

ABSTRACT

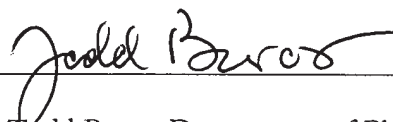
The Socratic Circle: An Unorthodox Reflection on Death, Church,
and the Mind-Body Problem

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This thesis explores the philosophical issues of Philosophy of Mind through the lens of a fictional memoir. The memoir revolves around a young intellectual named Skylar and tracks the evolution of his thoughts as he reckons with the impending death of his best friend. Though Skylar and the other characters articulate many of the standard contemporary stances on the so-called Mind-Body Problem, no final answer to the problem is given. Instead, the work ends with the introduction of the concept of the Socratic Circle: the idea that the philosophical journey is something which is undertaken in a hopeful search for truth, but which must be anchored by a stern recognition of one's own foolishness.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Todd Buras", written over a horizontal line.

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THE SOCRATIC CIRCLE: AN UNORTHODOX REFLECTION ON DEATH,
CHURCH, AND THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have held a story in my mind for many years, not knowing who to tell, or how to tell it. My wife has pestered me since the early days of our marriage to get it down on paper; “just get it off your chest and onto the page,” she always says, and I’m sure she’s right. The sad fact is that the story itself is of little consequence, and only incidentally interesting. Put simply, the story is about a young man who falls ill, and his concerned best friend. That friend is my father.

My father’s name was Skylar. He was a thoughtful man. He was a true Texan, though not a *typical* one, born in 1991, and raised in a Baptist church. He was a great husband and father, and a universally beloved teacher. The brief period in which the story takes place is not indicative of his life as a whole; nevertheless, I believe in my heart that he would be glad to hear that I am writing down this particular episode in his life. I believe it, because throughout his life he spoke often of all the little realizations that came to him during his friend’s illness. All those little realizations, in fact, are the point of this story. And in light of that observation, I must begin the story with an apology. This story, one might say, is a story about ideas. By that, I do not mean that certain characters represent certain ideas; I’ll leave such complexities to greater writers than myself. For one thing, all the characters in this story are real people, rendered as faithfully as possible by a child of a different generation. To that end, I have referenced the journals which my father kept at the time, as well as several conversations I had with my father years ago. I have also tracked down some of Jon’s writing—but I’m getting ahead of myself.

Some readers may wonder why I would spend all this time and effort on recreating the context in which my father came to understand things differently. Why, they might ask,

wouldn't you just write down the ideas themselves? Why not write an essay, or a sermon, or a scholarly article? Setting aside the simple fact that I am a dreadful writer of essays, sermons, and articles, I would answer them with a sentiment my father often repeated: "ideas come from life, not the other way around." My father believed that ideas divorced from their concrete origins were useless ideas. His ideas are important, but they are only helpful when understood in terms of the context they come from. Perhaps I've lost readers already. To those who find the form of this story offensive, heavy-handed, or uninteresting, I can only reply that it could not have been written any other way.

CHAPTER ONE

The Holey House of Worship

In Skylar's second year after college, he ran into one of his old professors by chance on campus. He was tutoring part time in the philosophy department, and happened upon the stout old man in the cafeteria of the student union building. His name was Dr. Pitcairn, a name which, if he had researched it even a bit, he would have found he shared with a small Caribbean island; but he was not the sort to go out of his way looking for things. Dr. Pitcairn, a long-time lecturer in the lower levels of the biology department, had taken a liking to Skylar in his junior year when they talked at length after an extra-credit presentation. Skylar, whose mind had never been particularly well-adapted for the type of thinking required in such an observational field of science, had given a short talk about the roots of biology in Hellenistic philosophy, specifically the techniques Aristotle presents in his *Posterior Analytics*. Pitcairn, whose mind had never been particularly well-adapted to philosophy, saw Skylar as an astute foil to his undergraduate self.

He invited Skylar to join him at the café on campus, and after an hour of free-flowing conversation and several cups of coffee, they expressed to each other a budding sense of kinship, exchanging their hope-to-do-this-agains and glad-to-have-made-your-acquaintances with a firm handshake. The intention was to continue the conversation at a local tea house in a week or two, but, as these things often go, the date was swept under other obligations. Skylar's intramural basketball team made a run in the tournament and Pitcairn was distracted by a sudden dip in his wife's health, and that was that.

As I have said, two years after graduating, Skylar was on campus when he and Dr. Pitcairn crossed paths in the cafeteria. In that moment, there was every chance that they would look at their watches as they walked past each other, or nod and smile. Each looked

up and instantly recognized the other, but felt the typical, irrational worry that he had been forgotten. Skylar grimaced meaningfully as they passed, and Pitcairn raised his hand; that might have been it, but for Skylar's depression—but we'll speak of that presently.

“Dr. Pitcairn,” Skylar said, turning.

Pitcairn wheeled around, happy to have been acknowledged, and shook Skylar's hand.

“You're a graduate now, son. Call me Francis,” he replied. “Forgive me, but I've lost your name among all the others.”

“Skylar.”

“Skylar Cofield, that's right. How are you these days?” Pitcairn asked.

The men swapped the sort of caricatures of life that one gives in polite society; this, too, would have fulfilled their social obligation, but they found themselves walking together. Such was their natural affinity, each seeing some resemblance of himself in the other, and quite honestly craving the company of a like-minded person, that they eventually decided to meet within the week and finish the long-overdue conversation that they had scheduled some four years earlier.

It will perhaps be in the interest of the reader to know something of their particular persons. Skylar was broad-shouldered, slim, tan, and dark haired, the sort of person who was picked early in the schoolyard more for stature than merit, but whose natural talent and wit allowed him to excel despite his apathy. Skylar's mind was the kind that is quick to make connections, but shrewd in its judgement of ideas. He was a favorite student of his English teachers as a child, by virtue of his uncanny knack for pointing out analogy and metaphor, until he began to question the validity of literary criticism itself (this tended to come off as dismissive, if only because Skylar's ability to deliver truth always lagged behind his ability to

apprehend it). Such a mind served him well in his exams, and he would have undoubtedly attended a more prestigious university, had his parents been able to afford it.

Pitcairn too had been an effortless athlete in his youth, but he had acquired a substantial belly and bad joints in his fourth and fifth decades of life. His hair, once bright red, had turned light-grey, and his small, dark eyes sat back in a masculine skull under a brow that was almost always furrowed. Behind those ever-searching eyes, his mind was quite as naturally analytical as Skylar's, but he was given disproportionately to the "small picture," as it were, while Skylar counted it as a point of pride that he was as poor a memorizer and detail-studier as he was a brilliant synthetic thinker. Both Skylar and Dr. Pitcairn often found that thinkers who tended towards the opposite perspective were difficult relations, and yet they possessed with each other a sort of rapport, grounded in a mutual commitment to good sense and a great number of common experiences, having grown up in the same part of the state.

The two made plans to meet at the local donut shop, at the only time they were both available: Sunday morning at nine o'clock. They arrived there promptly, and soon they were chatting along like old friends. The conversation itself was of little substance. The gap in their academic disciplines might have become a source of awkwardness, but instead it became the central topic of discussion. Pitcairn was concerned with defending the factuality and authority of scientific discovery, and Skylar found cruel pleasure in playing devil's advocate. He challenged Pitcairn to explain why scientific thought, which is necessarily inductive, should take precedence over the deductive reasoning employed in metaphysical inquiry; Pitcairn spent nearly an hour trying to convince Skylar that science's authority comes from its backbone in the purely mathematical discipline of physics, but ultimately could give no answer when Skylar began to launch a skeptical argument which seemed to undermine

the validity of empirical evidence. They talked thus until morning neared noon, grinning as they engaged in an intellectual sparring match that required no winner. When Skylar apologetically admitted that he needed to leave, Pitcairn graciously spouted a list of to-dos, absolving him of any unmasked eagerness to go, and they found themselves again making plans to continue the conversation; as before, the time would have to be Sunday morning.

In just this way, almost by happy accident, one conversation became three, and then four, and so on, until there was an unspoken agreement that they would meet at the same time and place each Sunday morning. Both Skylar and Dr. Pitcairn would have said then that their conversations on Sundays were an agreeable diversion, a meeting of two sharp minds that spent too much time chafing against dull ones. They might even have made an allusion to the Biblical image of iron sharpening iron, though neither would have appreciated how deeply the image was related to their lives.

And here, perhaps, it is appropriate to revisit the subject of Skylar's depression. For him, the experience of leaving college was much like leaving a movie theater at noon, or, more accurately, leaving a sun-lit field for the damp confusion of a pitch-black cavern. His inner eye, which had been fixed on and guided by the rhythms and values of the academic world for twenty-two years, was thrust into an environment so totally alien that it expanded and contracted in a panic, trying to find its new bearings. Most of the friends of his youth and his undergraduate days were far away, and an increasing number of them were married. Even more disturbing was the disappearance of the ebb and flow of the school year, which was replaced by a constant, dull-faced parade of bills, week nights, and mindless chores. He worked an office job so unremarkable that it need not be mentioned here, and after a year he quit, taking double shifts at a coffee shop downtown and tutoring part-time at the university to make ends meet.

If there was one positive result of his leaving the university, it was that the thirst for knowledge grew in him. The rushing river of information which had been cutting a canyon through his mind for nearly a decade was dammed up, and the pitiful trickle that replaced it left him parched for intellectual stimulation. He began a project of his own design, vowing to reread every book of importance that he had been assigned since high school, meticulously and one at a time. The reading was almost meditative for him, and he found himself able to focus in a way which had eluded him for years. After a decade of overstimulation, he was now living the kind of mundane life which might as well be likened to blinders. Against all the noise, the pettiness, the constant influx and outpour of money, the important ideas presented in literature seemed the only words with any color. Philosophy, which had held him in its grasp for a few semesters in college and then promptly become a chore like everything else, now became vibrant again. He could feel its importance. It seemed to him a deep well of ungrasped knowledge—the only possible source of a solution to his current crisis, or even a source of salvation.

Perhaps this thirst alone could explain Skylar's excitement at the prospect of a conversational partner, but there was another layer which was equally important. Skylar had grown up in a typical First Baptist Church—too many members to know everyone's name, full of businessmen and city government people and others who needed a public image of Christian values in order to bolster their careers. Of course, there were also plenty of good down-to-earth people, and a youth group that, while large, was on the whole much tighter-knit than the rest of the congregation. As a young man, Skylar had been the darling child of the youth group. He quickly learned that intellect was easily mistaken for piety, a fact which he exploited often as a child, but which he resented greatly as he grew older. College presented the kind of mind-expanding challenge that he had longed for, but since he felt an

obligation to stay connected with his roots, and had no real reason to doubt that the fundamental premises of his upbringing were true, he spent much of his first semester attempting to remain a consistent churchgoer. This was a doomed endeavor. He found that he couldn't stand his own church's college ministry, and though he quickly found a so-called missional community to meet with weekly on campus, and remained a nominal member for all four years of college, by February of his first year he had stopped going completely.

This is not to say that Skylar considered himself an atheist, or an agnostic—or even “unchurched” if you pressed him. He had been taught in his formative years, as is the Baptist way, that God doesn't live in a building. The exercise of seeing God in people and mountains and homework, which he had nearly perfected at the height of his religious fervor in high school, now became the thin thread connecting him to the great tapestry of the church, at least in his own estimation. His church simply did not reside in a building at an appointed time anymore. His classes, the late-night talks with friends about God and women in 24-hour diners, even lonesome long walks across campus became his church, the places where he learned about God, communed with God, and participated in what he called “unrecognized sacraments.” These forgotten bits of sacred living were elusive to him, and seemingly changed by the month, but they included things like dipping french fries in milkshakes, kissing, and the committed observance of sunrises. Skylar would proudly (and though he scarcely realized it, defensively) tell people who asked about it that unrecognized sacraments were “anything and everything that makes you feel like God's right around the corner.” Even such tenuous religious practice faded as Skylar moved out of his undergraduate years; and that is why he could not fully understand what these meetings with Pitcairn meant to him, at least not at first. Skylar slowly became aware that the intrusive warmth in his chest, the feeling of being really *known*, which he felt in their morning

conversations, was a sensation he remembered from his past: the feeling of being at church. Though it was by no means a purely positive feeling (indeed, it carried with it as much of a sense of guilt as it did a sense of comfort), it was strangely compelling to him, and he soon felt almost addicted to the communion, haphazard and incomplete as it was. He jokingly began calling the Shipley's where they met each week the "Holey House of Worship" as a sort of tribute to this discovery, though Pitcairn thought the name was a mere jest.

One morning, moved by some bolder shade of his ever-present longing, Skylar decided to broach the subject with Pitcairn.

"Francis, did you ever go to church?" he asked.

"Not since Helena died," said Frances. "She grew up Methodist, so we used to go to the Methodist church over by the high school. I never really liked the services or anything, but Mike and Elizabeth were really involved there for a while. Probably ten years before you were at the high school. Good people, mostly. But without Helena—" Frances cut off and stared. After a moment he seemed to return, and said, "I don't have any reason to go anymore. Why do you ask?"

"I just find the whole thing interesting. I used to go all the time, and I would pray and go on mission trips and all that, but then, you know how it is, I got older and things changed, and school took over. At some point it stopped making sense to be somewhere I didn't feel comfortable, so I quit. I put it out of my mind, mostly, but now here we are. For the first time in years I wake up excited on Sunday mornings, and I wonder if there's something in that. It's almost church, in a way, or what church ought to be. Like we get up each week and drive here for Not-Church. It means something to me."

Francis took a liking to Skylar's new term, not least of all because he sensed that there was a seriousness in how he had talked about it. Thus, quite incidentally, both Skylar

and Pitcairn crossed a sort of threshold in their friendship. To name the meeting was to give it a gravity which subtly shifted its meaning, and indeed its purpose.

The primary result of founding Not-Church was the idea to add members. Pitcairn jokingly proposed that they “evangelize” a bit, though neither he nor Skylar seriously anticipated that someone would be interested in meeting over donuts at a time so dominated by the dual forces of the pew and the pillow. Pitcairn was the first to add a committed member. He had long been acquainted with a woman named Doreen Lloyd who had been a librarian at the university for some forty years. When he mentioned the meeting in passing, she told him that she had been needing a group of people to talk to on Sundays, and that she thought God had sent him to her that day. This made Pitcairn rather uncomfortable, for though he would have called himself an agnostic, the idea of God actually intervening in the affairs of humans was one that he had never entertained; at any rate, Doreen secured a place at the table, and two became three.

Doreen added a completely different voice to Not-Church. She was an interesting and thoughtful woman, not well-educated in the formal sense, but well-steeped in the books she had sorted and mended for most of her life. Her small frame supported a thin body, but her spine was never bent, and she had a fire in her speech which had long impressed Dr. Pitcairn. Doreen was completely disinterested in both philosophy and science, and even dared to quote the New Testament at Skylar, chiding that she would not be taken in by any ‘hollow and deceptive philosophy’ with a wag of her finger. This skepticism, which pervaded most of her thoughts about the academic world, disappeared completely when she began to talk about God. Her matter-of-fact manner of discussing faith amused Skylar and Pitcairn, though neither knew quite how to discuss their interests across such a wide gulf. Eventually, the new equilibrium pushed the subjects discussed in Not-Church into a much more

theological mode, which the founders accepted as a nominally appropriate shift. However, Pitcairn became restless for a new presence in the group, and encouraged Skylar to seek out a disciple of his own.

