A NEW KIND

OF HAPPINESS

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I don’t remember who they were. But some time in the mid 1950s, when I was growing up on the south side of Chicago, three men, friends of my father I suppose, showed up at our house late one afternoon and did something I’ve never quite forgotten. After chatting pleasantly with my father for a few minutes, they asked him if they could make use of an old coffee table we kept in the corner of our living room. It was pushed up against a wall because one of its legs had been broken off. I’m not sure why we hadn’t thrown it away. But one of the men insisted that it was perfect for their purposes. I dragged it into the center of the room. Then they pulled the shades and we all sat down on the floor with our hands about an inch above the table.

They told me that the table would soon be moving on its own, and sure enough, after a few minutes of weird silence, it began to shake, as if in the midst of an earthquake, even though no one was touching it and the floor was perfectly still. Thirty seconds later the shaking stopped, and one of the men addressed the table, speaking quite casually, as if he were talking to a friend, asking it to indicate the ages of everyone present. The table began tapping the floor, pausing at seven—my age at the time—and pausing, correctly, after much longer intervals for my
father and the others. I sat there smiling, astonished. I couldn’t think of anything to say. My father made some kind of joke and the men laughed. Then they went away.

I’m sure my father discussed the situation with me afterwards, but I don’t recall what he said. All I know is that I was left with a mysterious feeling that has been with me all my life. I’m not religious, and I don’t subscribe to any of the New Age attempts to account for “paranormal phenomena” like the one described above. Indeed, I think all existing pictures of the universe are inaccurate, misguided, and ultimately boring. History shows that people seem to need interpretations and will do almost anything to explain what they don’t understand. But why should we force the world to make sense if that’s not what it makes?

Of course, these thoughts were not in my mind as a boy growing up in Chicago, and they weren’t in my mind ten years later, my final year in high school, as I sat in French class tuning out the teacher, staring at the floor, where panels of light and shade were thrown by dusty venetian blinds. I loved the way those panels moved with even the slightest breeze, and I often became so immersed in that trembling motion that I forgot where I was. My hand would remain on the open page of my notebook, so it looked like I might be learning, but instead of taking notes I was making abstract sketches, without paying any attention to what I was drawing. But one time, about a week before graduation, I was startled to find that instead of the usual squares and cubes and pyramids, I’d actually made a detailed illustration, a cobbled street of old shops and brick apartment buildings, a picture so vividly rendered that I
couldn’t believe my own hand had produced it. Somehow I
had even managed to capture the opposite side of the street,
sketching its partial reflection in the shop fronts. Where had
I learned to draw so well? Even with careful effort, I’d
never before been able to produce such an accurate picture
of a place. In fact, I’d never drawn a picture that looked
like much of anything. I stared at the page, imagining that
beneath or perhaps within its blank surface all the possible
tables in the world were waiting to happen, needing only
the proper atmosphere to manifest themselves.

The bell rang, ending class. The teacher, Mr Blanc,
gave me a dirty look and told me and a guy named Gary,
who’d been sitting on the other side of the room, to stay
after class. He told us our lack of attention was insulting
and unacceptable. He made us open our notebooks and
show him our notes for the day. I was shocked when I saw
that Gary’s page was exactly the same as mine, the same
carefully rendered cobbled street of shops and apartment
buildings, the same opposite side of the street reflected in
the shop front windows. At first Mr Blanc was merely
annoyed. But when he thought about the exact replication,
he wanted an explanation. Gary and I just stood there
looking stupid, shrugging repeatedly, truthfully insisting
that we barely knew each other. Had we seen the same
picture somewhere and by coincidence copied it into our
notebooks at exactly the same time? We both said no, that
we’d never seen such a picture and had never been to a
place with a cobbled street. Mr Blanc shook his head,
stared out the window for a minute, then gave us extra
home work, even though graduation was only a week away
and none the other teachers were assigning any home work at all.

I assumed that Gary shared my amazement and would want to discuss the situation after Mr Blanc dismissed us. But once we left the room and began walking down the corridor, he seemed annoyed when I started asking questions. Aside from telling me that he’d never seriously tried to draw anything, he did little more than shrug, nod, and shake his head. Then he said he was late for baseball practice and hurried away. We graduated the following week and never met again.

But in college I met many people who were fascinated by the story and had similar stories to tell. One story led to another, one person led to another, and six years later, through a series of friends and connections, I was living in a spiritual commune in Baltimore, one of many that began to appear all over the world in the late sixties. One day I was walking through an unfamiliar section of the city. I’m not sure where I was going, though I must have known at the time. After turning a number of corners, I realized I was lost, and with each attempt at retracing my steps I became even more unsure of where I was. To make things worse, it was getting dark, and the warehouses and factories that filled the neighborhood looked like cardboard props, flattened in silhouette against the deepening red of the winter sky.

