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The CD

Daniel Fetter sat down in his easy chair, and opened the packaging on the new CD. Ignoring the booklet, he slipped the disc into his chair-side player and pressed the Play button. Then he put his headphones on and settled into the cushions.

There was silence for a few moments, and then a soft chord sounded, like muffled bells struck in unison. *That's not Brahms*, Daniel thought.

A soft hum arose in the distance, farther away than the bells, and grew almost imperceptibly into a gentle throbbing. Superimposed on the hum, barely audible droning tones appeared and disappeared, like far-off sitars on an evening breeze. Slowly, with increasing harmony and definition, a pattern of chords and melodies began to emerge, some from far to the right and left, and others from behind. Then, dead center, a tiny point of light appeared, expanding steadily into a spot of softly undulating whiteness.

The white region slowly filled Daniel's eyes, and then his whole head, while the strange music grew in complexity and structure. The whiteness was all that existed, for a time, and then within it objects began to appear: figures, buildings, automobiles—indistinct but recognizably real. The music swelled, and a sound-track faded in, bringing with it the impression of a busy city, traffic and industry, people hurrying by along the sidewalk, a bus pulling up just a few feet away.

Jan stepped from the bus, waving at him. Daniel turned, startled to see her after all these years. He waved back, and pushed through the crowd toward her.

“Daniel!” she exclaimed, obviously excited to see him. “How on earth

are you?" She reached out, and they hugged through their overcoats while pedestrians flowed around them.

"Pretty well, actually," Daniel replied, scrutinizing her enthusiastic smile; he wondered just how glad to see him she really was. "What brings you to New York at this time of year? I thought you said Manhattan was the last place you'd ever be in the dead of winter."

Jan laughed. "No, not the last place—just the least likely!" The wind swirled their coats, and biting cold crept up their spines. Jan shivered and clutched herself with both arms.

"Let's get into a coffee shop," he said. "Do you have time? I'd love to chat a little."

She nodded, pulling her blowing hair away from her face, and they threaded their way through the Christmas shoppers to a nearby storefront restaurant.

The door slammed behind them, cutting off the din of the city, and hot savory air swept over them. They found an empty booth and sat down, loosening their winter clothes and removing their gloves. A waiter appeared, and they ordered coffee; Daniel asked for a Danish, but Jan (as always) declined.

The restaurant was filled with people like themselves, middle aged, middle class, middle of the day shoppers and passers-by, seeking refuge or sustenance for a few moments between errands or appointments. The waiters appeared and disappeared like sparrows, darting expertly among the closely packed tables, serving or snatching plates from among the patrons. A large, elderly woman with a white mustache presided from behind an ornate NCR cash register with a crank on the side. From the kitchen came a steady hash of frying and clanking that floated on olfactory waves of baking bread, simmering gravy, frying batter, and onions.

Jan was gazing fondly at Daniel, ignoring her surroundings, and Daniel found himself watching her eyes as if they were apertures, not seeing her face. For a moment, it seemed as if her face and all the rest of the room were a realistic painted backdrop, and her eyes were small openings through the wall into another room. Fascinated, he leaned forward, and saw twin spots of light shining back at him, reflections, no doubt—the restaurant's overhead lighting, or the windows onto the street.

Then he realized that he could align his own eyes with Jan's, and

somewhat see through her face, into the room beyond. He squinted curiously, and their eyes met—and the other room came into focus. Jan seemed not to notice. In fact, she and the restaurant had gone flat and motionless, and the smells of food had vanished. But the sounds remained, changing into the sooming of wind through trees and the chirp and twitter of birds.

The room beyond came into three dimensions, and it was not a room, but a forest: steep hillsides converging on a rock-strewn brook, tangles of underbrush along the water's edge. Countless trees rose all around, blocking most of the sky except for a strip of blue directly over the nearest bend in the stream. A cicada buzzed raspingly nearby; a jay emitted a shrill whistle in the distance; robins and other small birds hopped and flew sporadically from branch to ground to branch. The forest floor was strewn with twigs and leaves, which crunched underfoot as he walked.

Daniel could see that the stream had almost dried up: the rocky bed was cracked and bleached for several feet on either side of the meager flow. But the water was blue and clear where it ran, and iridescent darning needles flew in tandem near clusters of water weeds. In an eddy, he could see skeets standing on the skin of the water, looking down at their own reflections in the sky.