Skylar's convert was a person who had been sitting under his nose all along—his roommate and long-time best friend Jon Harringer. Jon's role in Skylar's life could not be overestimated. The two boys met in church at the age of seven and became almost instantly inseparable. Skylar's parents were glad that he had finally found a friend, and Jon's parents, who were mostly absent, had no problem leaving Jon at Skylar's house as often as he liked. As children they spent as many nights together as they did apart, talking until they fell asleep or were cut off by the scolds of Skylar's parents. The boys were kindred spirits in many ways; they were both successful in school and quite thoughtful, and whether by happy accident or simply as a function of all the time they spent in each other's company, their tastes in entertainment, art, and even food were nearly identical.

However, as wise people sometimes say, facsimiles make poor friends, and their differences contributed as much to their companionship as their similarities. While Skylar had a deep-set appreciation for art, he sometimes said that Jon "lived inside" art. Jon had always had a connection to art in every form, especially painting. Even before he could articulate it, he treated creation as a cypher for life, interpreting and expanding upon his experiences in the form of beautiful landscape paintings, sculptures, or piano music. Skylar was proficient, even talented at many of these forms of expression, but contented himself with the act of participation, never having any pretense that what he created would have lasting impact or much artistic value. He spent most of his time admiring Jon's art and helping him hone it.

To talk only of Jon's art, though, would be to reduce his person. Even his creative prowess taken as a whole was only a facet of a larger ability which was at the core of Jon's being: he was an essentially tranquil soul. In some ways, as a matter of course, he was rather intense. He enjoyed long efforts in concentration and precision, and could least of all be called lazy. Yet, at the core, Jon's mind was always calm. The stability it gave him was called different names by different people; sometimes self-control, sometimes perseverance, sometimes hope—even, on occasion, faith. Once, when Skylar brought up the particular quality and asked him what it was, Jon responded, "I guess I'm just never that worried about everything falling apart, because it never quite feels put together in the first place." Skylar thought at the time that his statement was most likely modesty, or else a misunderstanding of what he was referring to, but Jon had understood him perfectly, and meant what he said.

When Skylar asked Jon if he was interested in coming to Not-Church, Jon agreed without hesitation. Jon had undergone a similar shift in his faith, and the idea of filling the gap left by church was both intriguing and relieving. And so the four members of Not-Church began to meet on Sunday mornings in the corner booth of the downtown Shipley's Donuts.

At the beginning, their conversations were a patchwork of different ideologies and points of view. Often, one of them would say something, and the three others would have three totally distinct understandings of what it meant. For the first few weeks, much of the conversation was taken up with a comical round-table translation exercise. Doreen would start talking about the hypocrisy of Christians who support the death penalty, and all three men would have different reactions: Jon would listen carefully and repeat her ideas back, Pitcairn would play devil's advocate and explain the position, and Skylar would stop Pitcairn's explanation and try to define hypocrisy as a concept. After a while, though, as

groups of people often do when given time and care, they began to really understand each other. Jon would nod his head and say that “there’s no idea that comes from nowhere,” pointing out the ways in which each member’s thoughts and concerns had their origins in life.

The conversations would have sounded ridiculous to outside observers (indeed, they often received a few sideways glances before they were finished), and yet there was a strange power in their meetings. At times they centered on politics or matters of social strife, or even philosophy. Other times the topics were much less dignified, and great laughs would erupt from their booth. Even in the midst of laughter, the conversation would turn to the great beauty and mystery of life, or to God, or to the importance of friends and family. Perhaps the only unifying force that was ever-present in Not-Church was the genuine concern they grew to have for one another. Each Sunday morning would start with hugs and sharp questions about the week’s trials and triumphs big and small, a sort of peculiar passing of the peace which they kept without thinking. When the first of their birthdays rolled around, Jon’s twenty-fourth, they brought paper hats and stuck his doughnuts full of candles, even attempting a chorus of “Happy Birthday” in loud voices to the amusement of the cashiers. For nearly two years the four friends grew to love each other without great incident. Their familial bonds were finally tested on a pleasantly cool October day, much like any other Sunday, when they heard about Jon’s illness.

CHAPTER TWO

The Church Elders

It is a human fact that everyone will experience death. It is a modern American fact that the longer you live, the more well-acquainted you are with the new, improved form of death which we call cancer. Both Doreen and Francis had become well-acquainted with cancer by their late fifties, and both hated it. Francis had watched his wife die of lung cancer about the time that Skylar graduated college, and Doreen had survived cancer twice herself, the second battle ending in a double-mastectomy.

For Francis, cancer was an enemy mostly of his routine. When his wife died, it had left him desperate. This was partially because she had received “favorable” odds from her doctor; as much as her death itself left him on his knees, the fact that the numbers had lied was perhaps the greatest blow to his sanity. There was also the matter of what he called “out of office” life. This mode of life, the mundane one which obeys no theory or analysis, which tumbles on day by day in unending moments of mere humanity, was one which he had relegated mostly to the care of his dear Catherine for the duration of his married life. This is not to say that Francis never spent time with his children, or that he did not enjoy the simple pleasures of life; on the contrary, the Pitcairn children knew their father far more intimately than most children of professors do. But when Catherine died, Francis found that all the little arrangements one makes in life, all the meals and errands and calls to friends, were completely overwhelming. With his wife gone and his children out of the house, Francis found himself almost immediately disengaging from all the social relations which his Catherine had so carefully maintained, and especially the ones which he had made at church. His mental distress and his failure to take good physical care of himself left him always

drowsy, and he alternated between late nights in his office writing and fourteen-hour weekend sleeps which he woke from in the early afternoon (this particularly surprised him, because he had never been able to sleep in past nine o'clock since college). The rhythm of life which he had laid out with his wife over decades had fallen into chaos. Thus, the emergence of Not-Church signalled the first positive change in his lifestyle since the death of his wife, and though he was never outwardly a churchgoing man after Catherine passed, the equilibrium that church gave him (which, to be honest, was the only benefit he ever saw in it) was restored.

Doreen's experience with cancer had been different. Her chief quality, from her youth on, had been fortitude. Cancer was not a boundary in her life story; it was just another iteration of the same adversarial force which she had battled in some form or another all her life. Many people, Francis for instance, see cancer as *tragic*. Doreen saw it as evil. The difference may seem trivial, but it explains the great differences between Doreen and Francis. For one, Doreen never treated her cancer as illness. Instead it was always a battle, always an insidious evil attempting to break her righteous will to live. I don't know enough about cancer to say this with any authority, but I would swear that she lived through two bouts of breast cancer because of her willpower as much as she did because of her doctors and treatments.

The real tragedy in Doreen's case came as an indirect result of her cancer. When the first signs of cancer were discovered, her children were still in high school. She underwent many treatments, but the most damaging was the removal of a tumor from her left breast. It saved her life, but left her disfigured in a way that would harm her more than any illness could. Doreen could not have cared less about her physical appearance. She was instinctively opposed to most sexual matters (a result of her fundamentalist upbringing), and so believed

that marital love was something to be experienced in the dark, by necessity, and with much repenting. However, the change in her body was one which troubled her husband greatly. Their attraction to one another, which had never been a passionate affair, had always been driven by his desire to be with her. The change diminished his desire to almost nothing, and the thorny conversations that resulted were the source of a rift which grew between them for years. After their children left for college, Doreen found herself in a situation which she had always condemned in others: she felt that a divorce was the best possible outcome for her marriage.

Two years later, she was, as it were, a liberated woman. If the tragic loss of his spouse had left Francis adrift in a sea of confusion, the loss of hers had given Doreen power and direction of the kind and quantity she had never possessed. She took charge of her situation, and, in a sort of reactionary fury, feeling the opportunity to express thoughts and intentions she had always kept at bay, she set about ridding her life of all the things she had done and been which were solely a result of her husband's presence. She had never been dumped as a young girl, and this winnowing of her social calendar, house, and general disposition seemed a fitting stand in for the burned photo-booth pictures and decapitated teddy bears that she never had. She cut out everything she didn't like: she never cooked red meat, redecorated in a style which had been too feminine for Harold, cut the phone line in favor of a new-fangled cell phone, and threw away all her skirts in favor of capri pants and slacks. She began to see more of her acquaintances from the university, and less of the wives of bankers with whom she had been obligated to maintain formal friendships. But most importantly, she left the Baptist church.

There was no clear reason for doing so at first. She had been Baptist long before she had been Harold's wife, and truth be told she was a much better Christian than he was.

Indeed, she was heavily involved in the goings-on at First Baptist, and had many lifelong friends at the church. Yet, she had the distinct impression that the final step in beginning her new journey was leaving the church. The first Sunday that she stayed home, she woke up at the exact time when her alarm normally sounded. She cooked herself breakfast and read a book on the couch in her pajamas, and smiled. By the second month, she could no longer bear the odd emptiness of Sunday mornings. By chance, she overheard one of her coworkers saying that she attended a Wednesday night Eucharist service at Saint Paul's Episcopal Church. Doreen stayed at home for two Wednesday nights and prayed about it. She had always thought that Episcopalians (or "Episcopals" as she called them) were too liberal, and she had heard growing up that most of them didn't really believe in Jesus at all. On the third week after hearing about the service, she showed up. She found that she was slightly overdressed, but the quiet and the warm, respectful faces of the women made her feel at home, even though she stumbled through the liturgy and pronounced "amen" differently than the others. As she took the bread and wine (this, her first ever Communion service conducted with alcohol rather than grape juice), she felt a sort of unification with the people around her, and even, perhaps, a unification with the many millions of those not present with her, but who were connected with her by participation in the same act. This feeling, of course, was a deeply internalized one. Had she articulated it herself, she might have said that she felt like all those years of following rules made her tired, and that in that quiet service in the chapel of Saint Paul's, she finally understood the forgiveness and relief her pastors had always talked about.

Despite the unity she felt, though, Doreen could not bring herself to join the church. She contented herself with being a welcomed outsider, and took such an identity to heart. The insights that had come with her divorce all seemed to have the same result: she was still

the same person, living in the same place, but she felt as though she was an alien arriving in a strange country, marvelling at all the odd elements of this foreign environment. The theology that she had taken for granted since childhood was no longer carved in stone; it was fragile now, and subject to criticism, but it was also alive and meaningful in a way that it had never been before.

In the midst of all of this freedom and turmoil, Francis had invited her to come to Not-Church. The gather meant even more to her than it did to Francis and Skylar, because it did not simply represent a community of sorts, but in fact it was the final missing piece in her newly-built life. Her Sunday mornings were filled once again, and she had found a group to which she truly *belonged*.

CHAPTER THREE

A Question of Composition

Then came the Sunday in October. Francis arrived at Shipley's early and waited in a booth by the window, skimming the sports section. Soon after, Skylar walked in, and then Doreen, bundled in so many layers that her thin body was obscured. They had talked excitedly about the cold front blowing through town and the field goal that decided the football game the night before.

When Jon finally walked in, forty-five minutes late, they knew that something was wrong. Jon didn't look sickly or worried, exactly; only his posture was different. His normally loose shoulders were taut and his neck was bent under an invisible weight, but as he approached the table, he smiled at his friends.

"I need to tell you guys something," he said, settling himself down into a chair. There was an air of kindness in his voice, but the tone he took was apologetic. He explained the diagnosis, starting from a few scattered symptoms he had been worrying about, and concluding with the phrase "stage four."

So, Jon had cancer. In times like these Skylar had always wanted to be an exemplar of steadiness, an immovable island of loyalty and goodwill that his friends could dock themselves against. But in the moment, he was speechless. His head went fuzzy, tears half-formed in his eyes, and an unwanted warmth came into his upper breast.

Doreen's reaction was automatic. She stood, strode over to Jon's chair and bent to hold his hand in hers. As she stroked his knuckles and squeezed, she simply said, "We love you, Jonathan." Her reaction moved the others, especially Skylar. He had seen Doreen primarily in terms of her limited education until then; now he saw her as an expert in a field

which he had scarcely considered. The ability to love well when it counted, he realized, was something that she possessed in spades, and he, barely at all.

“What are the numbers?” Francis asked. Skylar nodded against his will. He had been wondering the same thing. Maybe he could find a way to steady himself if Jon had a chance to live.

“Not good,” Jon said. “But it’s okay. My life is good.” Now there was a hitch in his voice, and he leaned into Doreen. He looked at Skylar and nodded.

The rest of the morning was, as a whole, rather unremarkable. The foursome talked as normally as they could manage, about any topic which could be summoned to mind, so long as it was neither too sober to be discussed in light of Jon’s news, nor too light to be stomachied. It turns out that such topics are rare, and so, after an hour of intermittent conversation and long stretches of contemplative silence, they went their separate ways.

Francis, the stern pragmatist of the group, responded most simply to the news: he went home, and had a horrible day. Beyond that, there was little to do, he thought, and as long as he was adequately saddened by the news, and sent Jon an encouraging message once or twice throughout the week, he had fulfilled his moral duties. Doreen’s mind was filled during the following days with a fog, which, though she chalked it up to fatigue, was at bottom a sort of dull rage. Of all people, she thought that Jon was one of the least deserving of an early exit from life, or indeed even a prolonged suffering. He was wise, and brilliant; a burning star which would shine out for a long time, if justice were done. She communicated this sentiment mostly in the form of baked goods and firm squeezes of the arm, which Jon deeply appreciated. In his mind, she was just about the only person who understood that the opposite of life is not death, but fear. That was not all she did, of course. Constantly throughout the first week, and daily for the rest of those terrible months, Doreen paused to

pray, sometimes pleading silently with God to heal Jon, sometimes shouting out in anger, but many times simply asking God to give Jon strength, whatever the outcome of his sickness. These prayers were the ones she shared with others, if only because she had been taught that God's will has more to do with the inside than with the physical outcomes of a situation. But secretly, she felt that if God didn't care about the physical outcomes, he was more callous than she was.



And then, there was Skylar. At this point in the story, we must delve back into Skylar's history, though it takes us far away from the moments following Jon's diagnosis.

Skylar had entered college with the intention of becoming a classics professor: an intention that he had pursued quite successfully for the first two of his undergraduate years. However, as he grew in skill and in wisdom, he began to tire of what were (in his estimation only) the trivial aspects of the discipline. He had no interest in digging up and transcribing ancient documents; indeed, even the study of ancient cultures for its own sake seemed a waste to him. What Skylar truly valued were the *ideas* that presented themselves, sharply as hard-struck bells, in the texts he translated laboriously, line by line. It occurred to him, sometime in his third semester, that the people who spent their time studying the ideas of the ancients were not the classicists, but the philosophers. It occurred to him the following semester that he should take philosophy classes.