Suddenly someone stepped out of one of the few residential buildings in the area, a decrepit three-story brownstone. Before I could ask him where I was, he told me to come inside because he had something important to show me. I told myself not to follow him, that the situation
might be dangerous, but I found myself going up the stairs with him anyway, all the way to a small room on the third floor. He offered me a cup of coffee, and we sat down at a small table by a window looking out over gabled housetops and water towers toward the blinking red lights of an oil refinery, and beyond that, toward the gliding lights of small boats in the harbor. We sat there for two minutes without saying anything. There may have been jazz playing faintly in the background, perhaps from the room below or perhaps from the street, John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, though at the time I didn’t know enough about jazz to identify what I was hearing. But that didn’t stop me from listening to it so carefully that the sound of my companion’s voice was jarring and intrusive, like a raging unicorn stomping through a meadow of human bones.

He said he’d been expecting me for a long time. When I asked him to explain, he got up and took a large envelope from the top drawer of a desk across the room. Inside was a folded map that he placed on the table in the fading light, opening it carefully. I wasn’t sure what I was looking at, and he seemed surprised that I wasn’t reacting with joy and astonishment. It occurred to me that I’d better try to simulate the response I assumed he was looking for, so I nodded slowly and gave him a faint but knowing smile. He nodded slowly and gave me a faint but knowing smile.

Two minutes later I was back on the street, the map was back in the envelope, tucked my under my arm, and I was lost again, wandering through dark industrial streets that seemed to lead nowhere. Yet now that I had the map, the feeling of being lost was not unpleasant, as if the mere presence of a chart was enough to make the unknown
landscape less threatening. It apparently made no difference that the map had nothing to do with Baltimore, that it seemed to have been drawn thousands of years before Baltimore even existed. All that mattered was the evidence that the human mind could transform three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional diagram, that the chaos and complexity of experience could be redesigned as an elegant abstraction, something so carefully drawn that it might have been a work of art. I began to enjoy not knowing where I was, immersing myself in the dismal brick structures I was surrounded by, the silhouettes of factory smokestacks, the crescent moonlight smeared on cracked and grimy windows, the occasional sounds of traffic in the distance.

When I finally got back to the commune house a few hours before dawn, the others were fascinated by the map. They seemed to understand exactly what they were looking at, talking in hushed reverential tones. I would have asked for an explanation, but I was desperately tired and quickly fell asleep. When I woke several hours later and asked about the map, no one seemed to know what I was talking about. I would have been more assertive in demanding an explanation, but I was afraid they might think I was crazy, so I let the matter drop. Three weeks later, someone found out that the leader of the commune had CIA connections, and I got away from that place as fast as I could. Thinking back on it now, I'm embarrassed that I didn't more quickly see the connection between the authoritarian qualities of our leader—he insisted on being called Master—and the crypto-fascism that the CIA is known for.
Today I assume that any group that operates with a hierarchical structure needs to be challenged or avoided. But at the time I was open to just about anything that promised an encounter with the unknowable, or at least with the unknown. Though I see now that I was looking for it in the wrong place, the fact remains that by making an honest mistake I set myself up for at least one strange experience I would have otherwise missed out on. In my bleaker moments, I tell myself that the commune was a waste of time, that I should have learned at the time to start shaping my life more productively. But even if the experience was in fact unnecessary, changing nothing leading nowhere, does that make it meaningless?

This question triggered a fierce debate at a Halloween party several years later. Heavily drunk, I told a guy dressed as a pirate that the most important things are the ones we can’t interpret or classify. He told me that such an attitude was a clear sign of a weak and lazy mind. A long argument followed, and I ended up sober and depressed, feeling as if he’d made me look like a fool in front a girl I was trying to impress. But three days later I heard that he’d been struck by lightning. I took this as confirmation that my point of view was correct, that we should value most highly those events we can’t readily grasp and place in a meaningful context.

This reminds me of someone I met soon after I left the commune, a guy selling his own specially prepared cough medicine. I never tried it, but I did experiment with a diet he proposed, living solely on peanuts and milk for six months. I don’t recall the results, but I do recall that this man—I’ll call him Andy—may have been the only person I
ever met who routinely said upbeat things even though he was chronically depressed. It was unnerving. So unnerving, in fact, that I wasn’t entirely surprised when one day in late March 1973, I found him in a sinister predicament.

I was taking a walk in the wooded park near the apartment I was living in, when I heard mean laughter coming from a shady willow grove beside a river. Turning off the path to investigate, I saw people scattering. Then I saw Andy staggering in circles, barely able to stand. I called to him but he seemed unaware of my presence, even when I was only thirty feet away. I noticed that a circle had been drawn with lime in the grass around him, and that— for reasons I still don’t understand—I was unable to enter that circle, just as Andy was unable to leave it. For the next fifteen minutes I tried to get his attention, yelling and gesturing. But he just kept staggering in circles, waving his arms like a wounded bird, convulsively shaking his head. I tried many times to enter the circle. But something kept stopping me from taking another step, though I knew there was nothing there, not even a force field of the kind you might see in a science fiction movie.