There was a steady wind blowing, but it was high up and only a light breeze penetrated the woods. Daniel heard the soft roaring through the tree tops, and saw the slow swaying of the taller trunks. The sun was bright on the stream, but the forest floor was cool, shaded over by intertwining branches that rose high above like a fantastic network of angular rods and cables. Ants trooped along a meandering trail up one tree trunk, picking their way over the convoluted bark.

A narrow dirt road led alongside the brook for a short distance, and then turned up the hill toward a log cabin with a Land Rover parked outside. Daniel had never seen the cabin before, but it seemed an attractive destination, so he resumed walking along the road, listening to the birds and the chatter of red squirrels. The pebbles crunched as he walked, and the stream splashed. The cicada stopped, leaving a sudden silence, and then started again.

The hillside driveway to the cabin was steeper than it looked from the

stream, and Daniel made his way slowly, feeling his heart begin to pound with increasing intensity. *It feels like I'm actually here*, he thought.

At the top of the drive, a concrete foundation supported the cabin and a front porch. Concrete steps led down from the porch, under a broad, overhanging roof. A series of clay flower pots lined the stairway with nasturtiums and azaleas. An old rug lay near the top step, matted with soil and pine needles, and an old dog lay on top, also matted and soiled.

The dog was asleep, its tongue lolling out in the heat of the day, and now and then its legs twitched as it ran through an inner dream-field. Unseen, a pair of fleas foraged in the short hairs between the dog's eyebrows, emerging into the sun now and then as they darted back and forth, snacking on dust-mites in between blood dinners. Neither the fleas nor the dog noticed Daniel's step upon the wood planking, nor his slow paces across the porch to the front door, nor even his loud knock upon the oak paneling.

The sound of Daniel's knocking rebounded inside the cabin. There was no reply, but the door shook slightly as he pounded on it, and he realized with a start that it was ajar. Was this a vision or a lure? He didn't know where he was, and had no business entering a strange cabin in the woods, but the impulse to just walk right in was growing stronger by the moment. He paused, and then knocked again—still no response.

Finally, surprised by his own impetuousness, he tried the knob. It turned, unnecessarily, and the door swung open another inch. The dog continued to sleep; there was no sound from the cabin.

Pushing the door fully open, Daniel called out, "Hello? Anyone home?"

He heard only the forest birds and the distant rattle of a chainsaw. Perhaps the owner was out in the forest, cutting firewood. *Perhaps he wouldn't mind if I just took a step or two inside*, Daniel thought, peering into the shadows beyond the doorway.

The door creaked softly, and swung open onto a large single room that seemed dark and cavernous after the blazing sunlight. Daniel stepped inside and looked around. The open doorway flung a bright parallelogram on the floor with Daniel's own shadow centered in it, like the cover of a mystery novel.

A dark oval rag rug covered the center of the floor, with a heavy unfinished wood table upon it, and a few chairs. A big wood stove stood to

the left, and a flight of wooden stairs without a railing led upward along the far wall. Sun poured in the doorway, but the windows were covered, and the whole space seemed as quiet as an empty church. In the distance, the chainsaw stopped, and Daniel could hear the sounds of floating sitars again, and a low hum.

The hum grew as he took a few more steps into the cabin. It took on the wooden quality of a low pipe-organ note, and soon was accompanied by higher organ tones, and within a few moments the whole cabin was resounding with a soft but unmistakable paean of baroque organ music. Daniel stopped, looking around for an audio system, but there was none.

Then he noticed, along the far wall beyond the stairs, a cluster of vertical shapes, almost like pipes in a church organ. He stepped up to the table to get a closer look, and realized that it really did appear to be a rank of burnished pipes, and the music was now distinctly coming from that direction. He walked around the table, noticing that the chairs, which at first seemed haphazardly placed, were aligned in a single row, facing the organ. In fact, the high, curtained windows were not curtained at all, but appeared to be stained glass, with pictures of unrecognized saints bent in various tasks, illuminated in brilliant transparent colors by the bright sun outside.

The table, in fact, was gone, and the pew he stood behind was the front row before an altar of gold and marble, with brocaded purple cloth draped over it. The pipe organ was now clearly visible, with several ranks playing at once, and the music filled the church with the resonance of a very large space. Looking around, Daniel saw at least 30 rows of pews behind him, flanked by small altar-spaces on either side, with a broad aisle leading down the middle of the church to a pair of tall carved doors, one of which still stood open.

