

## Excerpt

### From *Far From This Land* by Michael Gellert

#### Author's Opening Remarks: How to Read This Book

The following story is based on a series of dreams I had in response to brain surgery and to facing my human frailty and mortality. It is the creative expression of what can happen when we consciously dream our dreams onward from where they ended. This can also involve protracted conversations with and among the inner figures who populate our dreams, conversations that produce penetrating insights into the dreams themselves and the vexing problems they are often about. Jung called this method of exploring the unknown “active imagination.” It led not only to the creation of his *Red Book*—a remarkable account of his conversations with his own inner figures—but to what subsequently became of that project, namely, the foundation of all his later psychological works. Since this method is so central to our book, some preliminary discussion of it is warranted.

As Jung himself acknowledged, he did not invent this method. In the fourth century, Saint Augustine admitted in the opening lines of his philosophical inquiry, *Soliloquies*, that he was mystified by the way it developed as a dialogue with “Reason,” the latter taking form as an inner voice that was not associated with a dream figure per se but that nevertheless suddenly spoke to him. Goethe is known to have written some of his poems in a somnambulist, dream state, as if he were possessed, and he purposely secluded himself so as to foster this condition. As did the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, whose screenplay for his film *Hour of the Wolf* was inspired by inner figures

who not only talked to him but, appearing externally as projections, wouldn't leave his room until the film was completed. (As contemporaries, Bergman was familiar with Jung but apparently not with his use of active imagination.) Similarly, Rainer Maria Rilke's mystical, prayer-like poems in his *Book of Hours* began with what he described as forceful "inner dictations" occurring in the mornings and evenings, the times when we are closest to sleep and the unconscious. (Rilke and Jung were familiar with each other, though Rilke was on more intimate terms with Freud.) But even a thinker as worldly as Thomas Jefferson clearly engaged in a self-reflective active imagination when he wrote his famous lyrical "dialogue between my Head and my Heart" as part of a letter to a married woman he fell in love with.

T. S. Eliot described the more shamanic side of active imagination as a "disciplined kind of dreaming" that has been forgotten in modern times but in earlier times was revered as the practice of seeing visions. (Visions would thus be dreams we cultivate while we are awake but in a meditative or trance state.) Coleridge understood this visionary discipline to be a way to participate in a "sacramental universe" or "imaginal realm transcending any personal existence," and he distinguished it from the creativity of the artist. *Active imagination is not fiction or novel writing*, even if at times it may resemble it because it gravitates toward expressive arts like sculpting, painting, poetry, playwriting, and creative nonfiction. Through them, it connects us to the deeper layers of the psyche, layers that, if their numinous effects on us are any indication, seem to border on otherworldly realms. Or perhaps, as William Blake and others intuited, *they are those realms themselves*—a possibility that this book entertains. This story is a

memoir of my visits—via dreams and active imagination—to what appeared to be such realms.

As you may have guessed by now, this is an unorthodox memoir. To begin with, unlike most memoirs, it is shaped by psychological and spiritual events more than familial, social, or historical ones; that is to say, it's more inner-oriented and intrapersonal than outer-oriented and interpersonal. Then there is the distinct kind of psychological and spiritual memoir that it is. The figures in our dreams, as any of us can observe, have a will and agenda of their own. There's no predicting what they will say and do. The same is true for the active imagination we engage in with them. There's no telling in advance in which direction it may turn, and why. Dreaming and active imagination are both a suprarational process. The inner figures who drive both activities can assume an identity far different than our own, representing what Jung called "part-souls" or "splinter psyches"—subpersonalities or parts of our psychic constitution but not all of it. Their existence is natural and normal—we all have these parts—and they become a problem only when the ego or central personality becomes fragmented and overtaken by them in such extreme and rare conditions as dissociative or multiple personality disorder. The diverse religious traditions that have historically incorporated active imagination into their practices have always viewed it as a safe and productive way to investigate the mysteries of the human psyche and to tap into Coleridge's sacramental or sacred universe. (Among such traditions, Jung includes the Jesuits with their Ignatian spiritual exercises, Patanjali's yoga with its sutras or aphorisms on the theory and practice of yoga, certain forms of Buddhist meditation, and medieval alchemy.) All the same, active imagination is not widely used as a way to tell one's personal story.

