dust. No, the dust particles were arranged in one layer only: the road was completely flat. The huts were also arranged with perfect regularity. Someone had planned this whole settlement. It turned out exactly how it was intended, that was the most imposing part of the whole experience. Perhaps I watched Apocalypse Now a few too many times in my earthly life but this was different. This was no massacre of innocents at a village. This was all created like this, the heads were placed there from the start. And they weren't heads too of course, it was only me who saw them as such. I hope it is unnecessary to state where I was and what the heads were; just that after this observation I went back to looking at the heads progressively opening their eyes and mouths. The ones closest to me were peaceful in

their closed eyes because there was nothing there, they were nihilistic heads who didn't see the order of the village. Walking closer to the front I also observed my own discomfort at seeing the heads with their eyes open taking in all this order. It was like these heads were *deader* than the unseeing heads.

My symbolism had become too blatant for me to continue being horrified or even to continue watching. I attacked the dirt road and it fled under my feet dragging the grand hut towards me. This one was different. It was made of reeds too, to be sure, but the outer walls were carved with intricate designs that I could only interpret as fractals. However none of this mattered anymore so I went about my only real concern and stepped inside. I remembered the bareness from the Viking hut as well as the place where I met Greg but this was of a new order of minimalism. A floor. Some light was coming in through various holes in the wall -- I wouldn't really call them windows. And right there on the floor was the same blob of light that I associated so clearly with the Designer. Unlike the rest of the environment, it changed not from our previous encounter.

"Welcome Cassi. I understand you intended to see me?"

"Yes, very astute of you" I said with a surprising cheeriness considering what I had just observed.

"Sure. By the way this whole vision of yours is a bit harsh don't you think?"

"Perhaps to you. It does its job for me. For now."

"Sure. Now you're aware of your situation. What would you like?"

"My wish is to return to my body in the Sculpture in time to be found alive. This would involve losing all of my experiences here: either forgetting them or better still attributing them to my imagination. Which as you know isn't that far from the truth. And returning to my humble material existence."

"Good. And if I refuse?"

"Then I must ask you to destroy me. I'm sure there are ways to pull apart an Intelligence, after all I know that even in this nonmaterial plane I'm still made up of composite parts even if they're much more complicated than the composite parts of my body."

"I assume you have some backup plan if I refuse this too?"

"Well I have nothing I can really threaten you with due to the fact that my powers in this world are rather limited. However I can await until I die and then I'll have more opportunity. I can't destroy you or myself but I can still become a thorn in your whole creation. That Fernando guy who killed his family is pretty much an outcast here for reasons which I refuse to accept but he seems not to be throwing tantrums. This is something I *will* do though. Probably because I'm more desperate, more outraged by the situation than him. I'll scream to every Intelligence I can find about how pointless and stupid and cruel the alleged profoundness of this whole arrangement is. I'll do my best to disrupt everything. I'm sure the movement of the planets, getting into exactly the right orbit and exactly the right key, takes some concentration. I probably won't be able to do much in terms of physical disruption. But I sure will make things unpleasant."

I stopped and took a breath. There was a certain amount of pride that I felt at my defiance. There was in this state of being, of standing up for what was right *to me* over the tractable rightness of the Designer's world. At that moment another feeling happened upon me, that everything will work out whatever the consequences.

"You certainly don't waste time. Have you considered the consequences of your actions?"

"You mean how I will be human again and have all those opportunities you advertised so brilliantly at our last meeting?"

"Ha ha, good point. Rather I meant the pros and cons. I realise you believe that getting away from my design will be a pro since that's what you obviously want to do."

"Obviously."

"What about the cons?"

"Sure I'm aware of them. Do you think I'm going into this with closed eyes? I can even list them for your benefit."

"Do."