Daniel vaguely wondered if he could walk back out of the door he had just opened, and still find the sleeping dog and the exterior of a log cabin, but with that thought, the organ music suddenly ceased, and the grand interior of the cathedral slowly reverberated to silence. Intimidated by the unexpected fading echoes, Daniel stood stock still, scanning from side to side for the organist, or a priest, or a member of the congregation. The silence stretched around him to the high vaulted ceiling, the distant upper galleries, and the tall saturated windows set in thick stone.

Then he heard a tap, from the far left corner of the cathedral behind the altar, in shadows he could not see clearly. The tap echoed with a brittle bounce from various walls and stone surfaces until the silence returned—silence but for Daniel's own breathing. He cleared his throat, and the echo died away.

The tap came again, followed by the clank of an antique latch, and then the long slow creak of a large, old door opening. A sequence of patting footsteps could be heard coming nearer, out of the shadows. He stepped into the aisle and walked toward the altar to meet whoever approached.

Without warning, a figure emerged into a pool of colored light from one window, and Daniel saw a tall man dressed in a brown floor-length robe, like a monk from the middle ages. The man appeared elderly, and under his cowl Daniel could see a full white mustache and beard beneath friendly eyes that looked straight at him, smile-lines playing at their corners.

"You came by a rather circuitous route," the monk said, holding out both hands in a gesture of welcome. Daniel smiled uncomfortably, and allowed the monk to take his hands and shake them warmly. He started to speak, but the monk gestured for him to be silent, and for some reason he complied, not without a small sense of relief. *What on earth would I say to a monk?*

"Please, don't ask questions just yet," the monk said, still looking intently at Daniel, as if surprised that he hadn't arrived some time ago. "Let's go sit in the vestry and I'll explain everything." He started walking back into the shadows from whence he came, and then stopped, gesturing. "You will come?"

"Oh. Sure," Daniel said, and followed the dark robes into the corner of the cathedral, where a tall oak door stood open on a paneled room with a long, rough-hewn table in its center. The table reminded him of the one in the cabin.

They sat on either side, at one end. The room was filled with bookshelves, punctuated by dark oil paintings of old men in brown robes. There was no sign of modern technology anywhere—no electric lights, no phones, no wires fastened to the stone vaulting, not even an outlet in the wainscoting. *Where the hell is this place?*

They sat in silence, but the monk did not speak. He seemed lost in

thought, staring past Daniel at the floor, or at some internal vision of his own.

“Was that you I heard, playing the pipe organ?” Daniel asked, breaking the silence.

“Ah, the organ, yes, yes,” the monk replied, looking as if he had just awakened from an afternoon nap. “No, that wasn’t me—I’m afraid my organ playing is rather pathetic. No, I’m not a musician, not in any sense of the word. I’m more of an audience than a performer.” His voice trailed off and silence returned. The enormous cavity of the stone cathedral seemed to vacuum all sound out of the vestry in a cool granite breath.

Daniel waited a moment or two, and then resumed. “You were going to explain everything?” He paused, not wanting to offend, and then added, “I do have a few questions—”

The monk looked up at him. “Yes, of course you do. I shouldn’t let my mind wander like this. It’s just that the moments seem to drift across one another like autumn leaves, and I forget which one my attention was on.” He straightened up in his chair, and stared intently across the table at Daniel.

“You’ve come to us from a long distance, haven’t you?” he asked.

Daniel shrugged, “Well, I don’t really know. I just walked up the driveway from the brook.” *What driveway?* He hadn’t walked far, but he obviously wasn’t in the log cabin. The priest must think him crazy.

“Oh, no,” the monk said with a smile, “Not the driveway, not the, ah—what do you call them—the restaurant, either, was that it?”

“I’m sorry?” Daniel was more confused than ever, but the mention of restaurant had jogged something in his memory about a woman with strange eyes, and frying onions.

“Was it from the restaurant that you came?” The monk didn’t wait for an answer. “No, of course not, you came from your home, from your—ah, your easy chair, yes? Right from your home, is that so?” He sat back, evidently satisfied that he had accomplished some feat of translation that he could be proud of.

“Yes, now that you mention it,” Daniel began. Then he remembered the CD he was playing, and how the music seemed to morph into images, and then the images took over. And now he was completely absorbed within his imagination. *This is my imagination, isn’t it?*

The monk was leaning across the table apprehensively. "Now, don't worry about it," he began, tapping his finger on the wood. "Just forget I said that, for the moment. I'll tell you whatever you want to know." But the monk's apprehension seemed to grow, and he hastily added, "Wonderful things!"