A further distinction making this memoir unusual is its main figure and narrator, a subpersonality—one so strong that it is practically an alter ego—named Richard Caldwell. His temperament, orientation, and biographical history are hardly my own. He personifies a skeptical side of me and gives voice to the existential doubts plaguing the period connected with my surgery, especially doubts about the continuity of consciousness after we die. In other words, the story is told from the critical, discerning perspective of a shrewd skeptic who is not easily fooled. That its narrator should be him rather than me was not a decision I consciously made. He spontaneously emerged in the post-surgical phase and insisted on telling the story—including all the dreams and visionary, active-imagination material that arose during this phase—from his point of view, essentially making it *his* story. What could I do, other than give him free rein? If repressed or cast out, he'd only return with greater forcefulness in his doubt.

Another figure, much closer to my conscious identity (or the actual ego), represents the professional part of me, the part informed by my profession as a Jungian psychoanalyst. The story very much unfolds as a dialogue between these two figures, my inner skeptic and my professional self. The first encounters a parallel universe (a.k.a. the afterlife), and the second, in the capacity of his analyst, helps him to make sense of this. The professional self becomes a helper or healer to the skeptical self, who in turn submits to the ordeal of psychotherapy. “Healer, heal thyself,” as the ancient proverb says.

However, this analyst does not practice his craft entirely in the style I do. He often seems more like a didactic teacher than an analyst simply listening and gently fording the patient's inner process with him, trusting the psyche to find its own cure. He's quick to make interpretations and to explain to the patient the meaning of the latter's

experiences, as if he knows better (and as it often happens, he does). In large measure, this is a creative device employed for narrative purposes, one whose use Jung would probably frown upon. He would agree that a psychopomp or spiritual guide is needed in order to clarify what the unconscious has revealed (often the guide is an agent or spokesperson for the unconscious, and in this story there is more than one), but he would disagree that this function should be the ego's. Citing Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as an example of active imagination that is "too strongly consciously formed," Jung stresses the importance of carefully separating material in one's conscious mind from that of the unconscious. He believed that material seeping in from the ego or conscious mind waters down the objectivity of the unconscious and the active imagination that flows from it. The approach I take here is more in sync with the poets, playwrights, and philosophers who do not so finely distinguish between conscious and unconscious material and intentions. Either way, the conversations our inner figures have with each other or directly with us speak to the psyche's impulse to reveal itself and to work out its inner conflicts and self-dividedness. A tremendously transformative and integrative power is unleashed when we allow our inner parts to talk with each other.

Speaking of poets, as a record of visits to other realms, the book has some features in common with Dante's *Divine Comedy*—a fact I was unaware of during the process of writing it. Of course, I am not elevating my account to the level of Dante's eloquent, sublime, epic poem, mesmerizing us with its boundless, vivid imagery and layers of rich allegory. Merely, I am pointing to these basic features—six of them, to be exact—to illustrate how creativity of this kind can follow certain "grooves," suggesting

the influence of what Jung understood as the archetypes of the collective unconscious. No writer is an island unto themselves.

The first way my story resembles *The Divine Comedy* is that the latter is also, as Eliot and others contend, a product of active imagination. Both have the quality of a revelation, a novel disclosure yet also a perennial truth. Like many exercises in active imagination, both stories wrestle with religious, philosophical, spiritual, and psychological themes.

Second, Dante and I are both actors in our stories—such participation being a general feature of active imagination—and we are both portrayed as alternate versions of ourselves. In Dante's case, he is presented as an idealized version he would have liked to have been. In my case, I'm presented in two versions that, as discussed above, reflect exaggerated parts of me, one that is a skeptic in matters of ultimate truth, and the other a loquacious, proactive psychoanalyst. I'm afraid neither of these alternate versions is as attractive as Dante's.

Third, if we compare Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise (or Heaven) to most modern near-death experiences (admittedly, perhaps an unfair comparison), we see a sharp difference in purpose. Dante's allegorical visit to the other side of the grave is primarily *instructive*, aiming to illuminate how to live a moral and spiritual life that leads to God or Heaven rather than to Purgatory or Hell. In contrast to the modern near-death experience, it was not intended to provide emotional comfort and facilitate safe passage back to the land of the living. It was not a short, single-episode event but a learning process unfolding over the course of a week, precisely, the week beginning on the night before Good Friday in the year 1300. Though the story told in this

book is about a modern near-death experience, it likewise aspires to be educative and process-oriented, but naturally with a different perspective and different themes than characteristic of Dante's medieval Catholic theology.

Fourth, the fact that this story begins darkly yet concludes with a kind of redemption and a hopeful outlook further gives it something in common with Dante's journey. This qualifies both stories as comedy—"comedy" as understood in the ancient, classical sense of the meaning—as opposed to tragedy whose movement is from light to darkness.