He gravitated to the oldest and most widely-read texts at first. He read all the Athenians, and found that he liked Aristotle the best: it was Aristotle's constant concern with the concrete outcomes of things that intrigued him most. Aristotle spent so much time

on the mundane things, like the cataloging of animal species or in-depth descriptions of different kinds of friendship, that Skylar thought he would have been right at home in the modern world. His dedication to logic and reason, over and against the religion and mythology of the ancient world, made him seem like a perfect fit for the intellectual culture of the late 20th Century: there could be personal value, perhaps, in the practice of religion, but in the end, Aristotle's views bottomed out in rational theories. However, there was one thing that bothered Skylar about Aristotle. When it came to moral philosophy, his theory of virtue was predicated on a belief in the intrinsic purpose of all things. Perhaps this made sense with knives or horse bridles, but Skylar couldn't accept the idea that people were so simple. Worse yet, Aristotle's understanding of purpose seemed to stem from the idea that different things were fundamentally different, and this was in direct contradiction to what Skylar had been taught all his life: that people, stars, and horse bridles were all made of the same stuff: protons, neutrons, and electrons. He loved where Aristotle was going, but he longed to find the thinkers that could bridge the gap between the ancients and the world of science that he lived in. Philosophy did something for Skylar that he had been told only God could do: it satisfied his thirst, yet left him wanting more.

He moved on in due course to the Enlightenment, where, he was told, many of the ideas he sought could be found for the first time. Skylar started with the "father of Enlightenment," Descartes, and began to see him as a sort of intellectual father figure. Descartes was everything that Skylar loved about Aristotle, and he rejected everything about the classical philosophers that Skylar disliked. Whereas Aristotle began most of his arguments with a few fundamental assumptions, Descartes developed a whole philosophy from what seemed like no assumptions at all. He began with the famous *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am," and reasoned from there to a robust metaphysics, even taking a large

part of his *Meditations* to defeat a skeptical argument. Skylar wondered at the power of Descartes's intellect, and commented to an older student that he was amazed by the originality of Descartes's thoughts. The older student, who perhaps felt that he had something to prove, replied that most of Descartes's ideas were really clearly found in Lucretius.

Skylar couldn't resist the challenge and tracked back to the first century in order to study Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, which he read in both English and Latin. The book was like nothing he had ever encountered. It was composed like an epic poem, beautifully and masterfully written, and yet, as far as he could tell, the hero of the book was reason itself, combatting the great monster of ignorance. Lucretius developed powerful arguments about the composition and structure of the universe, which rivaled that of the best philosophy Skylar had ever read; yet, they were concealed in the form of a great work of art. He imagined all the scholars and casual readers over the years who had stumbled into Lucretius's complicated philosophy in an attempt to read his poetry. The thought was so compelling that it moved him to take up a new hobby, which he had never considered before. He decided to learn to write poetry, with the intention of taking up Lucretius's ancient project. He would write poems that captured the ideas of his new philosophical views, which he had only recently learned to call "naturalism." He wrote five poems the first week, and two poems in the next two semesters, and then, as these things often go, he set it aside until graduation.

Skylar finally decided to pick his project up again five months before Jon's diagnosis. In the intervening months, they would sit for hours in Jon's cramped studio after Skylar finished work, Skylar whittling verses and Jon mixing paint. Those moments were quiet and

lovely, filled with the sort of masculine camaraderie and affection that transcends and often avoids the spoken word.

Sometimes, they would talk about doing a joint exhibit, pairing their art and poetry, but neither of them seriously considered it. Their products were too disparate, not simply in form, but in their central instincts. Skylar's writing was idealistic and lofty, built with a rigidity that, though it was intended to reflect the order in nature, often gave off the sort of antiseptic feel that most often crops up in academic writing. Jon's painting, on the other hand, was much less purposeful. He painted what he saw, on street or trail as often as in the mind's eye, and with more instinct than intent. Even so, Skylar revered Jon's ability to communicate what he himself so often attempted to capture; Jon's paintings were filled with the order and balance of the natural, concrete world, and, at the time, Skylar could not work out how Jon communicated it so well. Years later, Skylar scribbled a note to himself on the back of an envelope. "I realize now," he said, "that order can't bear the weight of being a subject; Jon showed the universal order by commenting on the accidental nature of a thousand little things. All those silly poems were aimed at capturing the uncapturable, like trying to make the eye seeing itself. Jon preferred using his eyes to see the world around him, and it made him better than me."

Whether or not all of Skylar's efforts were a waste, they signaled a deep need to find the truth, to understand the world not on an individual basis, but in terms of its underlying principles. He had toyed around with several systems, even taking a brace of courses on theism in college, in an attempt to assimilate his new interests with his so-called "cultural heritage"—that is, Southern evangelicalism. This, however, ended ultimately in failure: the tendencies of his naturalism and his old Christian assumptions about the way the universe were structured seemed, at least at the time, to be fundamentally contradictory. Naturalism,

which was also called physicalism or materialism by some of the people he read, assumed that the physical world was the fundamental one. Anything seemingly un-natural (that is, non-physical) was a sort of ghost, not real in itself, and anything *supernatural* was impossible. “How can there be something more fundamental than the fundamental itself?” naturalism asked. And on the other end, Christianity responded, “How can a world exist which does not rest on God as the fundamental element of being?” Skylar was caught in the middle, and ultimately put the question out of mind. He saw Christianity as something ingrained in his consciousness, which made it good and important; yet, it could not have the final word on *existence*. That was metaphysics, philosophy’s domain, and Skylar let his naturalism win the debate in the end.

Thus, Skylar settled again, as people tend to settle. It was not that he had found the answer, but that he had tired of the problem. The battle lines had moved, yes, but there was still a battle, a fault-line of contradiction in his beliefs. He accepted it, thinking to himself that this must be how it always is; you think yourself in circles, back and forth, and end up somewhat different than before, but never come to the end.

One poem, in particular, exemplified the new outlook he developed as college came to a close. It was written in the back cover of his notebook, taken down during a wistful hike through a patch of woods not far from his house. He originally titled it “A Naturalist’s Epigram,” but replaced the title after revisiting the poem a year later.

A Question of Composition

The composition of a Man
Is right, perhaps, to guess, but not to say;
And in our honesty admit
We know not how we differ from the Clay.

That question, the question of humankind's *composition*, was the one which began to haunt him when Jon's sickness entered the picture. The one thing that had always made Skylar uneasy about naturalism was its inability to address, or even acknowledge, the parts of people that were beyond the mere physical world. How could Skylar truly believe that his friend was just a bunch of atoms, that Jon's sickly body, which was destroying itself, was all of him? Jon was so much more than that, Skylar thought. Jon's age gave Skylar pause as well. It made him think about death concretely. Before, Skylar had seen humanity as a minuscule part of a giant, complex system, and religion as a means for people to feel important. But now, in the light of this new dilemma, it all seemed backwards. What could possibly mean more than the life of a friend? Skylar began to realize the fallout of his beliefs. If people were just bodies, and nothing else, then Jon's death would mean more than just sorrow. It would mean oblivion. Skylar didn't have any rational means to negate his naturalism; he still found himself trapped in his belief that there was nothing outside of matter and energy. And yet, a small seed of doubt had grown up inside him. Surely, some small voice said, there is more. Surely life is more important than that.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sword of Damocles

After Jon's first two rounds of treatment, on one of the first days that really felt like spring in Texas, Skylar drove Jon to his doctor. The tests came back, and the news wasn't good; the cancer was spreading, and Skylar's lungs were weaker than ever. The doctor suggested something Jon had expected for some time; he should leave the state before the muggy summer began, and go somewhere with dryer air.

Francis had a small condo in Estes Park, Colorado, which he gladly offered to Jon for the summer, and by the middle of March, Jon and Skylar were packing their bags. Skylar asked off of work so that he could drive, and they set out on a Thursday for the Rocky Mountains. They planned to meet Francis and Doreen on Sunday (they were travelling by air); Francis would help Jon get situated, and Doreen would stay with him for a few weeks. Skylar tossed two bloated suitcases and a duffel bag in the back of Jon's old Jeep, which had already been loaded up with Jon's painting supplies, and they pulled onto the highway as the sun crept over the horizon.

They stopped in Dallas at lunchtime, and decided to stay there for the night; Jon wanted to "ease into" their journey. After barbeque, they drove to the art museum. Neither of them had been since they were in high school, and Jon wanted to spend some time examining the Mondrian exhibit that he had always regretted missing. They pulled into the parking garage of the museum with high spirits and full stomachs.

Jon had a lightheaded spell on the way to the door, but in a moment it was gone, special exhibit tickets were purchased, and he and Skylar were walking around the museum. They spent ample time on old staples, the American West, late Renaissance art, and

Impressionism, and then moved on. There was a traveling exhibit of large, faceless costumes that interested Jon greatly. He said they looked like people searching for identity, and Skylar supposed that he was right. They found the wall of Mondrian and traced the artist's evolution from representational painting to the purely abstract, from trees and windmills to simple, bold blocks of colors.

"I understand the need," Skylar said. "He started out looking at things in particular, but at some point you wonder about representation itself."

"What do you mean?" Jon asked.

"What about color on its own, divorced from the things you paint with it? After a while, he was just painting colors and squares, abstract forms. Maybe he felt like he was admitting to himself that that's all painting is anyway."

"Or maybe he just wanted you to look harder to see what he was painting," Jon suggested. He pointed to a painting which was completely composed of colored blocks, divided by thick black lines. Near the top, an arch had been scratched out of a yellow rectangle, as if with a nail while the paint was still wet.

"Door?" he asked.

"Maybe."

Later, they slowed down and sat together, watching people and waiting for a spell. The conversation they had there, sitting in the 20th Century American wing, would stay with Skylar for many years. It was remarkable to him even then. Later that night, when he was home and in his bed, Skylar wrote down his best recollection of the conversation, in the form of a philosophical dialogue.



A Dialogue Between Skylar and Jon

Skylar and Jon sit on a bench in an art museum. As people walk by, they begin to talk.

Skylar: So, what's going on with your exhibit these days? Any new self-portraits?

Jon: I do have one thing I've been stuck on for a while. I started it a couple of weeks ago. I'm not sure how I feel about it.

Skylar: What's it like?

Jon: Maybe it's better to show you.

Jon pulls out his phone and scrolls around for a moment. He turns the screen to face Skylar. There's a painting on the screen: in it, a downtrodden, thin Jon sits cross-legged beneath a lamp. It would look like a yoga pose, were his head not resting in his hands.

Jon: I feel weak, basically.

Skylar: Are you afraid?

Jon: I'm not as afraid as I was. I'm afraid of suffering, but the idea of death...that doesn't keep me up at night anymore. I'm more or less resigned. Even if the cancer leaves, and it's decades away, I can't pretend like it's not coming. And I'm not afraid of what comes after, either. Whatever it is, exactly, I know that I'll be okay.

Skylar: I wish I could think like that.

Jon: Why can't you?

Skylar: I just can't rationalize any sort of life-after-death. I don't know what part of us is supposed to "live" after death.

Jon: What, you don't believe in souls anymore?

Skylar: I don't know. I don't really know *how* to believe in the existence of souls. It just seems like a good dream. A "lie breathed through silver¹." All this thinking about death, all of the fear, it's got me thinking. I still don't understand where the soul fits into all this. How can it fit?

Jon: Well, what do you mean? It seems like it fits, to me.

Skylar (smiling): How long do you have?

Jon: All day, buddy. Make your case.

Skylar: Okay, think of it this way. What do we really mean when we say "spirit" or "soul"? It seems like we mean one of two things...either a literal...*thing*, some soul thing which is non-physical, whatever that means, or we're really just referring to all the stuff we think and feel. Our *identity*, you might say.

Jon: Okay. I think I'm on board with that. But you don't like the idea of a literal "thing"?

Skylar: Well, I just don't know how that would work. Suppose there is a non-physical...*realm*, or something. A type of existence that isn't physical (in other words, it isn't made up of atoms or energy or anything). Even if a soul did exist in the non-physical realm, how would it affect my body? If I have a soul that isn't physical at all, how is it controlling me? How is it the source of my will? How is it making my mouth move right now? Or, better yet, if my soul is the "real" me, how does it get all the information from my body? How does it see

¹ Here, I believe that my father is referencing C.S. Lewis's famous conversation with Tolkien. Interestingly, this was the phrase Lewis used to describe the Christian myth before his conversion. Perhaps my father saw himself as an analog to Lewis, pre-conversion: a skeptic, but one who yearned for someone to prove him wrong.

what I see, or feel pain when I stub my toe? If the “real” me was a soul, living in some other plane of existence, why would physical pain bother me, or physical pleasure gratify me? You know?

Jon: I see what you’re saying. But why can’t there be a...link, or something? Why would you just assume that you know everything, and that there’s no invisible force, way too complicated for modern science to detect, that makes your body do what your soul wants, and your soul feel all the things your body senses?

Skylar: Causal closure.

Jon: Okay, I’ll play along. What’s causal closure?

Skylar: It’s complicated to explain.

Skylar thinks for a moment. He looks around ... He spots something.

Skylar: Okay, roll with me for a second.

Skylar walks over to a painting. It’s abstract, a Pollock-esque canvas splattered with paint.

Skylar: Look at this red splatter of paint, in the middle. Would you call it “random”?

Jon: Sort of. I mean, the painter meant to splatter it, so not in that sense.

Skylar: Right, sorry. In this sense: could you have predicted what the shape of the splatter would be before the painter threw it onto the canvas?

Jon: Got it. Yes, I’d call that random.

Skylar: Perfect. Now, in light of that, think about this. If you knew all of the factors—the viscosity of the paint, the direction of the air flow in the room, the exact force his hands

exerted on the paint can, and so on, and so on—you'd eventually be able to predict what happened.

Jon: Well, sure. In a perfect world. If you knew every single thing, with perfect precision or whatever, you could draw the shape of the splatter before it hit the canvas. But that's impossible. There's no way to know all that stuff.

Skylar: Right.

Jon: Well then, what's your point?

Skylar: You just made my point. We see the paint splattering as a *random* event. It's indeterminate: there's no way to know how it'll splatter. For all intents and purposes, it's random. But really, we just don't know enough. And if we *did*, we could model the thing perfectly. But this whole notion betrays your belief in causal closure.

Jon: Which you still haven't defined.

Skylar: Essentially, it's the idea that all physical outcomes have physical causes. The idea that when a thing happens, if I'm smart and knowledgeable enough, I can trace out the exact causes of that event. And it's equally true of the future. We even do it now: astronomers model the movement of the stars or asteroids. All of that is predicated on the belief that the underlying rules of the universe are consistent. It's all regular and it all follows the same set of rules.

Jon: Okay...so how does that affect my soul?

Skylar: Well, it means that you need to ask a question: Why would I think that I'm any different? What evidence do I have that the human brain is not exactly like every other thing in the world as we know it—or, in other words, that all my actions don't have physical causes, if you zoom in far enough.

Jon: I think I'm starting to get it. So, what you're saying is that, if you zoom in enough, from the words that I'm saying, to the physical movements of the muscles that cause the words, to the electric signals that cause the movements, to the brain-chemistry-stuff happening in my head (and that's where I really lose the ability to understand things), you can tell a complete story of how I said something.

Skylar: And *why* you said something. A completely solid story, which doesn't involve any outside causes.

Jon: Any non-physical causes, sure. But how can you possibly know that? We're talking about something totally impossible for the current science to prove.