Daniel wasn't paying attention. He was thinking about the CD, and wondering how it could have produced such a vivid series of hallucinations. He took his left hand in his right, and squeezed—it hurt, like a real hand. Then he tried to retrace his steps in his mind—the monk, the organ music, the table in the log cabin.

This is wrong! Daniel thought, in a sudden panic. He jumped up and a wave of desperation and terror surged into his heart. *This is not real! Where the hell is my real body?*

The monk was watching with sorrow and concern. Daniel heard the monk say, "Oh dear. Don't be upset! Open your eyes. Don't be frightened. I never meant to—"

Daniel did open his eyes, though it took great effort, and his living room popped into existence all around him, complete in every detail, right down to the headphones covering his ears, and the Brahms symphony playing on the CD machine at his side. Still in a panic, he pulled off the phones and leapt from the chair, looking around desperately for—for what? His living room was *right*; it appeared just as it had a few minutes ago when he sat down to play the CD.

Everything was perfectly normal. Somewhere in the back of his mind, amid recent memories of seeing Jan and walking in the woods, the monk's voice was saying, "Next time just bring your mind. It will be easier."

Daniel hurried into the kitchen and poured himself a shot of scotch, downed it, and leaned back against the sink to collect his senses. His faculties seemed to be working properly, but he couldn't shake the memory of what had just happened. It was too real, too much like an actual experience, to dismiss it as a daydream.

Faint, tinny sounds of Brahms floated in from the headphones in the living room. The scotch burned in his throat and warmed his stomach, but there was still a faint, lingering smell of frying onions.



For several days, Daniel avoided the Brahms CD, the player, the headphones, and his recliner. He wasn't prepared for another leap into the unknown. He didn't speak of his dream to anyone, especially the appearance of the monk, because he wasn't at all convinced it was a dream.

Then, on another warm spring evening, he felt another urge for Brahms, and decided to try another listening session. He leaned back in the big easy-chair, donned the headphones, and turned on the player. The Brahms CD spun up, and familiar orchestral music began to flow.

What was it the priest had said? Something about "just bring your mind"? *What could that possibly mean?*

He was relieved that an actual orchestra was performing Brahms this time—the Third Symphony, orderly and unambiguous. His muscles relaxed, and he sank gratefully into the cushions. When the horns began their stately theme, he reached down and lowered the recliner all the way. With a bemused smile he thought, *I suppose I could leave my body here for a while.*

Afternoon sunlight flickered through the trees and dazzled his vision until Daniel realized he was looking up at the forest canopy and the bright blue sky. Brahms was long gone, but somehow woodland sounds had filled in for the orchestra and he couldn't remember when the transition took place.

The forest was familiar, and the cabin was up the hill, over the knoll, in its utilitarian clearing. He had forgotten about the dog, but it was still there when he approached the wooden porch; everything was as he remembered it. As before, the dog didn't look up when Daniel approached. He reached out and knocked on the cabin door, this time not expecting anyone to respond.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside the cabin. "Hello?" he called, and his voice filled the large cabin space. A fire crackled inside the wood stove. And then he heard the faint hum, as on his last visit, and as before it was growing louder. In a few moments the hum filled the cabin. Daniel took a few steps across the rag rug, and then realized the hum emanated from a flight of steps on the far side of the room, leading down into the basement.

This time he knew there was no point resisting the urge to explore. He

went to the stairs and peered down into the darkness. There was a light switch alongside the opening in the floor, and he flicked it on. The stairs were stout wooden planks, freshly cut and fitted together with evident craftsmanship, and after making a turn at the landing, they continued on down to the right. *Why not?*

The stairs led into a spacious room of poured concrete supporting the whole perimeter of the cabin. A large door in the far end of the foundation stood open, and a warm glow spilled through the opening onto the cement floor. Daniel strode across the room and pulled the door wide open.

A tunnel stretched out before him, leading down into the earth, curving slightly to the right. It looked like a mine tunnel, supported by square timbers and cross-beams, with a rough dirt floor. It was lit by a long series of dim light bulbs wired with big loops of cable that stretched off into the distance.

The tunnel before him was complete in every detail, totally convincing. He took a step onto the dirt floor of the tunnel. He could feel the dirt crunching under his shoes, but it made no sound. *Alright, not entirely convincing.*

Daniel continued walking along the passage, which ran on into the distance, angled slightly down and to the right. After some time, it seemed he must have gone full circle, and he wondered if the tunnel was a huge spiral curving deep down into the earth.