Fifth, given this comedic feature, it is noteworthy that the redemption in both stories is spearheaded by male guides (in Dante's instance, the Roman poet Virgil) but is finally midwifed or consummated by extraordinary women who are the love interests of the narrators. As we shall see, a man's female, inner figures tend to serve as a bridge to the hidden depths of the psyche, or to what the ancients called the soul. With its diverse characteristics, this feminine side within every man is what Jung referred to as the anima.

Lastly, another core feature that the two stories share is their concern for ordinary life in the everyday world we inhabit. It should be remembered that Dante did not intend his *Commedia* to be only an exaltation or mystical contemplation of otherworldly realms. (Indeed, the adjective *Divina* was added after he died.) He also intended it to be a reflection upon the condition of the mundane world that he lived in, namely, the Christian world around the year 1300. So, too, does this story explore questions about an afterlife as a means to raise our awareness about how we should choose to live here and now in *our* world and century. It is, at heart, a story about *this* world, this Earth we dwell upon—in Dante's words, "The small round floor that makes us passionate . . ."

On a final note, it is worth repeating that the book is a memoir. It is a faithful rendition of what the psyche released when its intimate partner, the brain, was intruded upon and when my natural fragility as a mere mortal was stripped down to a stark naked vulnerability. The dreams and visionary, active-imagination experiences in the story are described in the way they happened. They are events as real or true as any, only they represent the reality or truth of the psyche. Specifically, they represent the part of the psyche that appears to be able to perceive higher or otherworldly realms, or, again, to perhaps be those realms itself. This memoir is about my visits to this distant region of the psyche, where the mind evidently meets and merges with these realms.

Michael Gellert  
Los Angeles, 2021

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## **Prelude**

### **Initial Consultation and Considerations**

*April, 2007*

The story I wish to tell must begin with the confession that I am the least likely person to tell it. Until recently, I had always been an atheist who had no difficulty believing in religious experiences. I just didn't believe they were outside the scope of natural phenomena. As a professor of evolutionary psychology, I often repeated to my students the fact that nothing in physical nature shows any evidence that it is designed by something beyond itself. Even so, nature is extremely complex and beautiful, and my awe of it was similar to the kind expressed by Einstein and Spinoza. If that love of nature is what people mean by the love of God, then you could say I had this too. But the notion of a superior intelligence transcending nature was never one I could wrap my mind around. Today, my confidence that this notion is purely wishful thinking has been shaken. And confidence it was: as someone once said, it takes great faith to be an atheist. I have become a man who has lost his faith.

If you think this is a simple problem you are mistaken. Losing one's faith in the idea that the ultimate meaning of existence is what humans give it is no small matter. This conviction cannot be easily and welcomingly replaced by some newfound religious belief. It may be far easier to lose belief in a God or a heaven than, after a lifetime of scientific training and atheism, to gain one. How does one develop a religious understanding that is as sophisticated and sober, as intricate and clear, as the laws of nature which one previously held as the highest order? Believers who have lost their

faith may seek help from a priest or some wise person who perhaps once also suffered such a crisis, but to whom do nonbelievers turn when they lose their faith?

I had been told of a Jungian psychoanalyst who had formerly been a therapist at my university. A colleague had consulted him to get help for her anxiety. In addition to his specialty of working with dreams as a way to understand the unconscious mind and our patterns of behavior, she had told me he was interested in mysticism and had studied with a Zen master in Japan. I had the impression that he was “out there” on the fringes of psychology. It thus seemed likely that he would not be one to think I was crazy. If consulting him did not yield any insight as to what caused my experience, then perhaps I’d get some clues as to what did not.

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I left a message for him on his voicemail. He called back shortly and gave me an appointment. Due to my operation I was still on a light schedule with no classes to teach. Though officially still on medical leave, I was feeling well enough to meet with him. Besides, I needed something to do. Staying at home and catching up on my reading didn’t work. I couldn’t concentrate. Likewise, the paper I had begun to write before the operation no longer held my interest. My mind kept returning to what happened during my surgery.

We met and shook hands. His name was Michael Gellert, and I could see he was a friendly man. He was in his early or mid-fifties, a good twelve to fifteen years older than me.

We sat down, I on a couch and he in a chair opposite me. Two bookcases were lined with books on a variety of subjects, though mostly psychology and religion. After

some small talk and discussion about my livelihood—I mentioned that I was fortunate to be a professor of evolutionary psychology in one of the few university psychology departments to host a chair specifically in this subject—I told him about my surgery. He asked how I discovered something was wrong with me.