It was only by accident that the problem was resolved. On my final attempt to penetrate the circle, I slipped on the lime and erased a small segment. Suddenly Andy was fine. He stood up straight, the blurred look disappeared from his eyes, and he called to me in surprise, not sure why we were there. Both of us crossed the boundary of the broken circle without effort. He had no idea what was going on. He knew only that earlier in the day he had overheard four young men in a coffee shop discussing a battered book on the table between them. When he asked them about it, they
were more than willing to include him in their conversation, which was focused on magic and other demonic arts, though the young men were firm in their rejection of the term *demonic*, insisting that magic and related practices were only demonic from a Christian point of view, and had actually been significant agents of human evolution thousands of years before the teachings of Christ. When Andy equated magic with the stage performers who pass themselves off as magicians today, the young men insisted on giving him a demonstration. The last thing Andy remembered was leaving the café and walking into the park, and then a series of dissolving impressions, each seeming to exist only to be replaced by something else. When I told him what I'd seen he became disturbed, hostile and defensive, and finally stormed off in disgust. I never saw him again. But the partial circle was there on the grass in the park, no question about it. I confirmed its existence by showing it to my wife, though I never told her anything about it, not wanting her to think I was crazy.

Unfortunately, I'd already given her many reasons to think I was crazy, and she left me within a year, viciously humiliating me in front of my friends at a party, telling me that my strong opposition to the Vietnam War was stupid, throwing a drink in my face and storming out into a blizzard. The next time we met was in San Francisco ten years later. I was rushing down a street to meet a friend at the Museum of Modern Art, when I saw a woman sitting on the sidewalk, her back against a garbage can, her trembling hand reaching out. I gave her a dollar bill, and as I hurried past, late for my appointment, it struck me that I knew her from somewhere. I didn't want to look back, but the
memory of her dirty face and matted hair kept returning throughout the day. I often think I know people from somewhere else, though in most cases I’m wrong. But this time I was right in a chilling way. I was just about to sit down in a café near the bay when the recollection came into focus, and I realized that the person whose face I couldn’t forget was my former wife.

I rushed back to the place I’d seen her before, but she was gone. I waited two hours, until the sun went down, but she didn’t come back. I kept returning throughout the week—indeed, throughout the next few months—with no success. I probably would have kept going back from time to time, had I not finally realized that the place itself was responsible for what I now recognize as a substitute perception. For those unfamiliar with this term, let me briefly explain. The Doctrine of Substitute Perceptions has its roots in modern theoretical physics, which postulates that the universe on its most basic levels is an ongoing fluctuation between everything that is and everything that isn’t. We know nothing of the latter, but when we’re extremely disturbed, or when the light and sound and smell and motion of a given place and time seem filled with undefined memories, we often catch an accidental glimpse of what doesn’t exist. Since we have no words for what we’re seeing in these moments, we translate them into something we do have words for, into substitute perceptions, things that might exist but probably don’t.

Of course, the words we use to think about such perceptions alter them slightly, and this creates an uncertainty which forces us to consider the distortions our verbal capacities unavoidably produce, and even these
speculations are dubious, caught in the same instability they've been driven to investigate, replicating and magnifying it, often beyond recognition, moving us further and further from the original substitution, until they have roughly the same connection to what they're addressing as the outermost ripples in a pond have to the pebble that produced them. Nothing is more important at this point in human history than the production of verbal strategies that can reverse the flow of distortion, running the film backwards from the final fading ripples to the pebble striking the surface of the pond, and beyond that, moving the pebble back into the hand of the person who tossed it, back through the neural connections in his arm and shoulder and then up into his head, where electro-chemical motions and reverberations more numerous and complex than the drift of galaxies take place every second, mirrored by an undefinable substance that destroys anything that could possibly be compared to it.

Of course, we can be certain that many things have been compared to it, that many things have been destroyed, and no complete picture of the universe is possible unless all of these things can be recovered. There are two ways to approach this situation. We can either accept that parts of the universe are missing, which means that we also have to accept that the human quest for knowledge is doomed from the start, or we can take the more ambitious approach and try to make what's missing reappear. This might be as simple as squeezing a sponge, releasing what’s been absorbed. Or it might be more like vomiting, pissing, or taking a shit, where what gets recovered has been transformed, leaving us to speculate on what it was before.
On what basis could such speculation even begin? On what basis, for example, could I convince myself that a cobbled street of shop fronts was once a pine on a ridge at sunset? How could such a statement be tested, scientifically confirmed? And why a pine on a ridge at sunset? Why not an oak or a maple? I wish my answer were more scientific. But like so many supposedly objective judgements, mine is influenced by a personal concern: I associate pines with survival, a connection I began making after a narrow escape from death.