"I will suffer. Tremendously, as all must during the course of their stay in the Material. I will lack resources and will have that thirst and craving for more that I've developed. I'll leave the comfort of this existence and go out into the cold again, literally into the blizzard. The volume of tears I shall cry from the time I'll return will exceed all the oceans on earth. I enter into a divorce that could potentially be messy and I don't know what will happen. My relationship with everyone I care for could sour to the point where it would be worse than if I didn't return and worse than if I died. Of course I'll also have to face old age, disease and death in a most real way: mine and those around me. I will see unspeakable cruelty again in its most realistic form. I may poo-poo this plane but the gratuitous suffering there will be far more intense, far more real. And I won't be able to do much about it. Even if I dedicate my life to helping the bruised and the beaten, which I'll probably *not* be in a position to do, I'll at best make an iota or two of difference. I may feel that the world is constantly spiraling in a downward path. Just like many philosophical, religious and just plain old common sense systems of thought I may see the universe in a state of constant deterioration. Or better still an *accelerating* deterioration. The age of Kali will be getting closer and closer and each day may be worse than the last. And there'll be no answers, no final purpose. Just the prospect of the piece of meat that I'm in finally rotting to the point where enough cells have rotted that it's no longer expedient to keep the *rotting* cells in a process of constant reanimation and so someone decides that that process of reanimation should cease."

"Is that all? What you said applies to *every* person when they are born. After all they all go into the Blizzard, really."

"I wasn't finished! Yes, these are all things all must face. I have two more groups of problems, as if the group I just outlined wasn't enough. Firstly there's the problem of memory. If I lose it I may not have developed anything from my stay here. I may go on to make exactly those mistakes that I could avoid by just remembering what went on here. I could avoid leaving my husband and become more embondaged every week making it harder and harder to realise that I must leave, and of course harder and harder to perform

the physical and emotional act of departure. If on the other hand I do keep my memory I may have an even worse time. For starters, if I'm perfectly lucid about everything I'll know too much. It will all seem a bit unreal for me. I may develop mental illnesses and may even have to be institutionalised...At least Clara can visit me every week and feed me soup from a big spoon". I just had to break the atmosphere I was building up in the room. Interestingly enough I was feeling stronger and stronger with each sentence uttered, knowing that my decision was correct. I pressed on homewards. "I will also lose many of the opportunities and compressions of embodiment, perhaps the most vital ones. If I knew exactly what happened after death, what the world *really* was, surely it must impair me in my human pursuits. If the point of embodiment is for the Intelligence to get so carried away by the physical that it goes on to achieve something, won't I simply not achieve because I won't be carried away any more? It will also seem so cheap and pointless. I'll feel everything I feel here but I won't even have the freedoms I now have. There's the third option of some kind of dimming of my memory in which case I'm placing my very being at the mercy of the dice. Finally I'll have to return to all this once I die again, and perhaps all this extra pointless cramped congested compressed existence would have been for nothing. I may end up in exactly the same situation later, having merely signed up for a few more decades of suffering... So how did I do? Did I list all of the cons?"

"Actually yes."

"Surely you can see now that if I want it so badly after knowing all the problems that I must really want it very very badly indeed."

The blob left its place and started moving around the room. I guessed it was the equivalent of pacing without a human representation.

"If you do, the other Intelligences will be shocked."

"Why, am I the first renegade to ask this?"

"Actually you are. I mean very few are ever in your position: being here but still only being able to use the human senses. It's much harder than just dying. Most have some issues but they've all decided to stay. Some even begged to stay after it turned out they were to come out of their coma or whatever state they were in."

"So I'm the first of-"

"About 20 million Intelligences in your situation over the ages."

"Wow! I guess I'm already a thorn then."

"Well you can't exactly be a thorn. But unlike you I'm not restricted to the human senses. And I can see that your Intelligence *is* something different. I like it."

"Oh so I'm another step towards success for you right? A more involved consciousness..."

"Are you offended?"

"Not at all. See, I'm prepared to go back and follow the human rulebook so why would I be horrified that my Intelligence is also following its own broader rulebook? On the other hand if the other Intelligences are all satisfied here then this lackeyism must be caused by that soul rulebook. Then being a human is better because *this* is inadequate."

It drooped. If I were visualising the Designer as a human, his or her lower lip would have protruded at this point.

"Oh relax," I comforted it, feeling confident at the fact that I was in a situation where I *could* provide comfort to the creator. Even if was of the jocular kind. "I'm amazed at the structure of the universe as you've come up with. I think that's wonderful and I loved seeing it all. It's rather the purpose that I'm not crazy about."