“About four days before the operation,” I said, “I developed a terrible headache and felt very fatigued. And nauseous. At first I thought I was just overtired. By the third day it got so bad I had to go to the emergency room. I thought my head was going to split open. They took blood tests, a CAT scan, and kept me overnight. The next thing I know the neurosurgeon is in my room, discussing options. There weren’t any. It was an aneurysm, and I went under the knife the next day.”

An aneurysm is caused by a weakness in the wall of an artery, causing the vessel to widen and potentially hemorrhage. If this should happen inside the skull, it can cause permanent damage. Mine had only leaked. To repair the vessel, they opened the cranium around my right ear and went inside.

“How did the surgery go?”

“Before the surgery, it was bleeding only a little. It hadn’t fully ruptured. A little over halfway through, it burst. In trying to control the bleeding by clamping the vessel, my brain was deprived of oxygen for over four minutes. They put me in a pentobarbital coma to lower my brain’s oxygen requirement. The doctor told me later that I was at risk of catastrophic brain damage. I was in surgery for fourteen hours.”

Gellert asked if there were any complications after the surgery. I told him that for about six weeks following the surgery, I was at risk of stroke from vasospasm from the bleeding that occurred around my brain. I fortunately didn’t have one and there were no

lasting complications. In five years I would need an angiogram just to make sure that everything is okay.

“It must have been a frightening experience,” Gellert said.

“Frankly, it all happened so fast I hardly had time to get scared.”

I didn’t know if this was the right moment to go into the real disturbance for which I came to get his help.

After a brief pause he asked if I was married. I told him my wife and I had separated about a month before all this happened, and that it was a trial separation.

“I had already moved out and was in my own place,” I said. “Naturally, she was shocked and upset when she learned I needed brain surgery. But she came through for me. Karen was there throughout the whole ordeal. She wanted me to recuperate in our house, but for one reason or another I preferred to go to my apartment. My brother flew in from D.C. just before I was discharged and together they helped out the first few weeks.”

He asked if I had any kids. Two, I told him. “Rachel is six, Ben is four.”

Then he asked, “How are they doing with all this? Surgery, separation, that’s a lot.”

“It’s been hard on them. Endless questions. We answer them as best as we can. We shielded them as much as possible from the surgery. But when they saw me four days after with my head all bandaged, they got very upset.”

“Understandably. Tell me, what has your mood been like these days?”

“I’ve been in a malaise. I feel listless most of the time, and when I’m not listless, I’m agitated.”

“Is that unusual for you?”

“Yes, I would say so.”

“And you’ve been like that since the operation?”

“Yes.”

“Would you say you’re depressed?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are you feeling right now?”

“I don’t know, nothing really.”

A silence descended upon us.

“How do you think I can help you, Richard?” he finally said.

“I’ll tell you. I had a strange experience when I was under the anesthesia, and I need someone to talk to about it. I think you might be the guy who can help me with this.”

He stared at me. It seemed as if he was surprised.

“What kind of experience?” he said.

“I don’t exactly know. That’s why I’m coming to you.”

“Was it an NDE—a near-death experience?”

“You’re asking if I saw a tunnel with light at the end, and a guide and loved ones waiting there to greet me?”

“Yes.”

“No. It wasn’t that. It was much stranger. It lasted for what seemed like hours. It could be my sense of time was warped, but that is how it felt.”

“During the operation, did you flatline?”

“No. It wasn’t a typical near-death experience. I looked through the literature. It wasn’t anything like that.”

“Have you told anyone about this—your surgeon?”

“I mentioned it to him. He thought it was a hypnagogic occurrence connected with the pentobarbital coma. I didn’t go into it any further as I didn’t think he’d understand. So no, I didn’t tell anyone, not even my wife. You’re the first.”

Now we both quietly stared at each other.

I thought about his question, *how could he help me?* I had never been to a therapist or felt that someone could help me in personal matters better than I could help myself. The fact that I didn’t really know how he could help me merely reflected that I couldn’t help myself. I had no idea of what help would look like in such an instance.

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It was only my second week driving again since the operation. I drove home late that afternoon wondering if confiding in Gellert was the right thing to do. I knew he would treat our discussion with the utmost confidence and respect, but I was concerned about making an already incomprehensible matter even more incomprehensible. His line of questioning in connection to near-death experiences concerned me. Yes, I had been in a perilous situation, and in that regard you might say I had a close brush with death. But I did not want him to squeeze my experience into the category of an NDE if there were other ways to also understand it.