Soon after I got my doctorate in anthropology, I took a trip to the Caucasus Mountains west of the Caspian Sea, partly for pleasure, partly to view the peak on which Prometheus was tortured, and partly because I wanted to do research on the descendents of a cult of magicians who supposedly inhabited the region three thousand years ago. Let me clarify: I had no intention of doing actual research. Instead, I wanted to prove that research is impossible, that anthropological research, for example, is based on the illusion that someone who is not part of a culture can understand that culture fully enough to make authoritative statements about it. The people I was planning to interview and observe had never been studied before. Though they had a very rich history going back thousands of years, they had yet to become parts of the official narrative called human knowledge. I had no desire to make them objects of study. Rather, my interactions with them would be the material used to demonstrate that people can’t study others in a scientific sense, that the assumption you make when you decide to study anyone but yourself is arrogant and offensive. Back then I was convinced that I would soon be
revolutionizing and even destroying the field of cultural anthropology. But my journey into the mountains took an unexpected turn.

About five days into the Caucasus, my guide and translator were killed in a rockslide. I was lucky to survive without a scratch, but I saw no reason to count my blessings, since I didn’t know precisely where I was and all our food had been buried in the avalanche. I wandered for several days, nearly freezing to death at night and not sure if I was even heading in the right direction, back toward civilization. I spent one night in a cave, where I had to make a fire by rubbing two sticks together. I spent the next night in the ruins of a chapel, where the broken stained glass windows were jagged enough to cut the shadows and make them bleed. I spent the next night in a forest of demons, vaguely human shapes trembling in and out of existence, biting my arms and legs, growling and laughing. On the fourth day I came to a small community of people living in stone huts. I assumed they were none other than the group I’d come to the Caucasus to “study,” but I couldn’t be sure, since my guide and translator were dead. Through a series of awkward signs, I was finally able to tell them I was lost and hungry, and they took me to a glade on the outskirts of their community, where an old man was sitting placidly under a pine so large it felt like the birthplace of all shadows. Then they left the two of us alone, and we sat in silence.

At first, I felt scared and awkward. Then it occurred to me that the old man was reading my thoughts, or rather, plucking my thoughts out of my head like someone plucking small reptiles from a terrarium with tweezers.
Each time he removed a thought, I felt like I was eating a delicious meal. Soon I felt so full I couldn’t take another bite. But I kept accepting food because it wasn’t food anymore. It was more like a map, guiding me to a path leading out of the mountains. I got up and started walking. I traveled through an exquisite combination of mountain vistas and pines iridescent with sunlight, easily finding my way to a large town five miles from the Caspian Sea. I knew I’d been saved by magic. But part of me had been removed. I had no desire to do any more anthropology, subversive or otherwise.

In fact, I had no desire to do anything in particular, even when I got back to the States, where all my wise friends and loving relatives had great ideas about my future. I listened politely. But instead of trying to figure things out, I avoided plans and commitments as much as I could, working as little as possible, letting the spirit of improvisation guide me. One day I found myself in a café, randomly reading passages from an out-of-print book on avant-garde jazz, when I saw someone reading the same book at a nearby table. We talked for hours, learning that our lives had been almost identical, filled with the same events and the same responses. But there was one crucial difference. Although we were both living in the spirit of improvisation, I was making sure that I didn’t start thinking of it abstractly. I had no interest in developing a systematic philosophy based on what I was doing. My friend, on the other hand, felt that everyone should lead a spontaneous life and that it was his job to make sure that random behavior soon became the norm, insisting that such a transformation could only take place if the principles of
improvisation were carefully shaped into a doctrine. The more we talked, the more I became convinced that he was right, and the more I became convinced that he and I were almost identical in appearance, something that hadn’t occurred to me until my opinions began to look like his.

I was just about to suggest that we should start meeting every day, but I caught myself before I said anything, realizing that such a proposal would interfere with the random quality of what we were trying to do. We parted without making plans. But over the next few months, we accidentally met on a regular basis, and out of our lengthy conversations the outlines of an improvisational system began to form. By the end of the year, I’d begun to see in a highly expanded way, noting differences between the ordinary person I’d been before and the expanded person I was slowly becoming. Of course, to summarize this difference with abstract generalizations would be to falsify its most basic assumption, turning a field of evolving possibilities into the kind of formulaic nonsense that the world’s religions have made famous. Nonetheless, it’s fair to say that where the ordinary person would see a museum, the expanded person would see new constellations. Where the ordinary person would see a dark blue raincoat, the expanded person would see an old man sleeping in a boat. Where the ordinary person would see a postcard of an alpine lake, the expanded person would see French windows with tossing drapes, then lightning bolts above Baffin Bay, then a house carried off in a flood, a human skull in a dusty attic, footsteps on a creaking floor approaching someone’s bedroom, handcuffs on a window sill, a town of rusting robots. Where the
ordinary person would see an urban skyline with mountains in the background, the expanded person would see piles of pages filled with obscure scientific notation caught by sudden wind and scattered in every direction, each page becoming a bird of prey sweeping over nearby fields, dropping suddenly and rising after a brief struggle with a rodent squirming in its talons, circling into a sunset filled with clouds in the shape of the Caspian Sea, others taking the shape of the Baltic Sea, or the Indian Ocean. Where the ordinary person would see a bee on a lime-green petal, the expanded person would see the White House caught in beams of dark light shooting down from cracks in a clear blue afternoon sky, the sound of shattering windows, the screams of terrified bureaucrats and politicians, the entire building suddenly getting reduced to the size of a doghouse, ripped from its foundations, sucked up into a crack in the sky with the sound of a zipper closing. Where the ordinary person would see someone forgetting to zip his fly, the expanded person would see someone forgetting to zip his fly.