"You don't want any purpose do you? Just nihilism. That's the main reason you want to go back isn't it?"

"Yes yes! It's like you...see right through me!" I said winking.

By then I realised the tension was gone. This was no longer an angry scene, in fact it never was. I wasn't throwing a tantrum, at least not from the Designer's perspective. Rather, I was an Intelligence with an unusual take on things.

"Don't you think that your lack of appreciation for the purpose of the universe comes from your restricted understanding?"

"Maybe. I mean maybe after my real death I'll have a different idea. In which case it would have been worth it anyhow. But I don't think so. If I was the first to have this idea in this state who's to say I won't be disappointed again when I'm here completely? You? But you'd have to be omniscient!"

"Yeah. Perhaps you'll end up being a thorn in this whole plan unavoidably. Or instead you could turn out as the next step, a catalyst for an improved purpose and all those fabulous things... You weren't really expecting to be destroyed were you?"

"No, I'm not Job that I can just blaspheme you and incur your wrath thus ending it all."

"You're not Job," the Designer proclaimed in a warm voice, "but I think Jacob has just become Israel."

"Thanks! I'll try to live up to the name in the future."

"What about the practical nature of putting you back? Don't you think it would be a bit too interventionist, too miraculous?"

"Far less than your dinosaur-killing comet. Besides if you have such high hopes for me it would be justified to further your project. All that must happen is for me to awake in the next hour in time for the rescue party to find me revivable."

"Looks like you've just gotten me to agree."

"What about memories?"

"The only practical thing is to keep them. But they will become less clear as a natural consequence of you following the human algorithm again."

"Right. Maybe it's for the best," I mused, more to myself than for the benefit of anyone whether it be Designer, Intelligence or reader.

"You've had your turn, now I'll talk...I admire you very much. I guess I say this to everyone but I did a damn fine job when I created your Intelligence out of the pieces. It's a nice pattern. So, all you have to do is focus on your attention back on your piece of

meat (as you aptly called it) that was so nicely preserved in the Scandinavian freezer. The Intelligences who weave the Sculpture will do the rest and your attention will stay fixed there. Do this in the next thirty minutes of time at that point in the Sculpture. This leaves you with some time here. There's one thing I think you should do. Of course you'd have done it anyway but I wanted you to know I know that you would have. You'll have visited him again without my mentioning anything, so go forth and do it with my knowledge. And blessing."

"Of course I'll see him, I admit it most emphatically."

"The other thing is that the chance of anyone in the material plane believing you are close to nothing. They'll claim you made all of this up."

"I won't reveal. To anyone who won't understand" I added quickly darting the Designer a glance that It in turn understood perfectly. "Plus they'd be right. In effect I did make this up; but it'll still have a major effect on my existence."

The blob floated off the floor and I stood up knowing this most memorable of audiences was over. "Goodbye Cassi. Although you're probably getting ready to treat yourself as mortal again, let me say that I look forward to having this thorn in my side for eternity." Despite all the strangeness that surrounded the world as I now knew it, I realised one inevitable fact: the Designer must be endowed with a sense of humour. I nodded and even did a curtsy. It wasn't even from sarcasm but was a genuine gesture, although delivered with irony as always. Then I turned around and lost sight of the Designer *forever* and walked towards the entrance *for the last time* for I'll be a mortal again and this will all be a dream even if for a few measly decades! When I pronounced the word 'dream' in my head I realised that I stepped out of the hut and started falling softly and gracefully. Kurtz's Apocalypse Now huts were gone and instead the hut was raised a few hundred metres above a great plain filled with the most stunning autumn leaves. Yellow, red, orange, lime, they were all there in droves and droves, with the millions piling up into a rather soft layer that were going to cushion me at the end of my fall. I fell, noticing the hut's fractals once more. Nothing could mar the joy and lightness of my decent. A descent that successfully hinted at my future descent into a material beauty no less stunning -- despite all the shit amongst *those* leaves. So I fell.