Skylar: Perfect! Now I can use my paint can. You're basically saying, "look, what you've explained makes sense, but there could be other equally valid pictures." And you're right. I have to take it on faith that, at the end of the day, all the operations in my brain boil down to biology, chemistry, and, ultimately, physics. In other words, neuroscience. But on the other hand, you've already made the same essential leap yourself.

Jon: The paint can.

Skylar: The paint can! You have no way of proving that the paint falls in some orderly fashion. You have no "proof" that the paint follows some set of rules. You just assume that it does, because it makes sense, and because Isaac Newton and his friends have been telling you about the laws of physics all your life.

Jon: Yeah, I see what you're saying. I just don't understand why I need to assume that I'm part of the system in the same way that the paint is part of the system. I'm pretty different than the paint.

Skylar: Physics would disagree. It would say that you're made of exactly the same stuff as the paint: protons, neutrons, and electrons.

Jon: Or quarks? I've lost count of all the sub-atomic particles at this point.

Skylar: Either way, you're just a bunch of atoms. And what's more, physics would say that *you* aren't even a thing at all. "You" is just a helpful term we came up with to reference a specific subset of the universe. The line between Jon and the air around Jon, or the fabric of Jon's shirt, is really a made-up line. It's arbitrary. It means something to us, but it's not *really* there.

Jon: Now you're telling me I'm not real?

Skylar: Maybe you could argue that reality is a subjective term, but then our conversation leaves the semi-concrete and enters the land of pure, abstract metaphysics. In any case, you're not *physically* real. You're not a separate physical entity in any significant way.

Jon: And why were we talking about that?

Skylar: Because you wanted to say that you're different from the paint.

Jon: Well in light of all that, I guess I have no choice except to admit that I'm just like the paint, at least in physical terms. But I still want to say that there's a difference. I mean, I'm organic, and I'm sentient.

Skylar: Well, would you look at that!

Jon: What?

Skylar: We've looped back around. Remember? We started with two options: the soul-in-the-non-physical-realm option and the just-another-name-for-certain-physical-phenomena option. And we decided that the first option doesn't work. Now you're chasing the other side. The concepts "organic" and "sentient" are ways that we categorize stuff in the physical world, but they aren't fundamentally separate. A sentient thing is just a thing that's aware. That can happen with a normal physical thing, no soul required.

Jon: Are you sure?

Skylar: Do you think dogs have souls?

Jon: I don't know. Maybe they do.

Skylar: Sorry, bad example. How about...termites?

Jon: Okay, definitely not.

Skylar: But they're clearly autonomous. Their brains can contain natural information that comes from their surroundings via their senses. Isn't that just like us?

Jon: Well, no. Not exactly. We can *think*. That seems a little more demanding than just reacting to stimuli.

Skylar: You're definitely onto something. That's essentially the argument that's been used for centuries, millennia, even, to set people apart from other things in the world. "Men are special because they wield the power of *reason*," that type of thing. But the faculty of reason itself isn't really that different from the awareness that termites have. It's just more complicated.

Jon: That's exactly my point, though. We're way more complicated than all those other things. That's what makes us different.

Skylar: You can take that line. But at the end of it, you find that our uniqueness is not a matter of substance at all. It's a matter of degree. And if that's true, then we're still beholden to all of the same laws that termites are. Our special nature doesn't come from some crazy, non-physical source. It just *arises* out of our physical construction.

Jon: Upshot?

Skylar: Simple. There's no real point in talking about souls. Or, more generously, there's no point in talking about the souls we have now existing after death. If the soul I have now

arises from my organic, physical structure, then my death means the end of my soul. It's not a separate, self-sustaining entity residing *in* me...it's just a set of conditions that are *predicated on* my existence as a living, breathing thing.

Jon: I don't like it, but it's hard to poke a hole in what you're saying. I'll have to think about it.

Skylar: I wouldn't wish that on you. It's a pretty depressing thought. I'd rather it be untrue, I just can't think my way out of it.



Afterward, the conversation turned back to more familiar territory. A toddler walked by with her father, babbling excitedly about paintbrushes, and Jon and Skylar laughed themselves out of their philosophical mood. They spent another hour walking around the museum, wandering separately, but never too far; together, but alone.

As Skylar rounded a corner, moving from sculptures back to an alcove of 19th Century paintings, his eyes met a painting that would haunt him for years. It was large, several feet across in every direction. The edges were muddled, as if the painter had neglected the borders of the scene in an attempt to make his subject as vivid as possible. There, in the middle of a drab grey city landscape, sat a mother, gently caressing her child. The child was a toddler, but was still wrapped, its head and body swaddled in some kind of cloth. The mother looked down lovingly, though her face bore an air of concern. But none of this was what caught Skylar's attention. There, over the mother's right shoulder, a figure sat, his skin the deep blue of darkest night, with a small flame of red hair dancing around the back of his head. He leaned over the mother's shoulder like the figure of death itself, his eyes

twinkling wickedly. Skylar thought he knew the meaning of the painting instantly. There sat a beautiful, humane rendering of the Madonna and Child, and yet, even in his first moments, Jesus could not be a normal child. Even as his mother held him, Death watched him. He wondered how a child could bear the weight of being doomed from his birth. Skylar thought of a passage in Horace:

Destructus ensis cui super inopia
cervice pendet, non Siculae dapes
dulcem elaborabunt saporem,
non avium citharaeque cantus,
somnum reducent . . .

When guilty Pomp the drawn sword sees
Hung o'er her, richest feasts in vain
Strain their sweet juice her taste to please;
No lutes, no singing birds again
Will bring her sleep.²

Just as he was beginning to put his thoughts together, Skylar's phone rang. Jon was in the bathroom, retching, overtaken by a spell of nausea. Skylar left the painting in a hurry, before he could read its plaque.

On the way to the hotel, Jon shifted in his seat, speaking over the dull hum of the road.

² Odes 3.1; English translation by John Conington, 1882

“I think I have a proper response to your causal closure thing,” Jon said.

“I do too, now that you mention it. I wonder if they’re the same.”

“What’s yours?”

“You might call it the non-representational aspect of experience,” Skylar said.

Jon raised his eyebrows. “I thought that you said consciousness is just representation. The termites, right? For them being conscious is just having information about the world in their brains.”

“I did. But like you said, that was termites. Maybe *that’s* how we’re different: our conscious involves experience, and experience deserves some credit. It’s more than *just* awarenesses. There’s the actual quality of a particular experience.”

“For example?”

“For example ... taste. The fact that salty stuff tastes different from sweet stuff seems representational. It’s a way my body tells me about a difference in the composition of different foods. But the actual saltiness, the what-it’s-like-ness of it, if that makes sense ... that seems arbitrary.”

“What do you mean?” Jon asked.

“Well, suppose you switched the salty and sweet tastes, in all cases. Would anything change, apart from your inward, indescribable experience?”

“I guess not. That kind of reminds me of the old junior-high philosopher question about colors.”

“Which one?”

Jon perked up. “You know, when some kid in class says ‘Dude, what if my green is your yellow?’ or whatever. The idea is that there’s no way of knowing, because we’d call the colors the same names even if they looked completely different to different people.”

“That’s a great example. The whole notion, that experience is greater than its representational aspect, seems to undermine the idea that a ‘functional’ view of the mind is enough...there’s more to the mind than just the sets of information it carries. There are parts of our mental lives that don’t seem to fit neatly into the scientific picture. At least not at first glance.”

“That’s interesting. And it’s a whole lot fancier than my objection,” Jon said.

“Do tell.”

“Well, I was just thinking, if everything you said earlier is true, and the most logical answer is that there’s nothing special about the human brain, and thought and emotion (and even identity) are all just illusions—if that’s all true, then logic, or any sort of philosophical thought, anything based in our ability to reason correctly or incorrectly, is kind of pointless. If our thoughts are determined, if thinking is actually just another link in an inevitable chain of physical events, then there’s no real way to know if any of it is right or not. Logic goes out the window, doesn’t it?”

Skylar sat quietly for a long moment, taking in what Jon had said.

Jon asked, “Was that a really stupid idea?”

“No,” Skylar responded quietly. “No, that’s really great. It just ... that seems to turn logic against itself. It makes the progress we’ve made since the Enlightenment seem circular. But I can’t trace the exact point where it all went wrong. Now I’m the one who has to think about things.”

As they neared their hotel, Jon drifted off to sleep and Skylar drove silently, his brow furrowed in thought. He wondered about the point that Jon had made, but he could come to no conclusion.

CHAPTER FIVE

The House of Descartes

Skylar's sleep was fitful and short the night they stayed in Dallas. He dreamed of the nameless painting, and the many corridors in the museum. As he walked through them, he felt that if he could find his way to the exit, he would find his answer—he would understand the soul and its place in the world. But every time he thought he caught a glimpse of the light streaming through the glass doors of the museum's atrium, he heard Jon's voice calling, and lost his way. He awoke suddenly at 4 am, and couldn't fall back asleep.

When Jon was up, the sun already high in the sky, they set out for Kansas, where they would stay the night. The hours of flat, grassy terrain that covered their route were unbroken, save for a disappointing lunch in northern Oklahoma and the few times they pulled over to keep Jon from getting carsick. The clear blue skies looked like a still ocean overhead, and they rumbled down the road to the odd lilting of Paul Simon for hours as Jon picked his way through his early solo albums in the passenger's seat. The excitement of travel and the quiet company would have thrilled Skylar most days, but he was distracted by the dreams of the previous night, which hadn't fully made their way out of his head. The more he thought about it, Skylar felt as though the mysterious painting was about Jon. His friend had always been marked by greatness, and it wasn't just his talent; it was his soul, for lack of a better term. The things that wise men often spent a lifetime seeking, faith, contentment, and a certain human understanding; these were things Jon had possessed since his youth. It was all natural to him. And now, just like the baby in the painting, who was blessed beyond all measure, Jon was marked by a second force: death. It hung on him like a shade, and though he was strong enough to bear it, the people who loved him couldn't

always say the same. The unfairness of it all put Skylar's stomach in knots. How could a soul so pure, the person who seemed to Skylar most closely linked with God's goodwill, be cursed to face death so early, when he had so much left to give?

Skylar stopped himself from going down that road. He asked Jon about the museum, hoping that Jon's view of things would distract him from his obsessing. Jon mentioned a painting of two acrobats that had moved him, and said how excited he was to see the Rockies in real life after seeing paintings of them for so long, but his words did little to soothe his friend's thoughts.

When they finally reached their second night's destination, they said little, quickly bedding down and drifting off. But Skylar woke before the sun rose yet again, after a second night of odd dreams and fitful sleep. Quietly, he got up from his bed and, after retrieving a notebook from his bag, walked down to the hotel's lobby. Sitting in an overlarge leather chair in the empty, high-ceilinged room, he wrote down his thoughts.

In a rare moment of inspiration, Skylar tried to synthesize his dreams and the previous day's events in his imagination, and a story began to take hold of him. He thought it could be a novel, an allegorical telling of the Enlightenment, from the perspective of the modern-day skeptic. With the kind of confidence that one only possesses in the early hours of the morning, Skylar turned the page and began to write his story.

It did not take long for him to reach a stopping place. The catharsis of the moment passed, and the haze of exhaustion descended over him. What he had written was only a sort of introduction, but it had a completeness to it, and when he shut his notebook, he smiled, vaguely planning to type the thing up and show it to someone or other, though the first person who read it, besides his friends in Not-Church, was his eldest son, who found it in his notebook many years later.



Skylar's Story

I rather prefer facts over fantasies, so if I must tell a tale, I'll tell my own. I was raised in an orphanage in the middle of France, on the Creuse River. The nuns saw promise in me as a child, and when I turned thirteen, they told me that I was to be indentured to an old man from our village. I feared that I would waste away from hard and meaningless labor.

A week after my thirteenth birthday, I was informed that the old man had returned home from Sweden, where he had been visiting a friend. He sent for me, and I arrived at his house just before the sun began to rise. The house was large and ornate; it was much more ornamented than any of my generation would have accepted, and there were religious symbols throughout the house. Later I would find that the house was completely circular, with the old man's bedchamber in the center. The first thing you saw, engraved in the gate outside the house and again above the front door, was the phrase "REASON ABOVE ALL" (I also remember a second inscription, carved by hand under the first, which read "contra rationem argymentor," which I always assumed to be a play on the old phrase "contra spem spero"). However, the thing I remember most about that day was the kind smile on the old man's face. From the moment we met, he took me in as his own son and trained me as his solitary pupil. In time, I began to call him my father.

My father was a peculiar man. His hair grew down near his shoulders, and he wore a thick mustache and a patch of stubble between his lower lip and chin. His inquisitiveness was impressive, especially for a man so advanced in his years, and one always walked in on him late at night sitting by his stove with pen in hand, writing down some new idea. He was a renaissance man in the truest sense: his expertise extended to every field, and his knowledge of both practical and abstract concepts was immense. For the first ten years that I lived in his house, my father trained me in the liberal arts, teaching me to read and write in Latin and Greek, and educating me in the entire canon of the Western world. At the end of those ten years, I could recite most of Homer, Ovid, and Virgil by heart, and I could quote Plato, Cicero, and Lucretius to suit any occasion. My twenty-third birthday arrived, and my father decided to take me to Paris for the first time. He walked me through the city, pointing out the vagrants who had been cast down by society and the rich elite who walked past them as if they were invisible. He took me to an overcrowded hospital, filled with the mortally diseased, and showed me the disgusting practices of the doctors who relied more on superstition than on fact. We walked past a cathedral with tall, gilded spires and a stained-glass portrait of the exalted Christ stretching across it. Inside, we watched as poor men offered their meager tithes into golden boxes held by priests with purple robes. After all of this, my father turned to me, and asked,

“Has all the wisdom of the ancients helped us heal this world? Have the many men who came before us found a way to subdue the cruelty of nature, or the cruelty of men?” I shook my head. “Well then, my son, we must

do this task ourselves.” And from that day on, I refused to look to the past for answers, when I might find more potent answers in myself.

The one thing that disturbed me about my father was his insistence on speaking at length about the soul. Though he hated the greed and superstition of the Church, he believed that religion was built into man’s very core; religion, in my father’s sense of the word, was the need to connect the soul to something greater, and, indeed, to the greatest thing of all, God. Later in my life, I often thought that, had my father come to know the Hindu teachings, he would have liked them best. The atman, the spirit, and its corresponding whole, the Atman, the World-Soul, need to be united, and this can only happen by careful training, and the transcending of the physical reality through discipline. The unity and the ultimate rationality (or, perhaps, irrationality) of the whole system reminded me of my father’s absolute commitment to *vita rationis*. It was a pity that the jumble of Christianity was his only real contact with formal religious thought.

My father, discontented with the religious order, was nevertheless obsessed with the soul, and its relation to the body. In the early days of his research, he spent significant energy looking for a solution to the problem of mind-body interaction in anatomy. He traced the connection of the two to the brain-stem. There, he believed, the mind imposed itself upon the physical reality, ordering the nerves to jolt the body into obedience and receiving

reports of the outside world in return. *How* this happened, he would never say, though he did claim to me a few times in private that he believed God “ordered the universe in such a way that our physical aspects are connected to the spirit realm by a divine connection”—a disappointingly weak defense, coming from a man so vehemently opposed to the *deus ex machina*. When I came into possession of his correspondence with his Swedish friend, a woman he called Christine, I found that she too had been skeptical of his “solution” to the problem of interaction.