The final comparison is clearly problematic—but not because it's inconsistent with what precedes it. In fact, this inconsistency is quite consistent with the improvisational perspective my friend and I were trying to cultivate. And this is precisely the problem: If there's always a difference between ordinary and expanded states of mind, then a pattern begins to form, and we need inconsistencies to break that pattern, leaving room for what can't be foreseen. But once we stipulate that inconsistencies will occur at irregular intervals, interfering with the pattern of differences, this too creates a pattern, an expectation that
interruptions will occur, and irregularity itself becomes predictable.

It took me another year to see this clearly. But once I was able to put this disturbing insight into words, I stopped running into my friend, though I told myself that I still looked like his twin, and got a strange feeling whenever I looked at myself in the mirror, as if that flat glass reflection had somehow taken over. It was precisely to avoid this feeling that I started planning my life again, even to the point of getting a nine-to-five job with an overly serious boss and inflexible deadlines. I also began to avoid mirrors, looking at myself only in bodies of water, in ponds and lakes and puddles, where my image came back to me in slightly distorted form, altered by motions in the water, and by the presence of authentic non-reflexive depth beneath the liquid surface. Slowly I learned to live without the feeling of being replicated in flat planes of glass, releasing myself from the tyranny of artificial reflections.

Before I continue, let me briefly explain that my use of the word *twin* in the previous paragraph should not be taken symbolically, as if my friend were just a projection of my psychological perspective. He was definitely a separate person, and the cafes where our meetings occurred were not mere textual settings for a series of philosophical dialogues, but actual places, with lots of other customers occupying themselves in ways that had nothing to do with our discussions. There were people laughing, scowling, nodding, arguing, reading, coughing, burping, writing, whispering, farting, sneezing, drooling, scratching, kissing, staring, sucking, snoozing, shouting, snapping, doodling, squinting, fidgeting, slurping, cheering, snarling, winking,
raving, wallowing, musing, eating, drinking, and doing anything else that people in cafes do. In fact, they were doing so many different things in so many different ways that it would be impossible to describe just one second of what was happening there, let alone describe the changes that took place from one moment to the next, accumulating relentlessly as the seconds, minutes, and hours passed, a massive unfolding that taken as a whole could be described as an improvisation, even if each individual had a fairly definite notion of what he or she was doing there. Had we really wanted to see what improvisation was, we could have just observed our surroundings. But we were too absorbed in our planned improvisations, too identified with our own perspectives to see that the other people in the cafes were not mere background presences in a narrative that featured us as philosophical protagonists.

I don’t mean to give the impression that I was mesmerized by the so-called grandeur of my own ego. If anything, my problem has always been that I have little confidence in myself, only a sporadic ability to respect my own perceptions. The truth is that I rarely feel like a protagonist, even in the story I keep telling myself about myself, and certainly back then I felt even less entitled to take myself seriously.

This feeling was painfully present in the jobs I ended up with. I always thought I was too good for the kind of work I was capable of getting, and not good enough for the kind of work I wanted. Though I had a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology, I never put much effort into finding an academic job because I was sure I wasn’t smart enough to work and socialize with brainy professors who had never
seriously doubted their intelligence or questioned their right to lecture at people. My lack of confidence left me scrambling from one part-time job to another, performing tasks that were so stupid I couldn’t take them seriously. In every case, I soon either quit or got fired. But I did manage to find one job I liked. Ironically enough, it was at the local university, though it didn’t involve teaching and trying to pretend to be someone’s colleague.

I got the job by chance. I was visiting a friend, the only professor I’ve ever met who doesn’t scare me by trying to be smart all the time. I picked up what looked like an old bone on the desk of his study. It felt funny in my hands, as if I could feel its age and origins. I closed my eyes and tried to identify the sensation more precisely, but the motion of words in my head, the tools with which I was trying to name the feeling, took the form of a car driving off a cliff, leaving me with nothing. The blank space was slowly replaced by a scene that had no connection to any place I’d ever been, though I somehow knew I was looking at a Stone Age village in southern France, a wounded man sitting in the shade of a willow grove by a river, carefully chipping one piece of rock with another.