On the other hand, I had the impression that Gellert would be an empathic and open-minded listener. At the end of our consultation, we agreed to an open series of meetings that would explore the experience I had. Given its lengthy duration, he asked

that I write it down from beginning to end, even if it took a number of weeks and installments. He also wanted me to report any dreams I had during the course of our sessions.

I was relieved to have someone knowledgeable with whom I could talk. I was hoping our sessions might give some structure to the state of malaise I had fallen into.

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When I arrived back at my apartment, Rachel and Ben were waiting for me. Karen was there too. Twice a week she dropped them off to stay with me. Since the operation, this too was only the second week that I was well enough to have them stay overnight.

“Did you see the therapist?” Karen asked after I greeted her and the kids. She knew I was going to meet him, but didn’t know the real reason why. I had told her I was going to see him to talk about my malaise.

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He wants to see me again. We’re going to meet every Tuesday.”

“Good,” she said, as she walked to the door. She kissed me on the cheek and told me to call her if I had any difficulties.

My understanding of the rift that led to our separation was murky. After nine years of marriage, it was no longer the day-to-day differences that taxed our relationship. That Karen is a morning person and I’m not, that she’s rather sociable and I’m not, that she’s highly structured with family events and plans and I’m not—we’ve learned to accommodate those differences and compromise as much as possible. Our drifting apart has rather been in our values and priorities. Some years ago Karen had a religious

awakening to which, frankly, I could not relate. As time went on, we had less and less to talk about. Our taste in books, movies, and weekend activities increasingly diverged. We liked to hike and ski together, but I had little interest in yoga and Buddhist meditation. She often expressed how she found my approach to life joyless and pessimistic, particularly my belief that the human race is very likely heading toward an evolutionary crisis due to climate change, overpopulation, and destruction of the planet's ecosystem. She saw this crisis as the turbulent birth pains of a new era of history, the beginning of a genuinely united global village. I saw it as the beginning of the end, an end suffered by so many species that had also gone extinct in the natural process of evolution for one set of reasons or another. Our discussions, when not about the children, had become flat and short. My sense was that Karen saw me as a kind of curmudgeon. Yet I was still surprised when she announced that she wanted to separate. I hadn't realized the depth of her unhappiness and loneliness in our marriage. I wondered if she had met someone, but I didn't want to ask.

My malaise began before the operation when I realized how alone I was about to become. As much as I knew I couldn't change who I was, I felt the oppressive weight of a failed marriage and the lifelong consequences this would have for our children.

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Pancakes: they're easy and fun to make, delicious (especially with walnuts in them), and the kids love them. We prepared dinner together. Rachel makes a good sous-chef, and Ben, a good consumer, particularly when maple syrup is involved. Over dinner, we talked about their day at school. Rachel is in grade one, and Ben is in pre-kindergarten.



After dinner, we played a game of Chutes and Ladders. Rachel won, her self-satisfaction gleeful. Then Ben wanted to put on his new Spiderman costume and wrestle, but I wasn't ready yet so soon after my operation. Nevertheless, wanting to at least see him in his new outfit, I helped him put it on. His second Spiderman costume, it was a tighter fit that looked better on him than the first. He demonstrated superb Spiderman skills while Rachel worked on a jigsaw puzzle. Her skills at this were exceptional and she regularly completed puzzles for kids three or four years older than her.

Finally came the ritual bath and brushing of teeth, and story time. This night the kids wanted to tell *me* stories, yarns they'd invent as they were telling them. First Rachel told a story about dinosaurs and two children, using a dinosaur picture book as a storyboard. Full of twists and turns, it revealed her dramatic imagination. Ben followed Rachel with a dinosaur story too. Except for the part about Rex the Tyrannosaurus rex, his cherished stuffed animal and by now practically a family member, his story made little sense, but was still delightful.

Curiously, both children became almost obsessed with dinosaurs at the same time. I wouldn't have expected this from a girl, yet both could tell me more about dinosaurs than could most of my graduate students who were pursuing advanced degrees in evolution theory. Ben, a precocious tyke with a big sister to mentor him, can name every dinosaur with near-perfect pronunciation. His audiobooks have also taught him well. The instant you put your finger on the picture he can specify the dinosaur:

“Brachiosaurus!” “Ankliosaurus!” “Pteranodon!” “Corythosaurus!”