I, of course, was not beholden to his view of the soul, and after his death, I set about on my own, revising his theories and eradicating the last morsels of superstition that had clouded his unusually clear mind. With *spirit* deleted from the lexicon, I went about rebuilding the human consciousness in a far more coherent and simple way, starting from a theory of natural information (that is, representational information embedded in the physical order, such as rings in a tree) and moving logically to full-fledged consciousness.

At the end of it all, only one thing haunted me. My theory, pristine and unassailable as it was, had a glass heel. This weakness was not in the argument itself, but in its inevitable conclusion. My theory of the mind made *mind* just another arbitrary subset of the larger whole, just a specific set of features in the undifferentiated physical reality—and that, the only reality.

If that was so, things I had taken for granted—free will, reason, even consciousness or life, in the truest sense of the words—did not exist. The

whole emotional, spiritual world was an illusion. I could not simply ignore this fact and go about my business as usual (as Hume famously did). I tried to truly *believe* that I had no will, no real existence as a special subject in the universe. I tried, and I failed. For months, I spent hours in my study, not reading or even thinking about anything in particular, but simply meditating on my existence, begging the universe for an answer. None came. Perhaps, I thought, that was the most honest answer the universe could give.

It was in that period of my life that I began to understand the paradox of my father's work. The phrase which was etched boldly into his door, REASON ABOVE ALL, was hopeful. It was written in the vulgar language, and it promised a near-utopian future. It promised healing and control over the fear of nature. But the second phrase, the small one, etched by hand, had always puzzled me. To reason against reason, as it were, always seemed contradictory. I had believed from the age of thirteen that the enduring beauty of reason was its symmetry, its coherence, and its power. Now I began to understand it differently. To hold reason above all else, to make reason the ultimate and unchecked arbiter of truth, was to doom reason to the grave. My father began the project, and saw it grow to unimaginable potential. I finished the project, and saw the meaninglessness that had come from it all. It was an endeavor that only endured as long as it was unfinished, and in finishing it, I had destroyed all our work. And so, I set out from the house, with only a small satchel of provisions, and walked into the countryside. There, I hoped I would find my answer.



The final day of travel started the same as the day before, a journey through a wide expanse of swaying grasses and tilled fields, broken only by the occasional tree or windmill. Skylar always found traveling to Colorado by way of Kansas amusing, because the first hundred miles of the Centennial State looked so much like its neighbor, flat and unmarked. But by the second hour past the border, the horizon began to shimmer with the far-off blue of distant mountains. The very air seemed to change when mountains came into view, and Skylar and Jon unwittingly leaned forward as if to hasten their approach.

Hours later, after they had climbed slowly onward, feeling their ears adjust to the new altitude as they rattled up the highway, they came to Denver. They stopped for lunch downtown, and then resumed the drive, entering the National Park and tacking up the mountain to Jon's new home. Whether it was the view of the mountains or the nostalgia that goes with long trips in the car, neither of them could say, but as they drove the conversation turned to an old friend of theirs: Robert Crenshaw.

If ever there was someone other than Jon that Skylar could say he looked up to, it was Robert Crenshaw. Rob was five years older than Jon, a stocky, broad shouldered man with a dark beard that he kept tight-cropped to his chin. But despite his imposing figure, no one would have called him intimidating. He was a talented musician, but he never wrote his own music. In a word, Rob was *cool*. In more words, though, Rob was much more than that. When Skylar and Jon were growing up in the church, Rob became something of a folk hero to them. He played his guitar on stage on Sunday mornings to lead worship, and was never content merely to show up and sing. He prided himself on the unconventional, on things that "made the old people uncomfortable," but that he hoped cut closer to the truth of God.

One time, he played on Sunday barefoot, and the music minister got angry emails; another time, he led the youth group in a Lord's Supper of Tang and girl scout cookies. His talent for annoying people in power was not so much a mischievous streak as it was a tendency towards iconoclasm, though few people saw it that way.

No one ever pointed specifically to the unorthodox communion as the reason that Rob stopped helping with the youth group, but it was generally assumed that his tendency to push the limits of what was acceptable resulted in his leaving. In Rob's own mind, it had been a long time coming, and soon after he stopped interning with the youth, he left the church altogether. Skylar remembered hearing two parents discuss Rob one time after Sunday school: one disgruntled mother had called Rob a "seeker" in a voice that made it sound like an insult. That was how the parents generally saw things. They didn't want their children being encouraged to *question* or *test* the Bible, or even to question the Sunday school teachers; they wanted to raise their children to be good Christians and avoid all the mistakes their parents had made in high school. Rob was a "seeker" because he would often admit that he didn't know that much about God, that most of it was a mystery to him, and, he thought, to just about everybody.

Had Rob heard the accusation, he probably would have laughed. The youth group parents didn't know the half of it. At that time in his life, Rob was struggling to understand the most basic things in life, and he had no idea what he thought about God. "Seeking" was embracing hope, which was as close to faith as he felt he could get. In any case, all he knew was that he cared about the kids he had met in his church, and he wanted to give them the space to wonder about things. That space was something he was never afforded when he was younger, and he always suspected that the lack of freedom had made it more difficult for him to believe in anything as an adult.

Whatever the youth minister and the parents said, Rob meant more to Skylar and Jon than the rest of the adults in church put together. When Rob stopped going to church, the two boys asked him to spend Thursday nights with them in a coffee shop near the university. He gladly obliged, and for a few years their folk hero became one of their closest friends.

The boys saw him as nearly invincible, and a source of great wisdom (not without reason; he was a kindred spirit to them, and his ability to understand what they were going through was unparalleled). But he had a way of hiding the disorder in his own life from his younger friends. The truth was that Rob was years into college with no plan for after graduation, and his emotional life was a mess. Skylar was heady even as high schooler, and Jon had always had a quiet contentment about him, but the dark side of Rob's psyche was his deep need to be loved. His heart was unsteady, and even the slighted romance revealed a raw nerve, one that seldom felt contented but tended towards the dramatic. After a string of failed relationships, which fell apart almost unilaterally because of his inability to commit, in his (second) senior year, Rob found himself in a new kind of trouble: he had fallen head over heels for a girl. He bought a ring after their third date, though he kept it to himself. He was captured, and he let the rest of his life fall away as she became the center of his universe. She was the kind of girl he had always hope for but seldom met, charming and cute, but fiercely independent and intriguingly neurotic. They were set to finish school the same semester, and they planned to attend the same graduate program, a small theology and literature program at a school on the East Coast. It was a big change for Rob, who had never lived outside the state, though he was well-travelled, and he decided to ask her to marry him once they finished school.

Instead, the week before graduation, she broke up with him. She had met someone else, and though she hadn't cheated, she didn't think it was fair to be in denial about it any longer. Rob pleaded with her, and even showed her the ring, but nothing would change her mind. He was crushed. He informed the head of his grad program that he wouldn't be attending anymore, and soon after, he moved away.

Skylar and Jon barely heard from him after that—all they knew at first was that he had taken a job working for one of his uncles in Albuquerque. A few years later, when Skylar and Jon were in college themselves, they heard that Rob had begun the process of becoming some kind of Cistercian monk at a monastery in the Sangre de Cristo mountains near Santa Fe; that was the last they knew of him.

They were still wondering out loud about Robert when they arrived at Francis's house. Skylar spent most of the day outside, and the only thing that kept Jon from hiking late into the evening was a persistent nosebleed that reminded him of his own frailty as much as the fact that he was several thousand feet above sea level.

The condo was small and comfortable, and Skylar supposed that it was sparser now than in the days when Mrs. Pitcairn had done the decorating. After dusk had settled and dinner was over, Skylar and Jon sat for hours on the porch talking about nothing in particular. Skylar even let Jon read his odd little story, which Jon enjoyed, not least because he saw that his thoughts on philosophy had seeped into his friend's mind. That night, for almost the last time, things felt like they had when Skylar and Jon were boys. The world was beautiful and quiet, and their friendship was enough to keep them happy.

The following afternoon, Francis and Doreen arrived. In lieu of their usual meeting place, Francis steered the group to a café in town, and they ate pound cake and talked like everything was normal. At Jon's repeated request, Skylar sheepishly retrieved his notebook

once again, and it was passed round the table. Francis read Skylar's story first, and looked up when he finished. He smiled quizzically at Skylar.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"I'm not even sure, to be honest. It just came out of me. I've started to realize that a lot of my problems—my philosophical problems—are wrapped up in the Enlightenment. The moment we decided that we could understand it all, and control nature, things started to fall apart. That's what I've been wrestling with, and it ended up as a story."

"You're pretty philosophical. I mostly wrestle with things like bills and deadlines," Francis answered. These were the conversations that made him thankful for Skylar; the young man had a way of forcing him to stretch mental muscles he had long since ceased to use.

"Was it too philosophical? Did you get the Enlightenment bit out of it at all?" Skylar asked.

"I understood the reference to Descartes, and all that. Writing by the stove. We've talked about most of this before. You're having doubts about the idea of materialism, I guess?"

"Yeah, that's the main issue. I don't really think it ends up in the right place. I can't accept the implications of taking the scientific project all the way to its logical end."

"What scientific project?" Francis asked.

"*The* project. The project of reducing everything down to one set of fundamental laws."

Francis nodded. He chose his next words carefully.

"I guess I just don't think that way. I don't need to ask where things are headed. I just accept that what science says is right. Or, at least, it's the closest thing we have to right."

“Even if it’s self-defeating?”

“See,” Francis continued, pointing his fork at Skylar, “those are just words to me. It doesn’t matter what the broad philosophical implications of geology are. It just *works*. I can’t argue with results. If neuroscience proves that I don’t exist someday, or I can’t think, or whatever the disaster scenario is ... I’ll worry about it then. Doesn’t that seem a little far off to you? Aren’t there more pressing things to worry about?”

“That’s what I told myself,” Skylar said. “I filed the question away with the exact definition of knowledge, or the categorical imperative. It was just another thought puzzle from philosophy that didn’t concern me. But I can’t separate the question from life anymore. If everything we think about the spiritual world is an illusion, I don’t want to keep hoping. I don’t want to have false hope that there’s something on the other side of death, you know?”

Skylar looked at Jon. Jon’s eyes were squinted in thought, but he didn’t look sad or hurt. Now Francis understood. He understood why Skylar had written something so out of his character, and why Jon had thought to bring it up with everyone.

“Look, Skylar. I’m not the person to ask. I’m not proud of this, exactly, but to be honest, I go through life one step at a time. I try to do right by people, and I try to do my job well. I’m sure I’m full of contradictions, but for me, science gets the final word in matters of practical existence. I still have hope that there’s more to life, but I don’t feel the need to ask too many questions. Doreen, you ought to read this. You might have something better to say about the whole thing.”

“I’m not sure I’ll understand half of what you’re talking about,” Doreen said, “but I’ll give it a shot.”

Doreen spent a longer time looking at Skylar's story. She read through it twice while everyone else talked, and asked Skylar about a few of the details. At last, she set the notebook down and sighed.

"You know what my problem is, with all these philosophers?" Doreen started. "They make a big fuss about 'looking inward' and starting from nothing and all that, but they seem to ignore most of what you learn when you take a look inside yourself."

"What do you mean?" Francis asked, intrigued.

"When you think about yourself for half a second, you know that you exist, you know that you have a soul, you know that life has meaning, you know all that. It's plain and obvious, everybody knows it. The only people who doubt any of that are the people who think themselves out of it."

Skylar laughed. "You never cease to amaze me."

"Thank you, I think," Doreen said. "Is that all you needed me to say?"

"I guess I just don't know what else to do, besides think my way through stuff, whether in or out."

"That's the right thing for you," Doreen said. "You're a thinker. You don't get a choice ... thinking is what you have to do."

"Well, how do I think things through without ending up where I ended up?"

"What, you mean ending up not believing in anything?"

"Right."

"Well, start from what you're most sure of, and believe that on the front end. If you know that you have a soul, then quit doubting it. Go doubt something else!" Doreen said, waving a hand in the air. Jon nodded.

"She has a point," he said with a grin.

The conversation moved on. They left the café and walked around the small mountain town, but while the other three joked and carried on, Skylar followed in thoughtful silence. The hair on his neck had pricked up at Doreen's words, and a cascade of thoughts began to work through his mind. For the first time in years, Skylar had found a shard of hope, a small window through which he might return to his old self. There, in the words of this wonderful woman, was the bridge he had been looking for, a narrow road by which he might follow his commitment to reason, and yet rejoin the old paths he had once tread—he could find his way back to the soul, to God, and, perhaps, to the Church.

CHAPTER SIX

A Final Portrait

When the long weekend was over, Skylar and Francis began their journeys by air and highway back to Texas. Doreen stayed behind with Jon, and tended to his needs like the mother he never had, washing his clothes every other afternoon and pestering him to tell her all his favorite meals. Jon appreciated the help, though he still felt capable of taking care of himself most of the time; but more than that, he appreciated the company. Doreen was no painter, and she wasn't fond of strenuous hiking, but she loved to sit on the porch of Francis's house, and there the two friends would sit for hours, Jon painting, and Doreen reading or knitting. In the evenings, after the sun disappeared over the horizon, they would sit in the small den of the condo, the room naturally vignettted by the single light that illuminated it, and work on puzzles over cups of cocoa. Doreen would say goodnight at nine o'clock and retreat to her bedroom, the smaller of the two rooms that flanked the narrow hallway upstairs.

Jon would go to his room soon after, but not to sleep. His room was bordered by more than a dozen canvases, all painted with different self-portraits. Though they all featured the same subject, each one was completely different from the rest. They were painted in a variety of styles, with every possible medium, from a large canvas covered in thick blots of oil paint to a small sepia-tone watercolor that Jon had painted with tea. Most of all, though, the portraits were remarkable in that they seemed to tell the story of Jon's illness. There was one near the window that resembled a print, drawn minimally with sharp lines, in which Jon sat in a stark white room, surrounded by medical machines. Next to it, in dreamlike watercolor, an almost Medieval Jon stood at the door of a church, clothed in a brown robe, with the skeletal figure of death watching hungrily in the background. Most of

the remaining portraits depicted Jon in nature scenes, as though at a point he had entered a period of escapism, choosing to put himself in the places he held dearest, if only in his art. Now that he was living in the mountains, he had begun to paint grand landscapes in which his newly-slender figure was only barely visible, a tiny footprint in a vast expanse of unadulterated wilderness.

One day, two months after his arrival in Estes Park, Jon hiked up to a lookout point alone in the early morning, to paint the landscape from a new angle while the sun was low. He sketched out the scene lightly in pencil, and began to fill the mountains in with deep greens and blues. When Jon was in a place like this one, with the breeze at his back, even he was surprised by the skill with which he brought the heart of a scene out of the world and put it down on canvas. The quiet that he felt in his soul in those moments was unmatched, a quiet that exceeded any other kind of joy he felt.

As he reached the sky, Jon found that his supply of the bright colors of sunrise was dwindling. He pushed on, but soon was forced to stop, for his paint had run out. Disappointed, Jon packed his things and began the trek back down the mountain. Walking down the trail, his pack and easel weighing awkwardly on his shoulders, he began to contemplate the purpose of all his portraits for the first time in months.