I opened my eyes and looked at my friend, who was watching me with a puzzled expression. When I closed my eyes again the scene was gone. He asked if I was okay, and I told him what I’d felt and seen. His eyes were bright with amazement. He explained that the bone I’d picked up was actually a Stone Age tool from the Magdalenian period, and that one of his colleagues had found it in southern France during a recent excavation. He urged me to talk about the village I’d seen, and was excited when the fragmented
description I provided matched the reconstructions he and other members of the physical anthropology department had been able to create from existing evidence.

He gave me two other artifacts, both of which triggered similar sensations in my hands and gaps in my mental perceptions, followed by unfamiliar scenes. And both times, the places I described were consistent with the approved academic reconstructions, even though, having focused on modern anthropological theory as a graduate student, I knew almost nothing about Stone Age societies. This left me with an eerie feeling, but my friend was enthusiastic. Over the next few weeks, he was able to arrange a research position for me at the university. It was a great job. All I had to do was handle various artifacts and provide descriptions of the places and events I saw, working painstakingly with my friend, his colleagues, and their illustrators, gradually creating a series of detailed pictures of late paleolithic society. These drawings were subsequently published in the *Journal of Physical Anthropology* and created an international stir in the academic community. Meanwhile, I was making $50 an hour, and for once I was able to support myself by doing something I liked.

My Stone Age visions were accompanied by a pleasant mental sensation. Earlier I said it was like driving off a cliff. But as I grew more accustomed to the process, it was more like tumbling over a waterfall and plunging hundreds of feet into cool flashing water without getting hurt. The visions themselves lasted longer and longer, were increasingly vivid and detailed. In such moments, I felt I was really there, back in paleolithic villages. I could feel
the ground beneath my feet and began taking tentative steps, moving carefully through the prehistoric landscape. The space became more tangible, more sharply focused, more obviously different from the space I was used to. The absence of noise was unnerving at first. The Stone Age air was so clean I could hardly breathe it. But soon I developed a strong preference for ancient atmospheres, an attraction that verged on addiction. The toxic patterns of modern life became increasingly repulsive. I was bored unless I was in the past. But I couldn’t completely escape the fear that at some point I might get stuck there.

About three months after the visions began, I reached a point of no return. I actually met the eyes of a young boy, sitting outside of a large hut made of the bones and skulls of mastodons. I was certain that he not only saw but also recognized me. To confirm this feeling, I asked my friend to let me work again with the hand-axe that had triggered the vision, and precisely the same scene appeared. This time my sense of the place was so complete that I actually heard birds in the trees and felt rain approaching from the north. The boy looked up and met my eyes and smiled. He said something I didn’t understand, but I knew I should follow him as he got up and walked along the riverbank.

Soon we were well beyond the edge of the village, following a trail through a dense forest. The smell of rain approaching grew stronger by the minute. There was thunder in the distance, wind in the treetops. Before too long, we reached a clearing, in the center of which was a pile of stones that seemed to be a sacrificial altar. Three men gripping sharp stone objects, knives apparently, approached from the other side of the clearing. I was taken
by a fear so strong that everything went blank, and I found myself on the floor of my friend’s office, looking up into his concerned face, taking the glass of water he was putting in my hand. He told me I’d been in my usual trance when suddenly I began speaking, or rather moving my mouth in response to non-verbal sounds that seemed to be coming through me but not from me. When he’d asked me what I was seeing, I’d dropped the axe and slumped down out of my chair onto the floor. We both agreed I’d seen enough for one day.

From that point on, the artifacts they gave me had no effect. The visions were gone. But I didn’t want to lose the job, so I began making things up, basing my invented visions on previous experiences and altering them slightly to keep things interesting. This went on for a month, resulting in several vivid reconstructions. But finally I made a bad mistake, reporting that the women in a village I was visiting had elaborate hairstyles. The professor I was working with at the time looked surprised but said nothing, faithfully jotting down my observation.

Two days later, my friend angrily told me over the phone that I’d been dismissed, that the pictures I’d been giving them over the past two weeks had seemed increasingly improbable, and that the notion of paleolithic women with fancy hairdos was an obvious fabrication. The fact that I was making things up had thrown all my work into question, and a few of his colleagues were even thinking of suing me for wasting their time and compromising their reputations with a cynical hoax. I packed my bags and left town the next day. I had no further contact with my friend. But I was pleasantly shocked one
day to find an article in the *Journal of Physical Anthropology* indicating that statues of Magdalenian women with ornate coiffures had recently been discovered.