At last a corner came into view, and the tunnel opened up onto what looked like the side of a large rough wooden warehouse built into one side of a dark, tall cavern. There was a long railing in front of the building, with a gate about fifteen feet wide. A huge door, large enough for heavy trucks or wagons, was set into the side of the building. In the massive wall to the right of the door, a smaller door, the size of a man, stood open, and Daniel stepped inside.

To his surprise, the interior of the warehouse was not a building at all, but another huge vaulted cavern whose stone ceiling arched overhead into the shadows. A short distance away, fast-moving water flowed past a broad dock lined with stout mooring posts.

To the right of the dock a dozen round-bottom boats were stacked upside down, with wicker hulls that looked incongruously frail amid all

the stone and heavy timber. One of them was already in the water, bobbing gently against the dock.

This is obviously a mythic journey, Daniel thought, eyeing the dark waters and the primitive little boat. *But I suppose I'm not in any real danger, since I'm probably not really here.*

Still, it took courage to climb into the coracle and feel its almost spherical hull slip and turn in the water. It seemed far too unsteady for practical use, but perhaps when laden with cargo it maintained a more seaworthy stance. Feeling an almost child-like thrill, Daniel untied the line from the post, and pushed the woven reed gunwale away from the dock.

The river current immediately caught the boat, and spun it slowly around, moving swiftly away from the dock and the warehouse cavern. Soon the river was speeding the coracle down a tunnel of sheer wave-cut rock, plunging ever deeper into the earth. The dim light faded quickly, and soon Daniel held to the sides of the coracle as it spun and rushed along in complete darkness. *This isn't very much fun right now,* he thought. But he slapped the tarred wicker hull with his hand, and when it made no sound, he felt some reassurance that this adventure wasn't real.

The river curved to the right just as the tunnel had done, and it seemed ever more likely that he was being swept along a huge multi-layered spiral. This was soon confirmed when the boat burst out into a large round cavern dimly illuminated by a silver glow from below the water.

The current here also moved rapidly clockwise, around the rocky walls and then—to Daniel's immediate horror—into a huge spinning whirlpool in the center of the cavern. His tiny boat was spiraling rapidly and would soon be drawn into the center of the glowing maelstrom. There was no telling how far the water fell from there into the next section of the underground river.

As the boat raced around the whirlpool, the rotation became more and more dizzying. On one lap around the perimeter of the cave, Daniel noticed a rock outcropping that descended near the water, and at first he feared his boat would crash into it and be destroyed. But even as his speed around the whirling river increased, he saw that there were bits of rope hanging down into the water from the rock.

The boat was revolving so fast now that he could barely stand, and he would soon be overcome by vertigo. Blindly, he reached out as the boat

spun past the rocky ledge, and he felt something slap against his hand. It had to be one of the ropes, so he reached out with both hands, and as the boat came around again, poised to plunge down to the center of the maelstrom, he managed to grab hold.

The coracle fell away into ever tighter circles and for a minute Daniel bobbed and flailed in the roaring water, clinging to the rope with all his strength. Gradually, he managed to haul himself up onto the outcropping, by clutching first one and then another of the ropes, and he finally made his way out of the river. As he did this, he saw the coracle twirl around a few more times, dizzyingly fast, and then it rolled onto its side, and dropped down the center of the whirlpool and disappeared.

Daniel lay gasping on the wet rock, and saw that a few feet away the wall of the cavern opened into another tunnel that stretched into the darkness. *Is there no end to this?* He rested for a few minutes and thought, *If this is entirely imaginary, why am I so exhausted?*

When he picked himself up, there was no other path available but this new tunnel, so he started walking. A short distance from the whirlpool cavern, total darkness enfolded him again and he had to feel his way, one hand tracing the rock wall, and his feet testing the floor before each step. He continued gingerly making his way through absolute blackness for a long time, measured only by the gradual fade of the river's thunderous plunge into unknown caverns below.

Later, for a time, the tunnel was almost silent: the river had faded to a faint echo in the distance behind him. Then he glimpsed a faint glow ahead, and the tunnel took another sharp turn to the right. He could see enough of the dirt floor now to walk at a normal pace without fear of tripping or falling into a hole, and soon the whole tunnel was aglow and Daniel knew the end was near.