What was the point of it all? He only vaguely remembered the origin of the idea. He had read about other dying people creating reflective art, writing music or drawing, to keep a running account of their emotional state, and have something to remember the experience. He thought of a Schiele exhibit he has seen in Austria on a school trip, though Schiele's portraits were much darker than his own, on the whole. One could simply keep a journal, of course, but Jon felt that his thoughts lost their potency when he wrote them down. There was also the question of what the point of a load of mementos would be if he didn't live to

look back on his cancer, a possibility that seemed increasingly likely with each passing month. But when Jon reflected on the whole process, he thought that his portraits were something wholly other than a visual journal of sorts.

They were a catalogue of his understanding, not of his personal state, but of the state of people in general. For Jon, the connection between the self and humanity as a whole was absolute, and his experiences with sickness made him feel a new connection to the suffering of all people. Based on conversations with other patients, he concluded that this was a rare response, but not a totally unique one, and of the few others who shared his insight, he found that nearly all of them had attempted to distill their new perspective in some way or another. This was, perhaps, the reason for all the portraits. They told a story of the struggles that all people go through in the face of death, not just Jon's particular story.

Jon thought of Skylar's need to define the soul in philosophical terms. There was something profound about the whole endeavor, but he couldn't trace it. Yet, perhaps, he did know why it bothered him. Jon didn't think that the soul *could* be defined, whether in philosophical, scientific, or even religious terms. Whether this made him a mystic he didn't know, but the more he considered the idea, the more it rang true. It seemed that if there was any way to sum up the heart of a life in the fullness of truth, it would have to be ambiguous, uncommitted to a narrow way of seeing things like existence and purpose. The only way to communicate such an elusive message, in Jon's estimation, was through art. If he made his portraits well enough, he thought, perhaps a hint of the truth would shine through. The factuality of it all was impossible to capture; one couldn't simply explain a concept like that of the *soul* in terms of physics or even metaphysics, for that wasn't how one came to know deep truths. The deep truths only presented themselves indirectly, through the inkling one got when reading a good book, or meeting a new person for the first time.

When he reached the condo, Jon was exhausted and lightheaded. He dropped his pack heavily at the door, and Doreen rushed him to bed. Contrary to his feeble protests, it became clear to Doreen that Jon had taken a turn for the worse, and she telephoned for help.



That evening, Skylar got a call from Doreen. Jon had experienced a stroke, she said, and the doctors were worried that he would not be able to make a full recovery. Skylar was on the first plane he could find, and the next day, he arrived in Denver, taking an airport taxi to the hospital where Jon was receiving treatment. He nervously asked the desk clerk where Jon's room was, and had to ask a second time when he failed to comprehend her response; his thoughts were moving so sporadically that the world seemed distant and muffled. He needed to see Jon.

A minute later, he had found the hallway and walked briskly to Jon's door, bracing himself for what he feared he would see inside as he crossed the room's threshold. The physical contents of it didn't surprise him; he knew them all. The plastic potted plant in the corner, the thick window glass, the bag-lined trash cans and the sterile, sickly smell that accompanied them, the flat white of the fluorescent light fixtures—all of it exuded sickness, though nothing was out of place. But in the midst of it all, where Jon should have been, glowing, steady Jon, who had been an unwavering thru-line in Skylar's life as long as he could remember, there lay instead a thin, graying body, wracked with pain and bundled for warmth. That body, so recently strong and unblemished, was wrought over with tube,

bandage, and needle, resting on thin pillows. Skylar's stomach dropped, though he remained still, his face unchanged.

Jon stirred. When he opened his eyes—and oh! his eyes, how out of place now, those wells of life planted in a decaying body—he recognized Skylar immediately. Even at his lowest, Jon's ability to communicate love with just a short, stern look was astounding.

“I'm sure glad to see you,” Jon said, his voice breaking at the end.

“How are you?” Skylar asked. He knew the answer. Jon was in pain.

“I'm okay, mostly. But, Skylar, I'm scared. It's finally here. The fear of death.”

“Why do you think?” Skylar asked, drawing close to his bedside.

“I don't know if I can really explain. I think I'm afraid of the other side. I'm afraid to find out how I was wrong. I haven't done enough. It feels like I haven't done anything meaningful. All you ever really have is hope, I guess. But hope seems far away right now.”

Skylar nodded slowly. He understood Jon perfectly, or as perfectly as he could have hoped to, healthy as he was. He was hurt for his friend, and yet there was a strange humor in it. Skylar smiled the pained smile of wisdom acquired too late.

“Grace is the heart of love. God is love,” he said simply, not knowing if he believed it, but hoping it was true.

Skylar sat with Jon in a chair pulled close to the bedside. He read a book of poetry to his friend, slowly and with care, until both of them drifted off to sleep, the white lights still glowing from the ceiling.

Skylar dreamed a half-dream, or something like it, never fully leaving the room, but leaving reality for a moment. Jon's body floated out of the bed, and began to move steadily away from Skylar. As Jon got closer and closer to the window, the blankets draped away from him and fell to the ground, and cords stretched until they broke and he came free.

Skylar saw the open window, and the path of Jon's body, but he made no move to stop it. He wanted his friend to be free. The doctors, Skylar's parents, Francis, and Doreen all walked in, frantically pleading with Skylar to do something, but he stood still, too sure to move, but too confused to say anything in response.

The sound of a deep intake of breath woke Skylar. His eyes blinked, and the world slowly came into focus. Skylar's head had slumped down onto his shoulder, so that Jon's face was situated above him by some distance. It was then that Skylar saw something he would always remember, though he never claimed to understand it.

There, in the hospital bed, Jon's face had been restored to full health. His lips were no longer cracked, his hair thick and clean. Though he slept, Jon's mouth was curled up on one side in an unmistakable grin. And around his face, a beautiful white halo of light shone, pulsing slowly in rhythm with his breath.

The vision shook Skylar from his sleep-daze. He straightened his neck and sat up with a start, perplexed and exalting all at once, anxious to speak with his transfigured friend—and in sitting up, he undid the strange magic. The light was not a halo, but the light of one of the ceiling fixtures, which had glowed as Jon's face obstructed the bulb from Skylar's view. His face, too, was sallow again, his lips cracked. Perhaps, Skylar thought, the light had played a trick on him. Yet he wondered if Jon would have stayed the same, if he had left his head resting on his shoulder. Maybe such enchantments can only exist in the suspended reality of the waking moment, and his sitting up broke the tender spell of renewal—but now, Jon was waking up.

Jon's twitch of a grin grew into a full, broad smile as he came to. He reached for Skylar's hand and held it tight with joy.

“I had a dream,” he said, hushed. “I know it, now I know it. I’ll be okay, and you will, too. When it’s time for me, I’ll be ready.” His words would have frightened Skylar on some other day, but in that moment, Skylar understood.

“I’ll miss you,” Skylar said, bittersweet tears forming in his eyes.

“And I’ll miss you. I already do. I miss you, and this place. Even now it feels distant, like a dream. And yet, it’s as close as I’ll ever be to this world, from now on.”

They said no more, but looked at each other for a moment, as though waving goodbye across a wide chasm. Jon had seemed grey to Skylar, as though he was fading away. Now, he understood that he looked grey to his friend, that they both seemed to fade from each other. They were no longer inhabiting space equally. Skylar could only see the little of Jon that was left in this world. He wondered if Jon could only see the little bit of him that was in the next world, and how different he must look there, though for better or worse he didn’t dare guess.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brother Elijah

Jon died the next day. Skylar and Doreen were in the hospital cafeteria, picking at lunch and talking softly about home. A nurse, a stocky man in his thirties they had grown to like, walked up to their table and gave them the news. They held each other and cried. Doreen's tears fell bitter and fast, and all of Skylar's hopefulness from the night before evaporated as he sobbed. He felt the hollow pain of grief invading his chest, knowing with all his being that he couldn't fill the hole Jon was leaving, but not quite believing it yet.

When they had dried their eyes and had a drink, they began to make the calls. They called everybody back home who needed to know that Jon was gone, starting with Francis and the few of Jon's relatives who were still around. The conversations were mostly short, painful, and difficult, but they were therapeutic, too, for they put Skylar and Doreen in a position to comfort others, and their own pain was forgotten for a moment. The only person Skylar couldn't reach was Rob Crenshaw. He knew the name of Rob's monastery, but they didn't have a phone number.

After an hour, Doreen told Skylar to go to the hotel and get some sleep. She determined to stay behind and talk to the doctors, to make final arrangements for Jon's body. They would ship it back to Texas, "where it belongs," she said, and hold a funeral there the next weekend.

Doreen decided to fly home, but Skylar was given the task of bringing Jon's Jeep back home. The unwanted road trip sounded exhausting to him, but it gave him an idea. He would have ample time to stop, and he had plenty of possible routes home, so, after discussing it with Doreen, Skylar decided to stop in New Mexico and try to find Rob. Jon would have wanted Rob to know, Skylar thought, and though he had mostly refused to

discuss his funeral, Jon had mentioned once that he thought Rob would give a good eulogy. Skylar set out the next morning, and before he knew it, he was outside of Santa Fe, nearing the monastery.



Jon's Jeep handled the road easily as it changed from state highway to rough, private pavement, and then to a dry gravel that kicked up into clouds of dust as the deep tire treads cut down the path. For five minutes, Skylar's view was so obstructed by trees that he would not have known the area was settled at all, had he not been following strict directions. Then, over the tops of a patch of slender aspens to his left, the point of a beautiful church steeple began to reveal itself, inch by inch, until the road turned left and began to descend into a valley clearing, where a tight circle of buildings seemed to huddle around the chapel's vaulted bell tower.

There was no designated parking area, but Skylar saw a thin patch of grass where vehicles seemed to have passed before, and stopped the Jeep there. He cut the engine and walked towards a wide, low building with an awning that he thought looked more hospitable than the other structures. Before he reached the door, a group of five monks wearing black and white robes exited the chapel, and he stopped short. Four of them walked silently past him, nodding politely in his direction, but the fifth, a small, middle-aged man with a brown beard, approached him.

“Good afternoon,” the monk said kindly.

“Good afternoon,” Skylar replied tentatively. “I'm looking for Rob.”

The monk looked perplexed.

“Robert Crenshaw, I should’ve said,” Skylar corrected. This seemed to connect.

“Of course. My apologies,” the monk said, chuckling. “We haven’t called him that name for some time, and I didn’t know him well early on.”

“He has a new name?”

“Yes. Robert is now called Brother Elijah.”

“May I speak with him?” Skylar asked. He was intrigued by Rob’s new home, even if it made him a bit uncomfortable.

“Brother Elijah is in his room meditating. We wouldn’t want to disturb his quiet. But if you stay for a while, he’ll show up. You are welcome to walk the grounds, and we’ll be eating soon.”

Skylar obliged. The monk introduced himself; he was Father John, from New York. Father John spent the remainder of his afternoon with Skylar, walking him around the monastery and talking with him. He offered Skylar an apple, which he gladly accepted, though Father John did not take one himself—he was fasting. As the afternoon wore on, Skylar’s interest grew, until Rob walked out of the main building and greeted them.

Rob was no longer Rob, Skylar thought, he was Brother Elijah indeed. His hair and clothing had changed, of course, but it was more than that. His face had taken on a calm that seemed different than what Skylar remembered, as though the sharp edges of Rob’s intensity had been filed off; not that this was negative. Rob’s features exuded the very wisdom that he had sought at Skylar’s age. It made Skylar hopeful for his own future, though he doubted that he could live a monastic life.

Rob embraced Skylar warmly, and they exchanged pleasantries; for a moment, Skylar forgot what he was there to do. Then Rob asked about Jon.

“Do you think he would want to visit me sometime? I’d love to see him, though I don’t doubt he’s doing well,” Rob said with a smile. Skylar was silent. He couldn’t bear to give the news flippantly; before he could speak, his expression gave him away.

“Is everything okay?” Rob asked.

“We should take a walk,” Skylar said.

They took their leave of Father John and headed down a gravel path that dipped down further into the valley, stepping lightly over the thick stones that formed a natural stairway as the path steepened.

“Rob, I—can I still call you Rob?” Skylar began. Rob nodded.

“That’s the name you know me by, and I’m happy to answer to it, as long as you’re here. What were you saying?” Rob asked.

“I don’t know how to say this, but I’ll try. Jon died. Of cancer.”

Rob looked at Skylar, stunned. He covered his mouth for a moment, taking it in.

“I’m so sorry, Skylar. I know how close you are to him.”

Rob pulled Skylar into an embrace. The feeling of being held was a relief, and before he knew it, Skylar was crying into Rob’s shoulder, his chest heaving in big, uneven breaths. Rob moved his hand comfortingly across Skylar’s back. When Skylar pulled away a moment later, trying to gather himself, he sat down on the trail. Rob sat with him in the dirt, looking into his eyes with a sober kindness.

“I’ll be praying for him, and for you as well,” Rob said. “The Father’s mercy is greater than we can imagine.”

“I want to believe,” Skylar said quietly. Rob took in a deep breath.

“I’ve thought a lot about the example I must have set for you and Jon, and I regret it. I was young and I was foolish. I thought that being smart and edgy would make up for the

emptiness I felt back then, but all it did was cover up my needs. It took hitting bottom for me to admit that I needed God, that I needed the Church to save me and put me on a good path. I always talked to you like the point of life was being free, not being constrained by rules. But I was wrong. The rules weren't petty, I was petty. I needed the discipline, but my stubbornness kept me from admitting it. I've spoken too much. I hope that you haven't gone as far down that path as I did."

Skylar didn't know what to say. He was taken aback by Rob's dismissal of his own past. Skylar had thought of Rob as an example of what it meant to be a thoughtful Christian, one who wasn't afraid to stand out from the crowd. Was this the same Rob at all, who was talking about rules as good and necessary? Worse yet, he wondered how Rob would feel if he knew that he had traveled even further down "that path," than Rob had; so far down it, in fact, that he didn't know if he could return. As much hope as he had that he could reconnect with God somehow, he knew that it wouldn't be the kind of Christianity Rob had embraced. In the end, he stayed silent. They walked back towards the monastery.

"Is that what you came to tell me, Skylar?" Rob asked after a moment.

"Sort of," Skylar replied. "I needed to tell you, and I didn't know how else to reach you. But I also wanted to ask you ... would you be willing to speak at Jon's funeral?"

Rob looked down at the ground. "I can't go back to Texas. My place is here, at least for now. And soon, I'll be entering discernment about whether to commit to this community for life. I want so badly to say goodbye to Jon, but ... I can't leave."

"I understand. I'm glad that I got to speak with you, at least." Skylar searched Rob's face. "Would it be okay if I came back sometime? If I need to talk?"

"Of course, Skylar. Anytime," Rob said, squeezing Skylar's arm. "But as for tonight—would you stay for dinner?"

Skylar nodded yes, and Rob led him to the dining hall. As they walked into the warmly lit room, a low-ceilinged adobe space divided evenly by long darkwood tables, Skylar expected the normal sounds of a meal, but instead he was met by silence. The room was full of monks in matching robes, eating fresh-baked bread and simple tomato soup out of wooden bowls. Rob led Skylar to the back of the room, where a smiling monk wearing an apron was ladling soup and breaking bread for everyone. He handed Skylar a steaming bowl and bowed his head slightly.