Two years and five jobs later, I was in northern California working as a forest ranger. After all the idiotic things I’d had to do to survive, I was finally doing something I liked again. Though the job was boring at times, I loved the weather patterns in that part of California, the cold wind and the rain that came so frequently, the absence of noise that reminded me of the prehistoric world I could no longer visit. On just such a day, I was walking in the darkest depth of the forest with Ben, a fellow ranger, performing one of our daily tasks. Suddenly, behind a huge rock, we found a monstrous egg with what sounded a gigantic baby bird inside, savagely smashing the shell with its beak. We weren’t sure what to do. The wind increased, bending the trees and howling, making a sound that almost drowned out the cries of the unborn bird. Finally I picked up a rock and smashed the egg. It made a sound like wind chimes as it shattered. Inside was an egg of normal size, cracked slightly. But when Ben tried to lift the egg it shattered, and what remained of the bird inside indicated that it had been dead for several days.

We quickly confirmed that we’d seen and heard the same thing, that the huge egg and monstrous cries had not been imagined. We decided not to file a report, not wanting to be accused of collaborating in a hoax. But since neither of us could get the incident out of our minds, two days later we met in a nearby town for dinner and tried to reason things out. Though we came up with several entertaining theories, we left the restaurant just as confused as we were
before. I thought of the Doctrine of Substitute Perceptions, but quickly dismissed it, since I didn’t see how two people could substitute exactly the same perception.

As we walked away from the restaurant and strolled along the town’s pleasant waterfront, we noticed a group of people in front of us, talking loudly in a language I didn’t recognize, apparently drunk. Suddenly one of them pulled out an umbrella, which was odd, since the night was unusually clear, with no threat of rain. After thrusting it up at the sky a few times, she spun around and faced us with a smile, swinging it in wide arcs, as if to enclose us in an invisible circle. Then she threw it down at our feet.

Ben and I stood there confused and amazed, staring at the umbrella. I thought I could hear carnival music in the distance, happy voices playing games and laughing. The umbrella began to flicker, like a lantern flame about to go out. It emitted an odd, crackling sound, similar to the sound of cellophane being crumpled, and in a dazzling array of multi-colored light, its ends curled up, its color changed, and it briefly became a flaming bird rising out of its own ashes. Then it was simply a broken egg on the pavement.

I looked up, expecting to meet the eyes of the strange woman and demand an explanation. But she and her friends were getting into a car on the corner, closing the doors and driving away. I turned to Ben, who agreed with me that everything had happened as I described it above. The only difference was that he compared the crackling sound of the umbrella to strips of bacon frying in a skillet, which made me mentally revise my description several times, thinking that the umbrella sounded like static on a radio, like a popped balloon spiraling unpredictably through a bedroom.
and shooting out the window, like velcro in a microphone, like a body very slowly drawn-and-quartered.

When we later wrote down our descriptions, I went back to the simile of crumpled cellophane, and Ben described it that way too, explaining that I’d clearly come up with a more accurate comparison, and that the only reason he’d initially thought of bacon was that we’d seen a broken egg on the pavement. This led me to think about why I tend to be so influenced by the perceptions and needs of others, why I’ll do anything to please, becoming a very carefully edited version of myself. I started getting anxious that Ben might use our shared experience to get to know me better. I knew that if we became close friends I would soon start changing myself in self-degrading ways, so I quit my job and moved away, becoming an unfamiliar face in an unfamiliar city.

An extreme reaction? I knew of course that it was. I ridiculed myself for nearly a month, accusing myself of cowardice, of becoming a hermit with no religious justification. But I also knew that what I’d done was consistent with my psychological needs at the time, even if most people would say that meaningful human interaction is psychologically necessary for anyone trying to confront the mysteries of existence. But as I grew older I had less and less tolerance for the annoying complexities people always confronted me with. Even though Ben and I had communicated pleasantly and clearly when discussing our strange experience, I knew that if we got to know each other better we would begin to get on each other’s nerves, and I’d reached this point so many times in the past that I saw no reason to repeat the pattern. Yes, I was withdrawing.
from a crucial aspect of life. But I saw no alternative. I wanted as little noise in my head as possible.

About a year later, I inherited a big sum of money from a childless aunt who had always thought of me as her son. This allowed me to quit my latest idiotic job move to a nice apartment facing a park with a view of the city’s waterfront in the distance. Most people in a similar situation would probably have spent the money on a fancy car or traveled around the world, but I preferred to pass long parts of each day staring out the window, fascinated by how much there was to see. The more I looked, the more I saw. The more I saw, the more I looked. The slow but steady process of expansion was delicious. But then something happened that forced me to learn to appreciate my limits.