16. Nihilism Triumphant

*Beatrice gazed upon me with her eyes
Full of the sparks of love, and so divine,
That, overcome my power, I turned my back
And almost lost myself with eyes downcast.*

Paradiso, Dante

The room that I knew would have Greg in it was no different than the last time we spoke. Unlike last time I couldn't go straight in but hesitated with my hand participating in an extended communion with the door handle. What was I to do? Although he did understand everything during our last meeting, too well in fact, I had a lot to make up for. The other hesitation was the fact that already by this moment I should be trying to forget everything here especially him. To push him out of my memory, or at least to its background, in order to continue with my material existence unimpeded.

There was something scary about standing outside the door and grasping the knob for dear life, waiting to twist but hesitating. Each time I gathered up the courage to turn it my intestines twisted in a new direction and I couldn't bring myself to, resulting in a series of emotional waves that made it seem like I've been standing there for hours. Of course only a few seconds would have passed in the real world. The real world. That's what made me snap out of my narcissistic wallowing. *You moron. The hounds have been released and you're the rabbit. In but a ridiculously short while the whole army of searchers will be drawn to your flesh like bloodhounds, and you're floating around here in self-pity about how traumatic it will be?* I pushed open the door and went in.

The room was much the same but the single piece of furniture was different. Instead of the wooden chair I used to interrogate there was a soft couch with two parts joined together at right angles Perfect. This *had* to be a cooperative arrangement not a competitive cluster where we'd be staring each other down from across each other's gaze. Not that I could have withstood his gaze after all the things I said last time. Greg was sitting on the bench but not on the bare wood. He had two gorgeous cushions with an exterior of orange silk and he was using one and had his hand out for the other cushion on the other side of the bench, not even needing to motion towards it, that's how welcoming his presence was. However I couldn't join him just yet. Instead I glided around the room in an arc that curved to finish right in front of him. Saying nothing I put my arm on his shoulder. I didn't know what I was going to do before we started talking but I surprised even myself at my outburst. Virtually involuntarily I sank to a kneeling position grasping his knees. I would have kissed his foot had he not stopped me. When he did restrain me I just managed to get out a breath of I'm sorry before he helped me onto the seat. He didn't grab and lift me but somehow assisted in me floating up onto the cushion. Or at least that's how I remember it...

"It's ok. You know it is. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't upset at our last meeting. But you know I couldn't help but appreciate a certain proportion of what you had said. One hundred percent."

"Still, I had no right to do this to you. And to myself. Anyway I don't mind any more. Yes there is something wrong with this whole universe as it turns out. But things were almost the same in the world too. Back there, there was also something hideously wrong, something I knew but couldn't exactly point my linguistic apparatus at to express. But on earth I was overjoyed at your contribution to it all, and that of others. It was what made even that hideously wrong thing lose its terribleness. Here though I slipped for a bit because I could see the hideously-wrong-thing very clearly. Again though, I realise that *you* make even this thing better too."

"Good. As -- as do you. For me I mean."

"Tell me do all souls react like I did?"

"The experience of seeing loved ones is never this complete sense of joy like people may think on earth. There's always a little bit of trauma. But most souls are here with their full faculties unlike you and even ones like you get over it pretty quickly. I've never seen a reaction like yours. I guess you are special because there's never been a reaction like your one to the Designer either. Part of the same package I guess. You saw and interpreted meaning in this plane of existence in a way that nobody else has."

"You attribute this to my restricted senses and this alleged property of me being special, just like the Designer does?"

"What else could it be but that last thing?" he pronounced carefully and deliberately with an innocent smile. "Like, I was also disappointed at something about the universe. But not like you."

We sat in joyful silence for a bit, a silence that reminded me of my silence with Clara on That Day -- and I'll be treasuring both of these silences for as long as I'm able to, which is apparently forever in a literal sense.

"So you've decided, bought the ticket and are going back out there."

"Yeah. And I know it's absolutely for the best."

"So do I. This has caused quite a scandal among the Intelligences. A raucous is happening as we speak. Will be happening too, for a long time. Things are moving."

"Could this be exacerbated by the fact that I actually managed to put myself in a position that apparently conflicted with the Designer's?"

"Exacerbated? It's the juiciest part of the scandal."

I laughed. "I always was a blasphemer at heart, that's why you adored me so."

"And still do. So as for your plans? I mean when you become entombed in the Sculpture once more."