Rounding another corner, the tunnel straightened out, and daylight blazed in from a large opening a hundred feet ahead. Daniel almost ran to the end and gazed, panting, at a steep mountainside overlooking a distant green valley. He felt a rush of elation. Although his spatial sense told him the tunnel couldn't possibly open onto the upper reaches of a mountain, nevertheless Fhere he was, and the valley below was more than a little inviting.

It was reasonably easy to make his way down the steep hillside into

the woods, and then into the compact rolling hills of the valley. A broad stream ran through the center of it, and he wondered if it was fed by the same underground river he had just left. Maybe this was where the great whirlpool emptied out. *No, the topology is all wrong; they couldn't be interconnected.*

At the edge of the first open field, Daniel found a broad avenue lined with tall, identical trees. He followed the avenue for a mile or more through the afternoon sun, until he came to a stone tower several stories tall. There was a small door at the base, in fact more of an access panel, about two feet square. When he released the catch and looked inside, he saw a cramped square room, like a walk-in closet in an antique house, with a small open window and a door on the adjacent wall.

He climbed through the hatch into the little wood-paneled room. Through the window, he could hear the distant sounds of city traffic: cars, horns, buses, air brakes, taxi and truck horns, the familiar din of a big city. *Am I back in the real world?*

He went to the window and looked out, but the scene far below (*Am I at the top of the tower now?*) resembled a 15th century village. *I must have been imagining things.* As if in response to his thought, the city sounds faded to chickens and livestock, and the distant cry of fishmongers.

He turned, and found that the little room had become a large library lined with books, with a stone fireplace. The monk was sitting in an ornate wooden chair by the fire. "It's good to see you again," said the monk.

"Yes," said Daniel. "Something of a relief, actually."

"Well, you certainly took a dramatic route this time."

"It wasn't my idea."

"It wasn't?"

"I nearly drowned in that underground whirlpool."

"You did? Your clothes aren't wet."

Daniel looked down. His jeans and shirt were perfectly dry. His hair was dry. He frowned.

"When I said to leave your body, Daniel" the monk remarked, "I didn't mean you had to turn the journey into some kind of mythic quest."

Daniel shook his head, and sat down across from the other man. The monk laughed. "You seem to have brought most of your senses, too, which is also quite unnecessary."

“My senses?”

“You could have just come directly here,” said the monk.

“How? This only happens when I play the CD. And I have no idea what’s happening anyway.”

“I know,” said the monk. “I’m sorry you have become so confused. Let’s try to sort things out, shall we?”

“Yes, that would be a relief,” said Daniel. After a minute, he said, “How do you know my name? Are you just part of my imagination?”

The monk appeared shocked, even mildly offended. “Goodness no!” he said. “I’m definitely not in your imagination. What a concept.”

“Well, then, what is all this?”

“This place?” said the monk.

“This whole experience,” said Daniel. “What’s going on? Why am I here? It’s like a detailed hallucination.”

“Well, yes,” the monk replied. “I suppose it is. But I’m not!”

Daniel waited for the monk to elaborate, but the man said nothing.

“Look,” said Daniel. “You obviously know what this is all about, and I don’t, so why don’t you just explain it to me. OK?”

The monk looked up. “OK.” He smiled. “Quaint expression, that one—oh kay. I gather it doesn’t mean anything specific.”

Daniel slapped the arm of his chair in frustration. “Could you please?”

“Alright,” said the monk. “First of all, you apparently think I’m some kind of priest. But I’m not a priest, because I don’t represent a religion anymore.”

“Oh,” said Daniel. “I’m sorry. You lost your religion?”

“Oh no, I didn’t lose anything. It just became irrelevant.”

“That sounds drastic. How on earth did your entire religion became irrelevant?”

“In your world,” the monk said, “religion is something of a choice. In my world, it was mandatory. Everyone is either a monk, a priest, or a member of the laity. That is, everyone is part of the one church. There’s only one.”

Daniel frowned. “That’s hard to believe. But just what is your world? Is this the 15th century?”

“Oh no,” said the monk. “It’s not any particular time.”

“But—” said Daniel.

"Or place," said the monk. "We're outside of time. I thought you already understood that. My mistake."

Daniel stared at him.

The monk continued. "In your world, a religion is a different kind of thing. And there are many of them."

"Different? How so?" What Daniel really wanted to know was what the monk meant by 'outside of time.'

"To your people, a religion is an institution, a hierarchy of wisdom and insight, an authority on the story of creation and man's role in it."