“Welcome, friend,” he said quietly.

Skylar accepted the bowl with a little nod of his own, and followed Rob to a table where several of the older monks were sitting. Rob greeted them with an affectionate touch on the arm, and gestured to Skylar.

“This is Skylar Cofield. He’s an old friend of mine, from back home,” Rob said.

One of the monks, a man wearing round glasses, whose dark brown hair was peppered with gray, set his spoon down in his soup and shook Skylar’s hand.

“You’re a Texas boy?” he asked with a smile. Skylar nodded. “I grew up near Abilene. Must be nice to get out of the heat for a while.”

“It was. I’m headed back there tomorrow, though. It’ll be nice to be home, but I wish I could take a little mountain air with me,” Skylar replied.

The monks chuckled. Skylar and Rob sat with them, and, after saying grace, began to eat. Whether it was the food itself, or the setting, Skylar wasn’t sure, but the bread and soup made a perfect meal, the bread soft and sweet inside its hard, dark crust, and the soup a delightful unity of lively, earthy flavors. They spoke little, but the warm company was comforting to Skylar.

After the meal, Skylar said goodbye to Rob. He climbed into Jon's old Jeep and started the engine, waving as he drove up through the trees. After he had been back on the highway for a few minutes Skylar faded the radio in. The sun began to turn red as it dipped in the sky, but Skylar kept driving, singing along to one of his favorite old albums. Before he knew it, the sky was completely black, and he was pulling into a motel parking lot near the Texas border. That night, Skylar fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. The exhaustion of driving, which was only compounded by the exhaustion of mourning, had combined with the restfulness of Skylar's afternoon at the monastery to make him feel completely spent. It was a welcome emptiness, and he accepted it graciously as he closed his eyes. He didn't recall any dreams the next morning upon waking, but he had a vague feeling that he had seen Jon. Curiously, this was not a source of sadness; most every reminder of his friend had set him back into a deep grief, but the half-formed feeling of seeing him that night relieved Skylar, for all he could make of the phantom memory was a sense that Jon was happy.

The funeral wasn't set to take place until the following day, so Skylar made no attempt to rush home. He knew that everyone was waiting back home, and the idea of grieving in the presence of many others made him appreciate the quiet and solitude of an extended drive. He drove due-East for a few hours that morning, crossing the border and rolling down a flat, straight highway that was headed for the Metroplex, where he planned to link up with the interstate. The solace and rest of the previous night faded as Skylar drove into the sun and the heat, and soon his thoughts had strayed back to his friend. Skylar wondered who would say the eulogy at the funeral now. He thought that, no matter what, the funeral wouldn't be what Jon would have wanted. Jon always said that he wanted his funeral to be a celebration of his life, but Skylar knew that there would be no celebrating,

and he couldn't blame anyone for it. The whole thing, the manner and swiftness of Jon's death—it was all too much to fathom, and one could only view it as a tragedy.

Skylar's thoughts skipped around, as thoughts always do, but especially in times of distress. He remembered a time, many years earlier, when he and Jon had parked the Jeep by the lake, and skipped rocks over the flat surface of the water. They had talked for hours about life, but what Skylar remembered the most was how they had taken a wrong turn into an old man's driveway on their way back, and he had chased them out of his yard brandishing a shotgun.

That was what life was like, he thought. There were long stretches of mundane things, talking, and skipping rocks, but what counted most were the few fleeting seconds that made memories. He reflected on those memories of Jon, all the pranks he would pull, grinning as his friends laughed until they cried, all the moments of quiet genius and all the acts of love that Jon gave to the world. For whatever reason, the last memory that came to Skylar wasn't a memory of Jon at all, but a memory of a painting. Skylar hadn't thought much about their trip to the museum after he got back to Texas, but now, he was picturing it again, the loving mother and the baby, with the figure of Death himself looking hungrily over her shoulder. He had tried to find the painting online a few times, in order to know who had painted it (or even, why they had painted it), but he had never managed to track it down.

Skylar checked the road signs. He was nearing Fort Worth, and he wasn't even hungry for lunch yet. All of a sudden, an idea formed in Skylar's mind: he had plenty of time to swing by the museum on his way home. He wouldn't even have to pay for anything, if he remembered it right, for the painting in question had been in the public collection. He decided to go for it. He would swing by the museum, go to the painting, quickly, and find

out where it had come from. He wasn't sure why it mattered so much, but he had a vague notion that understanding the painting that had haunted him for so long might constitute some kind of closure for him. Perhaps the closure would extend to Jon's absence in his life, though he knew that nothing could make the wound go away completely.

He parked as close to the door as he could, and jogged up the steps at the front of the museum. Once inside, he found a clerk and asked for directions to the 19th Century paintings. He walked briskly past everything on his way, determined to get to the painting so that he could put the whole thing to rest. He turned the same corner he had rounded months earlier, and the painting was there on the opposite wall, as imposing as ever. He approached it. It looked mostly the same, but this time he saw some things he had missed the first time. The Mary figure was dressed not in the drab clothes of a peasant, but in a dirty, garish carnival dress. And the Christ Child was older than he remembered, and not swaddled, but bandaged on the head. Skylar arrived at the small white plaque mounted to the right of the painting.

La famille du saltimbanque: l'enfant blessé

Gustave Doré, 1853. Part of Doré's series *Paris tel qu'il est*. Here, two street acrobats mourn their dying son, who was injured in the middle of their regular routine. Doré says this in an 1874 interview in England about the portrait's mate, *Les Saltimbanques*, a direct copy which was produced two decades later: "Yes, he is dying. I wished to depict the tardy awakening of nature in those two hardened almost brutalized beings. To gain money they have killed their child and in killing him they have found out that they had hearts." The

painting is hard to define stylistically, but its thematic depths and its concrete origins make it a uniquely compelling piece from a prolific painter.

Skylar looked quickly back at the painting. Sure enough, the demon who sat over Mary's shoulder was no demon at all. It was a man, dressed in dark blue, his face painted grey and his hair dyed bright red, as part of his acrobat's costume. His eyes, Skylar saw now that he was close to the painting, were not shimmering with demonic glee, but were sparkling with welling tears. Skylar was amazed. How could he have been so moved by a painting that meant something completely different than what he had thought? What was more, he remembered Jon's words now: he had said that he liked the painting of the acrobats, because it was a picture of *redemption*. Sure enough, there was a strangely redemptive arc to the painting, now that he knew what it really was. Skylar laughed to himself, realizing that he was like the parents, gaining some small shred of insight, but too late. He looked at the painting for several minutes, stepping back from it and taking it in from a low bench in the middle of the room. He remembered how Jon had seen something, before he died; some vision that convinced him everything would be alright for him in the end. The painting made more sense now, in light of that. It wasn't the picture of a looming curse, but the picture of the possibility of hope, or at least the possibility of understanding, in the wake of tragedy. Skylar breathed in and out, listening to the air move through his nostrils, feeling his pain wash through him, and out of him. He still felt tired, but a little of the sadness was gone, at least for a moment. He stood, walked to the car, and left the museum behind.

The sun was getting low by the time Skylar started seeing road signs for home. He had mostly put the museum out of his mind on the drive, choosing to sing along loudly to the CDs looping in the stereo, but now he was quiet, and his thoughts wandered back to the

oddity of the two interpretations of the painting. They had both been poignant, in one way or another, at different times. Jon had always talked about art, or even conversation, as “two messages.” The first was the outgoing message; the intended meaning of the speaker, or the artist. The second was the incoming message; the way the listener or the viewer *understood* the art or speech. Both were vital, Jon thought, and they could not be divorced from one another. Skylar knew the outgoing message, now, but he thought that both interpretations were meaningful. Perhaps the paint itself, divorced from human contact, didn’t mean anything at all. But when a viewer looked at it, he imbued it with some kind of meaning. In Skylar’s case, even more curiously, the meaning he had given to the painting had changed over time, but both interpretations had been useful. He thought it was odd to think of the second interpretation as the “correct” interpretation. Both were important to him in their own way.

He thought that maybe that was true of his questions about philosophy as well. He would never have an objective view of the soul, for how could he? He was a soul, in some way or another. He was the eye attempting to see itself. What he could do, though, was give each understanding its due. Perhaps the naturalist’s view was true after its own fashion. Perhaps it was valuable or useful in its own way. He supposed that the world of medical treatments for mental illness was born out of a belief that the mind was material. How could he dismiss such a good outcome? And, on the other hand, the idea that the mind, the soul, was more than just another arbitrary part of the material world had its value. That view was, in his estimation, the most important of them all, as he had learned over the past few months. He needed to believe that there was more to life, and so he did. Skylar knew that taking such a view was not popular. He grinned despite himself as he pictured a conversation between Francis and Rob, discussing the possibility that both of their views were

indispensable parts of some unknown whole. Neither of them would take the news well, he thought.

Skylar didn't know if his theory held, or what it meant for the big picture. All he knew was that he felt a little relieved. He thought that, perhaps, this was his way forward. To follow his gut, those things he knew without needing evidence, was, in some sense, the only way to find value in all the corners of his mind. That would have been impossible for him years ago, but now he knew that Doreen was right. One had to take some things on faith, even if the larger picture was obscured. Night fell, and Skylar made it to his bed safely. He slept deeply, and when he awoke, he felt ready to say his final goodbye.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Funeral

Skylar hadn't visited his old church in years. It was an incoherent, patchworked complex of buildings, as Baptist churches often are. The main building had a steeple in the center, rising several stories above the sanctuary inside. Long, low buildings flanked the steeple on either side, where the meeting rooms and the nursery were, and around back there was a newer building, covered in brick that so nearly matched the older style that it clashed if you looked close enough. That building was the new gymnasium, which had been sold to the congregation with lots of talk of "outreach," but in fact functioned mostly as a place for the youth group to play basketball and do messy activities without bothering the elderly church members.

He passed by the church often. It was situated near a busy intersection at the edge of town, and more importantly it lay along one of his favorite driving routes. On summer nights, when he had nothing to do, Skylar would drive for an hour or more, making a rough loop around the city and listening to music. Sometimes he would pass the church on a busy evening and see people milling around in the parking lot, laughing and talking; a feeling of displacement would descend on him, in those moments, wondering how it was that most of the people there in the place where he had grown up didn't know him at all.

All of it, the memories from years before and the uncomfortability of being near his old stomping ground, hovered over the dark asphalt of the parking lot as Skylar parked his car and made his way to the sanctuary for the memorial service. This time, though, he wasn't just beset by the ghosts of his old friends; many of the people he had known then were here in the flesh, gathered back together to pay tribute to one of the church's favorite sons, Jonathan. Some people nodded politely in Skylar's direction, and others walked to him,

giving hugs and hushed words of regret, but they all looked at him the same, their eyes lighting up as they recognized him and registered his grief, then looking away in an attempt to afford him a little courtesy. It was all a blur, and soon he was sitting on the front row of pews, staring blankly at the words in the hymnal as the organ plodded through the second verse of “When Sorrow Floods the Troubled Heart.” Out of guilt and a little interest, Skylar made himself read the words, and even attempted a little singing as the third verse began.

The sting of death cannot forbid the child of God to sing.

The scars we bear may long remain, but resurrection brings

The healing of the broken heart, the righting of a wrong.

Our tears shall cease, our silence breaks in Christ, the living Song.³

Tears streamed down Skylar’s face, his chin twitching as he tried to steady his heaving chest. He didn’t know, in that moment, what it all meant. He couldn’t have said, then, what he thought about all of it, Jesus or Heaven, or whether he could find any real hope in this time of grief. None of that was in his mind at all. Instead, as the words washed over him, as he looked up at the portrait of his friend’s glowing smile, he felt a sense of comfort, as if something in the atmosphere, that alchemy of simplistic Protestant symbolism, unaccented music, and formal grief was wrapping around his shoulders and telling him softly that it was alright to be sad.

Then the music ended, and the pastor solemnly made his way to the pulpit. He rested his hands on either side of it, and drew in a deep breath.

³ “When Sorrow Floods the Troubled Heart,” Rebecca Turner and Paul Simpson Duke, 1989.

“I never enjoy preaching over the death of a church member,” he began, “but this one pains me more than most. Jonathan Harringer was a joyful, good person, whom we dearly loved here for many years...”

Thus the eulogy began. Skylar’s concentration lapsed, and he found himself staring at the casket for the first time. There’s the body of my best friend, he thought simply, but it meant almost nothing to him. Even the picture of Jon, thin and propped up on an easel, was more of the real Jon than that pile of bones in that box. Whether Jon himself was more than the sum of all those little electric sparks that had so recently ceased to fire in his brain, Skylar didn’t know, but he knew that a dead body, stiff and preserved, could not be the friend he had loved.

“...We stand here today, humbled and in awe, reminded of our own mortality. But I want to say this, too: let us be reminded of God’s mercy as well. Jon left us years ago, and I can’t say that I know him well. Whether he’s meeting the Father now, I can’t say. And it’s not for us to say who goes with God at the end of life. But what I can say, I say to the living, to all of us in this room. Draw close to the Father. Give him your burdens, cry out to him in pain, if it’s pain you’re feeling today. But above all, let him make a new life in you. Christ knows death better than anyone in the world, and he wants to raise you up as a new creature today...”

Now a hint of anger impinged upon Skylar’s sorrow. If Jon’s not with God now, he thought, nobody ever was. To make Jon’s memorial into a call for repentance—but he was weary, and the anger didn’t last. Skylar wondered what he would have said. Would it have truly been any better? He knew that any eulogy he delivered would be less certain, at least theologically. He supposed it would be a story of some kind. He remembered once, three or four years earlier, he walked into Jon’s studio and saw Jon sitting alone, unaware that he was

being watched. As he worked, Jon sang to himself, doing a truly impressive rendition of Aretha Franklin's "Respect," in his best falsetto. A silly story, perhaps, but it expressed the thing about Jon that Skylar had revered the most: Jon was the same, all the time. Jon's joy wasn't derivative in the slightest. It didn't come from the approval of others, but from somewhere deep inside him. Today, Skylar couldn't help but think it came from God.

Soon the sermon was over, and the reception began in the atrium of the church, an odd mixture of people and tones of voice which echoed against the hard stone tiling. It made as much sense as anything did in a time like this, and Skylar took comfort when he saw more than a few old friends telling funny stories they remembered about Jon. It was tragic to say goodbye so soon, but Skylar liked the fact that the stories were still fresh, and being told by young people, still full of life, who would carry those memories with them for many years.



Some three weeks later, the casket in the ground and Skylar on the mend, a different sort of day came: a good occasion. In honor of Jon, the local art gallery had decided to honor their agreement with him and display his portraits. Doreen convinced them to donate all the money from sales to cancer research, and Francis sent memos out to everyone at the university, hopeful that there would be a small crowd to celebrate Jon's work. The living members of Not-Church had not met together since Jon's passing, although they kept in touch, and they excitedly made plans to go to the gallery together. They would shake hands and give answers in Jon's stead, and in the meantime they could catch up.