"Who knows? But it won't matter. I'll have things there that I could never experience in this realm. You know, I've obviously discovered that materialism and nihilism have their benefits. There's a certain degree of reality which makes them more real than this. Kinda like back on earth when I used to visit planned towns, they'd be lovely and all neat and purposeful but it's not the same as a real organic place. I'd appreciate all the conveniences of having streets at right angles and clean sidewalks and trees planted at regular intervals."

As well as the low crime rate, the high standard of living and education. I guess the practical advantages form a very long list indeed."

"Yeah but you felt there was something missing in those places?"

"There was. I would never have wanted to live there. I guess I lie shamelessly because much of Sweden is like that anyway. But my heart belongs to the organic. Even if there's more pollution and misery and general crapness. I like sprawling medieval city centre streets that wind and meander amongst themselves in a manner that's almost decadent. I guess that's just how I want life to be. Of course the planning part of the material world has really to do with a centralised government that tries to plan everything. Perhaps in this respect the plane we're *currently* in is different. There's a certain degree of chaos and freedom. The Intelligences don't exactly all operate under the beat of the same drum. In fact this was the best part about seeing the music of the planets. Still, it's all too planned."

"Kind of like the Brasilia or Canberra of the universe."

"Precisely! And the purpose is too planned. Better to have no purpose than to have this one. There's a certain dignity in the material life I'm about to face. It will be real. I'll get the opportunity to be bruised again, to experience the reality of loss."

"I take it you're also not thrilled about this existence having an everything-will-be-ok quality to it."

"Indeed I *am* very unthrilled about that."

"It's not going to be all heartaches though and you know it. You've much happiness to look forward to. For starters you're part of a family now. An unorthodox one but still you weren't proclaimed ungodparent for nothing!"

"Oh that. Yes. But again I can't be sure if my soulfriendship with her will last, just like I couldn't be sure about my one with you. Clara could die or I could die or we could have fallout. It's the uncertainty of it that's central though. I'm prepared to take uncertainty. Here, everything is up to me and my Intelligence whereas there I must negotiate between that and all the other countless forces combining in countless combinations. I know I'll succeed in the greatest challenge in that I *will* have happiness pretty much no matter what actually occurs simply because I'm me. The altered post-post-mortem me I should say."

I realised we were staring in virtually the same direction despite the rightangledness of our seating arrangements. It was time to say goodbye but not before I got the rest of it out.

"I'm going right about now so I must continue my original request and ask that you just listen because I need to say this. You asked me why I'm so dissatisfied with the Designer's plan for upholding consciousness through this material life. I mean you didn't ask me explicitly but I think you're dying to know. And I've just realised a good way of expressing my answer. It's all about explanations. The nature of an explanation is that it must reduce or simplify what is being explained. Tanaka originally shocked me about there being no names here because there is no need for simplification. I think I understand now and realise that this extends from language to explanation. If I can express a concept in totality then I don't need to explain it, I can just show it directly just like instead of naming someone here you just focus on them in the conversation. So

explanations can be successful by simplifying. But only for local answers. Why did I become a graphic designer? Why was Harem Girl not tempted by the vizier in the end of the third story despite all that happened between them? Why do pine trees have cones? All of these have answers and I'd love to answer these three questions for you and more. In fact during life we answered billions of questions like these to each other with each other and about each other. But this doesn't work for explaining the whole of the universe, almost by definition. In a way the Designer's purpose is doomed to be unsatisfactory to me by elimination. If there is no explanation then I'd perhaps be disappointed that this world is for nothing. Maybe it's the best option being closest to material nihilism. But still it couldn't be true because there it's impossible for there to be no explanation for how all this came about." My nonphysical arm gestured as I said this, across the nonphysical room, outside and beyond. I continued. If there was an explanation though, then there are two possibilities. Either I could understand it or not. If I couldn't I'd be dissatisfied that it was impenetrable. Perhaps the Eastern Orthodox monk cloistered in his cell contemplating the true nature of original sin or something-or-other (to no avail of course!) is a good example of this uninformed frustration. Why oh why did you make it so mysterious and complicated? Certainly I can't be satisfied with an explanation I can't understand because that explanation is actually a mere *promise* of an explanation. If on the other hand I could understand it, as I can in this case, in this plane, then I'd be dissatisfied because there *is* an explanation. This is exactly what I've been feeling during my stay here. Any explanation for the whole world and its purpose must feel cheap. Base. Of course I'd feel cheated! So the best thing is to just get on with things and not to worry about explanations altogether for they only get us into trouble. This is my nihilism, not affirming the meaninglessness of it all but rather just being concerned with other things. Maybe this is the only way for humans (and Intelligences) to be happy. I guess we need purposelessness which provides us with a blank slate. Otherwise what on earth are we to do with ourselves?