This night Rachel asked a question scientists have been studying for decades: “What happened to the dinosaurs?” It's a good question, and one that makes any student

of evolution uneasy. I tried to give an answer that was age-appropriate. Long before humans existed, millions of years ago, the dinosaurs ruled the Earth. They were the world's greatest creatures. This was called the Age of Reptiles. Everything that is alive changes. The Earth lives, too, and it changed. It became a place where the dinosaurs could no longer live. They disappeared, and all we have left of them today are their bones. A new age then came, the one we live in now. Today, humans rule the Earth.

“How did the Earth change?” Rachel asked.

I had to be careful how much I explained: The climate changed. The plants that dinosaurs ate disappeared. They ran out of food.

I was grateful that Rachel seemed satisfied with the answer and soon drifted off to sleep. Ben was already asleep. Any explanation more than this might have caused nightmares. Contemplating the demise of the dinosaurs can lead only to dismal conclusions, even for adults. Think about it. Sixty-five million years ago there occurred a mass extinction that killed off seventy percent of the Earth's species, including the dinosaurs. This marked the shift from the Mesozoic Era, or Age of Reptiles, to the Cenozoic Era or Age of Mammals. Of the numerous theories to explain this, two are prevalent, and they are both cataclysmic. The first theory is that a huge asteroid or meteorite hit the Earth—possibly in the Yucatan—and the second is that there was a massive volcanic eruption. Either of these would have caused dramatic climate changes, such as extreme atmospheric cooling alternating with heating; months or years of darkness, from dust and soot; acid rain; and the greenhouse effect. All this would have adversely affected the Earth's plant life and food supply.

The demise of the dinosaurs was not exceptional. There have been at least five mass extinctions. The one involving the dinosaurs, the end-Cretaceous extinction, wasn't even the biggest. The end-Permian extinction, occurring some 200 million years earlier, killed ninety percent of the Earth's species. In the course of evolution, probably less than five percent of all species that ever lived are still alive today. In other words, it is the fate of most species to go extinct. Many scientists believe that we are today threatened by a new, sixth mass extinction due to the combined effects of habitat destruction, invasive species, pollution, human overpopulation and overconsumption, and climate change. They call it the Holocene or Anthropocene extinction. Thousands of species have already disappeared. What makes us think we can weather such environmental trauma better than the dinosaurs? These sturdy giants had ruled the Earth for over 150 million years. Compare this to the mere 200,000 years our species, *Homo sapiens*, has been on the scene. If current trends continue, our global ecosystem may once again collapse, requiring a long period for recovery. It would not necessarily be the first time humans played a role in widespread extinction. Scientific studies suggest that when humans first reached Australia about 50,000 years ago, they set massive fires—possibly to clear the land—that led to the extinction of at least sixty species of mammals and birds. But aren't such episodes a part of the evolutionary process too? After all, do our own destructive impulses belong to a different order than nature's?

Watching my children sleep gave me relief from these thoughts. For a brief moment, the recklessness of nature and humanity was shut out. But as always, it would be too brief.

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After the kids had fallen asleep I made myself a cup of tea. My ambivalence about consulting Gellert resurfaced, and became more clear. I felt apprehensive about the huge gulf between the evolutionary psychology I had, after years of study, come to appreciate as the foundation of human nature, and the psychology I was now turning to in order to examine my anesthesia experience. Evolutionary psychology incorporates the findings of evolutionary biology, zoology, ethology, anthropology, and social and cognitive psychology. There is not a single field of human behavior or activity that it cannot shed light upon. Romantic love, humor, play, gossip, morality, altruism, nationalism, war, and even genocide can be understood as means to enhance our survival. Of course, this is not to say that evolutionary psychology condones our aggression; it merely explains it.

Deciding to see Gellert was a huge departure from my way of thinking, and I was suspicious of the outcome and where it would lead. Did he practice the scientific method, with its emphasis on hard evidence, or was his approach to problem-solving based on fanciful intuitions and wishful thinking? I was especially uncomfortable with his particular leanings toward the unconscious mind—the so-called “depth” that his school of psychology believes lies beneath the waking mind or ego. Evolutionary psychology approaches the unconscious primarily as a process of brain activity, acknowledging that most of what goes on in the human organism in service to its survival, such as breathing and digestion, goes on unconsciously. Depth psychology, as it is known, is more interested in the contents of the unconscious—dreams, repressed emotions, psychological complexes, and so on. Evolutionary psychology would agree with Freud that dreams function as vents that let out the pressures of the mind at night, and thus serve an adaptive purpose. And it might even agree with Alfred Adler—another

depth psychologist who like Carl Jung was originally a student of Freud's—that they represent insecurities, inferiorities, and other problems that the unconscious is trying to solve. This too is obviously adaptive. But that dreams have profound meanings like the kind Jung talked about, that they have a knowledge and purpose beyond the ego's and are guiding the ego toward wisdom, or that they can predict the future—that is something more in line with primitive and ancient views of dreams as divine revelations.