Skylar gave Doreen a ride to the gallery. They chatted happily on the way, but when they walked into the long, open space where the show was to be held, they found themselves speechless. The room, completely white, save for the dark concrete floors, was full of their beloved Jon, staring back at them more than fifty times. The walls were lined with portrait after portrait, painstakingly arranged according to some plan which Jon had doubtless laid out before his passing, telling an abstract account of his final months of life. It was all there, moments of happiness with his friends, the fear of death and the pain of treatment, his trip to the mountains, which took up an entire wall all on its own, and finally a series of nearly unrecognizable portraits, which seemed to chronicle his spiritual journey through a period of hopelessness, culminating in a small drawing scribbled on a piece of printer paper, dated the day before he died. This final portrait was a simple piece, powerfully contrasted, in which Jon appeared as a feeble body in a hospital gown, grey and hunched over. There was a shadow over his face, but the faintest trace of a smile could be seen. Over his shoulder, a figure so bright that it could scarcely be rendered stood by. Skylar didn't know for sure, but he thought that, just maybe, the second figure was Jon as well: the Jon who had departed from that room not headed for a casket, but for another life.

Francis joined them a minute later, while they were still taking in all the beauty Jon had created out of his suffering. As he entered the room, Francis lifted a rectangular cardboard box emblazoned with the logo of their old donut shop. Doreen squeaked with excitement at seeing Francis, and they sat in the middle of the room together, eating their late breakfast and marveling at the paintings. At some point a few minutes later, a church bell nearby tolled eleven o'clock, and they realized that they were meeting again on Sunday morning, Skylar, Francis, Doreen, and dozens of Jons, one last time.

The conversation mostly stayed light that day, but after half an hour, as the opening of the show crept nearer, Doreen asked Skylar about something they hadn't discussed in many weeks.

“So, Skylar, did you ever figure out about your mind problem?” she asked.

“You think there’s something wrong with my mind?” he chided, but she waved his joke away.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not sure if you remember this, but when we were in Estes Park, you said something that really affected me. You told me to start from what I know, and think on from there.”

“That sounds familiar. Seems like common sense, though.”

“You’d think it was common sense, but it’s not that easy for me. Anyway, though, I listened to you, and it did help, at least a little.”

“Have you become a theist, then?” Francis asked, with more than a little sarcasm in his voice.

“Well, I don’t know about that. I think *you’d* call me a theist, Francis, but a lot of theists wouldn’t agree.”

“Please, explain yourself,” Francis said.

“Well, obviously all these things are wrapped up together, theism and naturalism, the nature of the soul, the mind-body problem ... all those questions end up in the same discussions, talking about life and death, the nature of experience, and all that. And, the truth is, I don’t know if I could defend any of the normal views people take on those issues. It seems like every answer has a flaw. So, I took Doreen’s advice. I’ve started going with my gut more, believing the things that *feel* true to me.”

Francis nodded skeptically. “Picking and choosing what you believe, you mean?”

“Well sure, you can take it that way, if you like. But I don’t think it’s the same thing. It’s more like ... I’ve argued my way all the way around the circle, and there doesn’t seem to be a clear answer. Take the mind: if you start out trying to break down materialism, no matter how you defend it, you end up losing out at some point. If you take functionalism, which is by far the cleanest rendition of the materialist picture, you run into logic problems. If you jump to a more nuanced version of materialism like epiphenomenalism, say (that’s the idea that the non-representational aspects of experience sort of “arise” from the causal chain of the physical world), it seems like you’re close to losing what you started with in the first place: the concept that the physical world is *all of it*. If you jump to a more extreme version, and double down, you’ve almost dug your own grave. Does anyone really want to deny that mental experience is real?

“But then, if you take the opposite approach, and start with the idea that the mind is its own kind of existence, a non-physical thing that’s the basis of who you are, you’re left with a total mess. How do you establish a connection between a non-physical mind and a physical body? Did you know that there are whole groups of philosophers who are convinced that the answer is in quantum physics? They think that there’s some sneaky pathway in the universe, where quantum physics allows our minds to physically affect our brains through quantum interaction. That seems completely absurd to me, as cool as it sounds.”

“So what’s your answer?” Francis asked. “You’ve left me and Doreen in the dust, and it seems like you don’t want to have an opinion at all. How did Doreen’s advice help you, if it didn’t help you find an answer?”

“It helped me realize that I don’t need to build an answer from the ground up,” Skylar said. “I can’t subscribe to one of these grand theories about the mind, but I can tell

you what my instincts tell me, after years of thinking through this stuff. For one thing, I'm convinced that my experiences are *real*. Any theory of the mind that ends up saying that I have no free will, and it's all an illusion, that I'm just a very complex machine executing the laws of physics with the same absoluteness as a tree or a paper plate is wrong. I'll say this, too, and I'll admit that I'm sheepish in saying it: I believe that there's life after death. I can't accept the idea that my mind is snuffed out the minute my heart stops beating."

"But you can't explain why you think it?" Francis asked.

"No, that's the thing. I can. That's what Doreen helped me to understand. I can point to things other than arguments on paper as reasons for belief. I wasn't sure about life after death, but when I saw Jon on that last night, I knew. Jon's not gone. He's out there somewhere, in some other world, some other way of existing." Skylar pointed to the final portrait of Jon. "He's his new self, now. That, I'm sure of, and I'm sure in a way that a theory could never have made me sure. I believe."

"And God?" Doreen cut in. "Do you believe in God?"

"I'm not sure about that. I don't think I often understand what people mean when they talk about God. If you mean some bearded old man in the sky who loves me, I can just say no. But, is there something out there? Something that can't be put into adequate words? I think there has to be."

"And if you didn't it would seem a little odd, considering your views on souls and such," Francis said.

"It would."



With that said, there's little more to say. The art show ended, and the friends departed, and they never sat together again on Sunday morning eating donuts and talking. Doreen joined a new church, and spent her last years there, surrounded by new friends who loved her dearly. Francis, too, began attending church in his own way: he went to mass with his daughter, who had converted to Catholicism when she met her husband. He never quite felt comfortable there, but he found that the practices and the time with his family were good for him.

Skylar went on with his life, and, years later, he became a lecturer at a small university. He taught a variety of courses, but his favorite was an introductory course in philosophy for non-majors. He loved hearing his students, fresh from high school, struggling through difficult questions that he knew were ultimately unanswerable. He would smile as he told the many stories he collected during his years as a professor, about his students "waking up" to the depths of a thoughtful life. It was a beautiful thing to him.

Finally, Skylar died too, surrounded by loved ones, and mourned by a whole community of loyal students and grateful colleagues. They mostly thought of him as a wise old man, who took death and life in stride, and found joy in small things. But I knew him better. As I grew older, he was careful to show me the pattern of his life, the many mistakes it took him to reach the happiness he felt as an older man. I knew that he had endured his share of doubts and tumult, and many times over the course of my youth, I was encouraged to remember the stories he told about his younger self. The best, I have always thought, came from the brief period in his life when he was reckoning with the coming death of Jon. Those were the days in which he truly began to "wake up."

EPILOGUE

Now I've told the story as my father would have wanted it told: straight and true, and not at all glorifying to himself. He always thought of himself as that young man, just out of college, with plenty of ideas and very little true insight. But I must have my own word about him. For me, he was a hero. He was quite the opposite of the overly-talkative, argumentative boy he talked about to his children. That is, he was a very *wise* man, and I don't say that word lightly.

I've spent much of the past months wondering how best to sum up my father's later years, without dwelling on them for too long. I wrote down dozens of anecdotes about his parenting, and compiled stories from students and friends about their memories of him, but none of those things capture him fully. In the end, I decided that the only proper way to "explain" my father was to let him explain something to you. I've chosen an informal lecture he gave to a small group of students and faculty at his college some years ago (there is some disagreement about whether it was delivered in 2042 or 2043, though that hardly matters for the present purpose). Whether it pertains to the story I've told about my father's younger years, I'll leave to you to decide. No other context is necessary, although it seems relevant that the theme of the lecture series was "What Would Socrates Think of the Current-Day University?"

“The Socratic Circle” A Talk Given by Skylar Cofield:

So, I’ve got a little time to talk to you all about this topic; “What Would Socrates Think of the Current-Day University?” It’s an unanswerable question, of course. We’d need to bring Socrates here and ask him, and even that would be difficult. How would we explain all of this to him? Perhaps more importantly, would he see any vestige of his own philosophy in our world? I tend to think that the answer to that last question is a resounding “yes,” but again, I’m not able to really say.

So, in light of that, maybe it’s best to try a more achievable exercise. Let’s talk about the *ideas* of Socrates, rather than the man himself. It’ll still be difficult, but perhaps we can get somewhere. There’s a concept in Plato that I’d like to talk about, with reference to Socrates: it’s about wisdom. The idea is that Socrates’s wisdom doesn’t come from any kind of special insight. Instead, it comes from his correct estimation of his own shortcomings. The Oracle at Delphi agrees that there’s no one wiser than Socrates, but Socrates claims that he’s a fool. The only thing that’s different about him, he says, is that he *knows* what a fool he is. Thus, his wisdom is simply his ability to recognize that he isn’t wise at all. The whole episode is problematic, for a number of reasons (all reasons that I’m sure have been articulated better elsewhere, but I’ll mention a few, briefly). For one, he’s already gone on extensively, in multiple

dialogues, about the definition of knowledge, and he gets pretty excited theorizing about the whole thing. So we have some idea of Socrates's understanding of knowledge, and judging by his own models, he knows plenty of stuff (for instance according to certain readings of the theory of recollection, he, and everyone else, already has all knowledge, locked away in his consciousness). Certainly a fool can still have some knowledge, but it seems odd for Socrates to think himself a fool. I could go on, but the point has been made: Socrates isn't simply "admitting" that he's a fool, at least not in the traditional sense.

So, what is he doing? I won't claim to know, but I think it's helpful to relate this whole episode to the enigmatic endings of many of the dialogues. Almost without fail, near the end of the Socratic dialogues, it seems like we're headed towards a perfect answer to the philosophical problem at hand. But then, at the end, Socrates undercuts his own ideas, or problematizes his solution in some way, so that we can't get a solid answer out of him. Now, maybe, a sort of coherence is coming into view. Socrates's responses to the great philosophical questions (all of which, by the way, we are still dealing with)—what is knowledge, for instance, or moral questions like what is the "good life?"—are, in essence, a shrug. He shrugs them off. What's knowledge? Well ... perhaps it's a sort of *recalling*, or maybe it's true belief that's anchored by good reasoning, and so on ... but who really knows?

It seems a little defeatist. What's the point of all the fancy talking and all the reasoning, if at the end of the day I still don't get any closer to the truth? But, here again, Socrates's words are starting to become harmonious. Through all the talking and thinking, if you do it right, you *are* closer to the truth, because you've inched closer to an understanding of the way the problem works, and, even more importantly, you've realized that your weakly held beliefs aren't cutting it.

Now, I do think there's more to the picture than simply staying in a place of uncertainty forever. I think there is a way to begin to locate the utter truth, the foundational truth. And I think Socrates does, too. But I'd like to save that till the end.

People sometimes talk about the *Socratic Seminar*, otherwise called the *Socratic Circle*. The idea is to sit in a circle and have a conversation driven by difficult, sometimes unanswerable questions. It's a good start, and I'm thankful for the times in my life when I've had a circle of friends to help me think through those kinds of questions. But I want to talk about a different kind of Socratic Circle this afternoon. I want to talk about the circle one makes when doing philosophy. We start, in general, with little knowledge, and maybe a little more conviction. Then, if we're lucky enough to catch philosophy bug, we begin to reason about an issue. For instance, the question "what ought I to do?" This is, of course, the fundamental question of moral philosophy, but most people don't think much about it. They take what they were told as children, and modify it as

they go, trying to be good people at least most of the time. The philosophers can't do that though. We learn and we reason, comparing the strength of the categorical imperative with that of teleology, thinking through the logical coherence of relativism, and so on. It's all very interesting. More than that, though, it's a compelling experience, especially as an undergrad, (like most of you); it's compelling because it feels like the truth is right around the next corner. It feels like we're moments away from a breakthrough, and all of a sudden everything is going to make sense.

Of course, the big breakthrough never comes. At first it's frustrating. Every time you think you have the ultimate answer, someone comes along and points out a flaw in what you've found. Sometimes we even find the flaws ourselves. It's hard work, philosophy. But we can find some comfort in remembering Socrates. Just like us, he usually finds himself without a solid answer at the end of the day.

This, of course, is the Socratic Circle. Perhaps you see where I'm headed. The Socratic Circle is the shape of philosophy, not only in the sense that philosophy takes place in the air between friendly mouths and minds (though that is inarguably true in its own way); it is the shape of the philosophical journey. Tempted by Plato, we think that the philosophical journey is like the Christian journey, the journey of Dante through the bowels of Hell, up the Mountain of Purgatory, and into Heaven. It's easy to see how Plato's Cave is the same: it's a straight line of ascent. Perhaps

the Christian journey can do just that, and carry us out of our prison, liberate us some how. But that's not the shape of the philosophical journey, at least for the Socratic philosopher. For the philosopher who goes with Socrates, the point of origin is the point of arrival, and no geographical progress has been made. But, like the adventure, the "there-and-back-again," the philosophical journey is not without consequence. The adventurer ends up where she started, but she is not the same person she was when she left. Just so, the philosophical sojourner (that is, the Socratic one, the one who acknowledges her own foolishness) does not end up in a new intellectual space, so to speak. But this traveller is undoubtedly better at travel, and more acquainted with the philosophical terrain covered.

That is the first thing that I think Socrates might say to the modern university: keep thinking! Keep questioning! Always remember that philosophy is a circle, that the journey of the good philosopher is never over. Don't get so caught up in your theories that you forget your foolishness.

But I think there's something else he would say, to those of us who have taken his first message to heart. I alluded to it earlier. Both Socrates and I have more to say than just "you never think your way into a perfect answer." After all, we're philosophers. Underneath the skepticism, there is a need to search for the deep truths, and that need can only spring up from one place: hope.

So, how does one find hope, if everything I've said is true? I started all this by talking about the wisdom of Socrates: the wisdom of seeing your foolishness. But, Socrates himself believes that there is another kind of wisdom, one that he himself hasn't grasped. This is the wisdom of the gods. Divine wisdom is true wisdom; it's the perfect right answer that's always around the corner but never in our grasp. And indeed, divine wisdom is not usually accessible to humans. For Socrates, the philosophical act might be seen as an attempt to see a little glimmer of that true wisdom.

Now I'll shed the guise of Socrates entirely, and speak as myself. So, please, if you have a problem with what I'm saying, take it up with the living fool, not the dead one. I think that there *is* a way for us to come into contact with divine wisdom. (Socrates hints at this in the *Symposium*, among other places.) But we can't access it through any sort of intellectual achievement. It has to come in a different form, something wholly other than our usual philosophical conclusions: it has to be a *gift*. We don't earn the divine gift, and we definitely can't control when we receive it. But if we labor diligently, as Socrates has taught us, we can hope for those few moments in life when we receive a gift of insight, and take a small step into the vast wisdom we've been striving for.

So, in conclusion, I don't know what Socrates would have thought of our university. But I think that two of the things he has to tell us, in the place we are now, as students and philosophers, are these: first, to keep

trying, with intellectual humility and with hope, to find the truth; and second, to have faith that our efforts will be rewarded, somehow, someday with the gift of true wisdom.