"OK, that sounds like a fair definition."

"Religions, by and large, are open to all the people, and anyone can come and learn the ideas and practices, and join the faith."

"Pretty much," said Daniel. "Some religions are a bit more inclusive than others, but I'm with you so far." *Although I don't know why we're talking about this.*

The monk smiled and said, "But where do these religions come from?"

Daniel thought about it. "I suppose they always start with someone who's an emissary from God," he said.

"But what does that really mean?" said the monk.

"I don't know. I've never met a prophet or a saint. Or a savior. I'm not sure I'd even know if I did meet one."

"What do these luminaries all have in common?" asked the monk.

"Well, they all have different theories," said Daniel. "I guess the only thing they have in common is thinking they know the answers, even though they'd probably all disagree with each other."

"You really think they would all disagree?" said the monk.

"Wouldn't they?" Daniel spread his arms. "Where I come from, religions are always arguing with each other, sometimes to the point of starting wars. Or worse."

"Exactly," said the monk. "Religions are always arguing with one another. But we were talking about the luminaries, the founders."

"Well, I don't know. They're all dead, so they don't get to argue."

"The thing is," said the monk, "there's a big difference between the founder and the religion."

"There is?" said Daniel. "Like what?"

"The luminary who starts a religion has had an experience," said the monk. "He knows something. He's seen something. He's trying to help."

"And the religion?"

"The religion is an institution of ideas, a structured confabulation of dogma. When the luminary passes on, his followers have only his ideas, not his vision."

"So the religion has to interpret what the founder was saying?"

"Oh no, it's much worse than that," said the monk. "The religion isn't a person, it's an organization with members. An organization isn't anything like a person!"

"Alright," said Daniel. "You're saying the members of a religion are following a group instead of an individual."

"No, not that," said the monk, looking mildly frustrated. He scratched his tonsure and then said, "A real religion is founded on experience, the spiritual experience of someone who can see deeper into things. But this experience is his, and it's not part of the religion at all."

The monk paused. Daniel nodded, and then the monk continued. "The experience of the saint, luminary, savior, avatar—this is what other people see, or sense, or respond to. This is what they try to perpetuate. They create an institution, a religion, to preserve what they saw in the saint."

"Well," said Daniel, "what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing is wrong with it," said the monk, "But the thing they have created simply isn't the same thing the luminary was experiencing. Not in any way."

"OK," said Daniel. "So the religion is a set of ideas based on the experience of the founder?"

"Yes," said the monk. "But the experience itself is missing. The people go to the religion instead of to the experience. The saint expounded his actual, personal, spiritual experience, but the followers aren't having that experience—they're just talking about it."

The monk paused for a long time.

Daniel waited.

"It's two completely different things," said the monk.

"I guess it's inevitable," said Daniel.

"I'm afraid so. It's only on the basis of a really profound, revelatory experience that a true religion can be created, but the experience of *religion*

isn't what creates one. Once the religion is created, its members must either have the founder's experience, or 'join the institution.' It's a tragic alternative."

"Is that why you lost your religion?" asked Daniel.

"As I said before," said the monk, "I didn't lose anything—I had the experience."

"The experience of creating a religion?" said Daniel.

"No, the experience which the saint had, the saint who created my religion."

"Wow," said Daniel. "How do you know it's the same experience?"

"It's obvious," said the monk. "But it takes a lifetime to explain that." He paused. "And the explanation is no better than another religion. It's just a description of ideas, concepts, distinctions, and it doesn't convey the experience. That's the whole point—it doesn't convey anything."

Daniel considered for a while. "So it must be very frustrating to be a saint," he said. "Never being able to share what you've experienced."

"It would be frustrating," said the monk, "if the experience itself weren't so divine. But the urge to share it, for many saints, is what leads to explaining it, and that leads to followers, and that leads to a set of tenets and beliefs. And it's those abstractions, concepts, that get institutionalized and become a religion. And by then, the saint is long gone."

"It sounds like religion itself is ultimately pointless, then," said Daniel.

"Oh my goodness no!" exclaimed the monk. "Not pointless at all. Most religions are full of wisdom and useful knowledge that can help the people avoid disaster and suffering. And a good religion can lead its people in the direction of that original experience. At least some of the people. If the dogma doesn't get too stultifying."

Daniel thought for a while. This was interesting, philosophically, but it didn't seem to have anything to do with his repeated journeys into other worlds. Including this particular world, with a monk at the end of a tunnel.