Why was I turning to Gellert—a Jungian who valued such magical thinking more than modern science—to help me make sense of a bizarre experience that needed a modern sensibility and intellectual approach to decipher it? I had to be careful with my choices. My grip on reality was tentative and in question. I was in a state of internal chaos and confusion. Before this experience, I was certain I am an animal at the mercy of the immutable laws of nature and with no different a fate than all other animals. I was certain that nothingness follows death and that life is only as meaningful as we make it. But just as certainly, Gellert would want me to descend into the abyss of irrational thinking, as if I weren't already disturbed enough by my anesthesia experience. I could only wonder, was that really wise? I would have to relive it all over again.

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## First Installment

### This Must Be a Hallucination

I open my eyes and see tall blades of grass. I am on my back, my head to one side. I run my hand along my body from my waist up to my head and scalp. I have no hair on my head. I touch my face.

Barefoot and in a hospital gown, I slowly stand up. I am standing on a patch of grass in the trough of a sloping forest canyon. Beside me is a well-worn trail that snakes down along the canyon floor and twists out of sight. Above me the trail continues, but I can't see where.

A warm, balmy breeze blows into the opening of the back of my gown. *How did I get here?* I scroll my memory to see if I can find a clue, but to no avail. I remember *nothing*. Absolutely nothing. I don't know who I am, I don't know my name, I don't know where I come from. I don't know anything.

There is movement far below. Somebody is coming. Minutes pass as I try to figure out what to do. What *can* I do? I can hide, but then what?

A man comes into view about two hundred yards from me. He is about six feet tall with dark features. His T-shirt reveals an athletic build.

“Are you Richard Caldwell?” he shouts.

*Yes, that's who I am! I am Richard Caldwell who a moment ago was about to go into the operating room for surgery. I was just injected with a sedative. How did I get from there to here?*

“I’m Marc Daniels,” he says as he reaches me. He is cordial, but not particularly friendly. He eyes me from head to toe. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I think I’m supposed to be in the hospital.”

He stares at me.

“How do you know who I am?” I say.

“My godfather sent me to get you. He lives on top of the mountain that this canyon leads to.”

He pulls out a cell phone from his pocket and presses a few buttons. I wonder how he is going to get reception here. There are no signs of civilization around.

“Hi honey. How are you?” he says into the phone. “Our guest has come from a hospital. All he has got on is a hospital gown. Can you get him some clothes?”

He listens to the other party.

“He’s about my size, a couple of inches shorter,” he responds, and then listens again. Turning to me, he says, “What’s your shoe size?”

“Nine and a half,” I say automatically, surprised that I know this about myself but, evidently, little else.

“Nine and a half,” he repeats into the phone.

Again a brief delay, and he says, “Okay sweetie, meet you there.”

And he shuts off the phone and puts it back into his pocket.

“The trail has stones. Can you manage?” he asks.

“I think so.”

“Good. We have to get there before sunset.”

He walks some fifteen yards ahead while I stand still.

“Are you coming?” he shouts after stopping and turning to face me.

I follow.

\* \* \*

The trail is a steady climb upwards. Lush, green shrubbery flanks both sides of it.

“Do you know how I got here?” I ask Daniels.

He stops abruptly, turns around, and says, “This will sound strange to you, but if you came from a hospital you are still in it. You are here in mind. Not *your* mind, but mind. You must have been in a state that allowed you to cross the threshold between your world and this one.”

Taking his words into *my* mind, which I *know* is sane—even though I can remember hardly anything before this moment—I analyze them. *Your world and this one?* That is nonsense. There is only one world. It becomes instantly clear. There is no other possible conclusion. If I was injected with a sedative in preparation for surgery, *this must be a hallucination*. Something must have gone wrong with the anesthesia. Yet how strange: this place seems physically real, and my body has sensation. He, too, seems physically real.

Problem: if I treat this hallucination as real, I’m feeding it. What should I do? I don’t seem to have much choice but to play along. But at all costs I must keep my wits about me.