"This is like my experience as a pig. I didn't know I was one and so Intelligences shouldn't know they're Intelligences. This is exactly what a nihilistic existence in the sculpture provides and it's better that way. In a way, we're all pigs, them being most lovely creatures that perform honest toil. Only my honest toil would be my nihilism.

"There's also the question of us. I know we'll see each other again. And yes this is a comfort. But for the sake of my earthly life I must once again treat you as forever gone. I need the possibility of this eternal loss if I'm to have my nihilistic human joy. I know in terms of memory it will be unrealistic to just forget our two meetings here. And I wouldn't want to either. One thing I will have though, in any case, is my suffering. This will cause me to treat you as forever gone: the suffering I went through when you *were* forever gone. I still have the pains of your death and our separation and the rest. And this is something I *don't want to be compensated for*. Neither here nor there, not now and not ever. That's what upset me at seeing you first. I felt like the Designer was offering compensation, which I scornfully rejected. But I realise that as long as I'm not willing to be compensated I can still be me, can't I?

"So you don't dread our next inevitable meeting?"

"Not at all. Perhaps next time I'll even gladly accept the Designer's whole design! I don't know. That's the beauty of life. Or at least life as I know it -- it may not be the beauty of the actual nonmaterial world after all."

We hugged for an indeterminate amount of time, just like my first experience of waking up dead. Greg broke the indeterminacy.

"Wait. I don't want to end this on a heavy note. So I'll do the whole obligatory speech I should have done if I were another Intelligence. Here goes: but you'll suffer so much!" he proclaimed in a mock dramatic voice, "Surely you remember how bad things could get. Plus it'll be more complicated now!...Right, I'm done, I couldn't keep the act up for that long."

"Good. And good to my future life with suffering in it. And on account of the extra complications. It's what I want. At least I won't be bored: I have more room on the blank slate to do my obscene graphic designs on. Oh, and you were right all along about certain rocks being capable of profound thought, so next time I see you I owe you a lunch."

Things felt right and light again. Just like my triumphant audience with the Designer but more so. I saluted my soulmate and left. *Well he is!* I thought. *And this time I have empirical proof; what with my stay here and my experiencing of actual souls. Of course he's one of several. And hopefully many more in the future.*

I suddenly thought of the Sculpture, the place where I was about to go to in order to switch focus. It seemed wondrous again. I thought of it as constantly growing but instead of going towards the Designer's intended destination it was just a blank slate. A nihilistic machine growing in an unplanned undirected direction.

I loved it.

Postscript Note

My darling readers! I now call you that, whether you are reading this testament on the material or nonmaterial plane. It doesn't matter any more. You've endured so much of my tantrum-like style of storytelling. Not that there was a story in fact, just a long experience. But thank you. Anyway as I'm about to be put back in the Sculpture any second now I just wanted to beg your forgiveness for perhaps disclosing too much. It was nothing like the volume I saw; after all, I experienced the totality of space-time! But as you know this whole thing was a hallucination of sorts anyway as I constructed each experience, so you can just dismiss everything I said as untrue and ignore it if you want to (and perhaps understanding the non-material plane naturally predisposes one to ignore it and focus on the real world). Also, as this turned out to be a positive experience for me, preparing me for material life with a joy that dwarfs any I had felt before. Perhaps it can do so for you without you having to actually freeze to a semi-dead state. Speaking of which, I look into the world and I see the rescuers are but a few hundred metres from my meat machine so I'm fare thee well.

Wishing you a thousand meaningless blank slates to create your own nihilistic pigsty on!

Love, Cassi.