Daniel said, "Why are you're telling me all this?"

The monk smiled. "You asked me to explain why you're here, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Daniel. "But this doesn't address that question at all!"

"But it does," said the monk. "Telling you all this—that *is* why you're here."

"Really?" said Daniel. "But why the tunnels? Why the cabin in the forest? What were Jan and I doing in the city, last time? You're not giving me any real answers at all." He paused. "And why me? Why tell me?"

"Why not?" said the monk. "We are all in the same predicament, trying to build insight on a foundation of ignorance. That will never work. Knowledge comes from cognition inside and experience outside."

"But you didn't say why I have to go through all this fantasy business to get to talk to you."

"My heavens, you don't. You really don't."

"Then why does it keep happening?"

"It's not happening. Nothing ever happens outside your own thoughts."

"It's all a projection?"

"Absolutely. What else could it be?"

"Well, this weird world here may be a projection. That is, it must be just my imagination. But the real world isn't. It's—well, it's too real. In the real world, I do get wet, and when I stamp my foot it makes a sound, and when I do something, there are consequences."

"Oh, yes, there are always consequences," said the monk.

"Then it's not imaginary!"

"No, it's not *merely* imaginary. But it's still your creation."

"And the consequences of my actions?"

"All, all still your creation."

"Then how can I tell the difference between this fantasy journey into your world, and the real world I actually live in?"

"You can't. You can't tell the difference between the real world and a dream, either."

"Of course I can!"

"Not when you're dreaming."

Daniel put his head in his hands. "You're talking me in circles. I can't make sense out of this."

"You shouldn't expect to make sense out of it. You're using your brain when you should have left it behind."

Daniel groaned. "Then what do I do? You make it seem so important—so it should at least make sense, shouldn't it?"

"Not really. It's very complex, very rich, very much beyond anything brains can handle."

"So I'll never understand it? Doesn't anybody ever understand it?"

"You're confusing understanding and knowing."

"What's the difference?"

"You think that if you can't explain it, then you don't understand it. But that doesn't mean you can't know it."

Daniel fell silent. He was running out of words.

"Words don't help," said the monk. "Not after a certain point, anyway."

"Then what can I do?"

"You need them both. Understanding *and* knowing."

"But how do I get them?"

"You don't go somewhere and acquire them," said the monk with a chuckle. "You already have them."

"No I don't!" said Daniel.

"Sure you do. You know, in your heart, that you've been searching for something. And if you've been searching, then on some level you know what it is. Otherwise you wouldn't recognize it, and you wouldn't be able to search for it."

"I suppose so," said Daniel.

"And you have the experience," said the monk.

"Wow, that's not what I would say. I don't even know what this special experience is supposed to be!"

"It's not a special experience," said the monk. "It's just you, inside, seeing who you really are."

"Is that all? Inside I'm just me. I don't see how that could spark any great religions."

"Yes, they do become a distraction," said the monk.

"To say the least," said Daniel.

"Those two things—" the monk said, and paused.

"What I'm searching for?" said Daniel.

"Yes. And—" the monk paused again.

"Who I really am?" Daniel wasn't even sure what that meant.

"Exactly. Who you are inside," said the monk. "Those two things."

"What about them?"

"They're the same thing," said the monk. "This is gnosis. It's not the end of some fantastic journey or convoluted reasoning. It's self-evident."

Daniel tried to think this through, but so much philosophy had strained his brain and he didn't have any ideas left. His mind was a blank.

"I guess I don't get it," he said, but then he realized the monk was gone. The room had reverted to the closet-like chamber in the tower. He opened the door alongside the window, and stepped through into a larger antique paneled room. But when he turned around after closing the door, he found himself in his own living room, standing by the armchair.

The CD player was still running. Confused, he wondered for a moment how a CD got into 15th century England, or wherever it was he'd just been. Clearly, it hadn't been England. Now, outside the window, he could see his lawn and driveway. The door he just came through wasn't there.

He turned, and sat down in the chair, and put the headphones back on.

What I've been searching for, he thought. An image formed in his mind, and then immediately dissolved. It wasn't something one could imagine: only recognize. *And this is who I really am?* He looked inside again, at the silent fullness from which his thoughts arose, a place outside thinking, outside space and time, outside language and concepts: it was like nothing. *These are the same thing*, the monk had said. *This is gnosis.*

The last notes of the Brahms symphony faded, and the CD slowly spun to a stop.

Ω