I’d gone out at sundown and walked well into the night, down many familiar streets of shops and pointed housetops. Around midnight, I reached a familiar intersection where in the past I’d always turned right, the first step in returning to my apartment. This time I turned left, wanting to expand the boundaries of my wandering. I was quickly surprised. This part of the street was cobbled, unlike the part of the street I was familiar with. The buildings were old but well preserved, a combination of small shops, brownstones, and two-story brick houses. I enjoyed looking at them so much that I felt stupid for having avoided this part of the street before, and I reminded myself about the dangers of habit, the exclusions that result when you do the same things all the time. I loved the way the moonlight spread on the wet cobbles, the way the shops became phantom reflections in the windows on the other
side of the street. But the crescent moon went behind the clouds, and everything vanished, leaving only the sidewalk and a wooden bench. I thought of going back to the intersection, but it wasn't there anymore, so I sat on the bench and waited, looking at nothing.

In fact, it was less than nothing. Instead of leaving an open space, the buildings had disappeared so fully that even their absence had vanished. At first I found this unnerving. But as I began to accept it, the absence of anything, the absence even of absence, began to seem quite remarkable, like a prerequisite for a new kind of happiness. I had always assumed that the absence of absence would mean presence. But this was not the case. What I felt instead was an absence that was no longer merely the opposite of presence, but rather its precondition, its origin, its point of departure. I felt privileged to be in its presence, or rather its absence, and I wanted to think that this indefinable moment, which could only be described by saying what it wasn't, was somehow deserved, that my willingness to live without any definite purpose, existing only to witness the present moment unfolding, had made me worthy of an experience reserved for mystics after long years of rigorous discipline. I started laughing, dissolving the fear that for decades had pushed me to believe that I was nothing unless I could present myself to the world as a conscious coherent being.

Unfortunately, the clouds finally dispersed. The crescent moon reappeared, bringing back the cobbled street of old buildings, and with it the intersection, about a hundred feet to my right. The bench I'd been sitting on was gone. There was nothing to do but return to the life I knew.
Obviously, I wasn’t going back to a terrible existence. In some ways, it was what I’d always wanted—a beautiful apartment in a city I liked with no financial pressures. But now things weren’t the same. Compared to what I’d been feeling in the dark, my normal sense of myself and the world was a keen disappointment. I had to deal with months of stiff depression before I started to feel that everyday life was acceptable again.

The turning point in my recovery came when I learned to adjust my Venetian blinds. I don’t mean that I didn’t know how to do it before, just that for the first time I was doing it for a purpose other than comfort, filling my apartment’s broad oak floorboards with a pattern of light and shade so exquisitely detailed that I could observe it like an evolving work of art, carefully tracking its transformations throughout the day. Of course I couldn’t paraphrase what I was looking at, any more than I could paraphrase an abstract painting. So instead of treating the changing patterns on my floor as if they were parts of a code I could crack, I tried to explain to myself why interpretation was impossible.

I came up with all sorts of stupid ideas, and I’m glad I was wise enough to reject them one by one. I won’t say I didn’t take some of them too seriously for a day or sometimes even a week, and I won’t say that I didn’t enjoy the often absurdly complex process of creating them. Explaining why something can’t be explained can be entertaining. But I wanted to think I was doing more than jerking off in my head. I somehow knew that what I was looking for would simply arrive one day on its own, seeming to come out of nowhere, though in fact it would
have been assembling itself quietly for a long time, waiting until I'd cleared the noise from my head.

The more I looked at the light and shade on the floor, the more I thought it was made of water, and though I knew this wasn't strictly true, the feeling it gave me seemed to relax my depression, letting it rise out of me like steam from coffee. If I was reading water, what was it telling me? Or rather, why was it impossible to know what it was telling me? I thought about the mind of water, an ancient form of molecular intelligence that had transformed the planet billions of years ago, setting the stage for everything that followed. I was mostly water. My interpreting brain was mostly water. By meditating on water, I could look at what I was made of.

I considered moving to an apartment closer to the waterfront, giving myself direct access to the source. But I reminded myself that it wasn't really water on my floor. It was light, and light was older than water, preceding it by billions of years in the evolution of the universe. Light in itself was far too vast, far too fast, for human understanding. But viewing the light as water, I could bring it closer to home, closer to my body, my biochemical map, watching it on my floor contained in a panel shaped like a page, with a language of shadows that moved in the breeze, as if I were looking at words trembling on a page of water. Yet the words I used when I spoke or thought were not made of water, and they had no way of explaining what the mind of water was. Language, of course, was the only way I could tell myself what I knew. Yet once I told myself what I knew, I was trapped in a verbal reduction, a grammatical picture of something that was not the thing
itself, something like the difference between a fishbowl and the sea.

But if words were the enemy, why were they informing on themselves, encouraging me to perceive without language? Were there other kinds of language that words were just an imprecise translation of? Could a lifetime of watching the shifting pattern on my floor somehow teach me to read the language of water, the language I was made of, and also teach me to read the language of light, the language of eternity, without corrupting them with words? There was only one way to find out.
This edition is limited to 60 copies.

This is number 6.

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