“Who is your godfather?” I ask after we’ve covered some distance.

“You’ll see.”

“What does he want with me?”

“You’ll see that too.”



“Whom were you talking to?”

“My wife.”

“Where did you come from just now?”

“The foot of the canyon. We’re approaching the south face of the mountain. My wife will come from the other side. You keep falling behind. Are your feet bothering you?”

“Yes. And it’s hard to move in this gown.”

He stops again and faces me.

“Take it off,” he says.

“What!?”

“Take it off and turn it around and tie it in the front. You’ve got your butt hanging out through the slit and you can’t move your legs this way.”

I take it off. As I’m preparing to put it on with the opening in the front he grabs it from my hands and rips it down the middle.

*“What are you doing!?”* I exclaim.

“Here. Take each half and wrap it around each foot as a shoe. You need to be able to walk.”

“I’m naked!”

“Yes, and you’re no beauty either. Come on. Let’s go.”

I make “shoes,” tying the ends of the rags together. This hallucination is bewildering and banal at the same time.

\* \* \*

As we climb quietly, I wonder what could have gone wrong in the surgery. If I'm in a medically induced state of mind, it should end when the anaesthesia wears off. But when will that be?

Again I try some conversation. "The last thing I recall I was preparing for surgery. I was being sedated. What do you know about that?"

"Nothing. People come here in different ways. Drugs are not uncommon."

"I wasn't taking that kind of drug. This shouldn't be happening."

"People also come during a close encounter with death. Maybe you came that way."

"Where exactly are we?"

Stopping momentarily, he turns toward me. "We are in France."

He then resumes climbing. I think of the *Saturday Night Live* sketch with Dan Ackroyd playing the father of a family of alien Coneheads visiting Earth and posing as French people. Why can I remember that and little else? If I weren't so confused and vulnerable I would laugh.

"Why France?" I ask, struggling to keep up with him.

"This is where my godfather is from. He lived in New York at the time he died, but he is originally French."

"*At the time he died?* What are you talking about!?"

"You are in a land where the laws of your world are no longer fixed in the ways familiar to you. This is where the things you know and see in your world live in their essential forms, and continue to live when they are no longer alive in your world."

We come to the base of a small mountain and begin to ascend on the same trail. This mountain is real. The hot sun is real, too.

\* \* \*

The terrain is rough but picturesque, and the foliage full and northerly—I imagine, like the foothills of the French Alps—yet I’m in no frame of mind to enjoy them.

“If your godfather died and is alive here,” I say, “is this the afterlife?”

“It’s a parallel universe, to be more precise,” Daniels responds. “Don’t try to make sense of it the way you make sense of the world you come from.”

Physics is of course nowhere near proving the existence of parallel universes, but it has hypothesized *how* they might exist. I don’t know how I know that, but evidently, I do. It appears as if this hallucination is constructing this narrative with information I am familiar with, information already in my mind.

“If I was brought here to meet your godfather,” I say, “why wasn’t I brought directly to him? Why is this mountain hike necessary?”

I am looking for loopholes in the narrative.

“The doorway between universes is a complicated phenomenon,” Daniels says. “You weren’t beamed here according to precise coordinates, like on *Star Trek*. We’re fortunate to have found you within walking distance.”

“Where are the people in this universe?”

He stops and turns around again, moves his eyes down and up my body, and says, “You want to be around people?”

I don’t like this Marc Daniels. He is not only aggressive but sarcastic.

After some more climbing, I ask if he lives with his godfather.

“No,” he says. “I live nearby. I visit him regularly, cook him a dinner and talk. My wife likes to come—she has become an admirer of his.”

“You’re American, aren’t you?” I say.

“I was born here and went to America when I was eight.”

As we continue to ascend, I return to my medical predicament. Could this be a post-operative state? Steroids administered often after surgery to reduce swelling are known to have hallucinogenic effects in sufficient quantities.

Eventually we come to the crest of the mountain and walk along it. In the distance I see signs of civilization and a road that comes up the north side. We come to an opening more or less at the peak, and I see an elegant, stone Tudor house with a chimney a couple of hundred feet ahead.

A woman’s voice calls out, “Marc, I’m over here.”

To my right I see an attractive woman with a long colorful skirt, high-heeled boots, a small knapsack over her back, and a large paper bag in her hand. Evidently having just arrived herself, she comes over to us and greets Daniels affectionately. She looks me over quickly. I feel like a fool, naked with my feet in big bandages. Our eyes meet. Mona Lisa could envy her enigmatic smile.