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Jesus and the Walnuts

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The Potato Chip Can, The Sphere, and the Logician

McMann came into possession of the mirrored sphere through a labyrinthine set of exchanges that included (among others) a Chinese pianist whose fingers had been chopped off during the cultural revolution, a Czech geneticist disgraced for fabricating evidence, and a Romanian chemist recently released from jail after serving — in part — two life sentences for poisoning a very bad priest. The sphere had never been touched by humans of any sort nor by any single human, although the transparent box within which it floated was greasy with fingerprints.

McMann immediately recognized that the sphere itself did not exist. Like the mirrored surface of a skyscraper, it offered the illusion of existence by reflecting almost every detail of its surroundings. Almost every detail. It was just this tiny difference from a full re-presentation of the world that so excruciated McMann, a gap across which arced the recurrent dream that stalked his sleeping hours. The dream concerned the tall metal tin sent by his grandmother as a gift for his fifth birthday. The yellowish tin had originally held New Era Potato Chips, but his grandmother had filled it with walnuts and taped a birthday card over the dark woman who stood beside the circular red logo. The silhouetted figure stood with one hand raised and the other pointing toward the phrase “artificially preserved.” Even as a child, he had noted the curve of her hips. The can, the walnuts, the woman, and the skyscraper were perturbations of his central nervous system, perturbations complicated by the unstable relationship between the concepts of reflection and reflexivity. McMann knew he was doomed, a figure tumbling through space, orbiting an invisible, theoretical center.

But back to the sphere. A Soviet cosmonaut had smuggled into his Soyuz spaceship a tiny, deflated, silvery sack that contained a pellet of crystalline helium. The idea was that upon entering a zero-gravity environment, the helium would sublime, and the gas would inflate the sack. Without the tug of gravity, the sac would assume a perfectly spherical shape. Both the sack and the clear, glass-like container in which

it rested were negatively charged. This perfect sphere would then float in the exact center of the glass-like box, repelled from its sides by the mutual distaste of the negative charges for each other. The idea worked, and upon returning to Earth, the helium kept the sphere floating and perfectly centered in the box.

For McMann, the miracle was not that the sphere was perfect, but rather that its surface was mirrored. He had accepted it from the fingerless hand of the pianist, confident that it might be the occasion for some sort of earth-shaking experiment. At first, he wasn't sure what that experiment might be, but for McMann, the perfection was the miniaturized perfection of a mirrored skyscraper, invisible to all, but inferred from the contexts reflected on its surface. He tentatively considered the following and labeled it "Praxis I," although he was not at all sure what the term "praxis" meant:

1. Assumption: An infinitely large volume has an infinite number of centers. Because the universe is infinitely large, any point in it is therefore the center.
2. If the little helium-filled sphere is perfectly . . . spherical, then every point in the infinite universe ought to be reflected on its surface.
3. Thus, the sphere is a genuine case of bridging the gap between words and worlds. The map and the world become one.
 - (a) Corollary: it is possible to represent (re-present) the world in words.

Consequence: McMann could finally sleep at night, secure in the knowledge that his thoughts were not just a ramshackle hut built of abandoned crackpipes and flawed fragments of philosophical concepts.

The need to evaluate Praxis I was obvious, even to McMann. Fortunately, he shared his office with a logician appropriately named Lucy Curt. When he showed his proposal to her, her response was predictably curt.

Lucy Curt cleared her throat and tapped a finger on her desk. "So, you think of the cosmos as something painted on the inside of a celestial sphere? Sort of medieval, isn't it? The stars and planets all equidistant from the earth?" She shook her head in disbelief. "Are you telling me that there aren't 'things hiding behind things hiding behind other things'? Infinite arrays of concealed objects? Give me a break."

McMann's face was somehow similar to that of an ox, stunned by a blow to the skull prior to being slaughtered. "No, no, no, no," he sputtered.

Lucy Curt pulled open the bottom drawer of her desk and took out her purse. She fished around and found a small mirror and handed it to McMann. "Turn your back to me, and look in the mirror," she said. "Try to see me."

McMann did as he was told, and when he finally spied her in the glass, she was hidden behind a copy of Newton's Optics. He tapped his head with a forefinger. "Oh, I see."

"No, you don't," Lucy Curt informed him. "And that's why your 'Praxis I' doesn't make sense."

McMann wanted to tell her that she too was a part of some praxis about his praxis, but he was not about to slide down that slippery slope. "I will re-configure," he told her, and the result was unsurprisingly called "Praxis II." But this time, he kept the project securely confined to his own spherical skull:

1. Assumption: An infinitely large volume has an infinite number of centers. Because the universe is infinitely large, any point in it is therefore the center. This argues for the value of an exemplum, a single case that bridges the gap between objects and their representation. This case would demonstrate the possibility of even more elaborate systems of re-presentation.
2. If the sphere is perfectly . . . spherical, then every point in a finite, single-layered space ought to be reflected on the surface of the sphere, if the center of the sphere and the center of the space are identical.
3. Thus, the sphere might be a genuine case of bridging the gap between words and worlds. The Map and the World become one.
 - (a) Corollary: it is possible to represent (re-present) the world in words.

Consequence: McMann could finally sleep at night, secure in the knowledge that his thoughts were not just a ramshackle hut built of crackpipes, fragments of flawed philosophical ideas, and dreams of Lucy Curt.

McMann attempted to draw a diagram of Praxis II, but quickly realized that any drawing would have only two dimensions while the experiment would have three. He wanted to ask Lucy about this problem, but he confused the ferocity of her mind with the ferocity of sex, and found himself asleep at his desk, dreaming of a shadowy woman feeding him New Era Potato Chips from a metal canister.

McMann awoke when Lucy Curt punched him in the shoulder. Her voice kept repeating a phrase, and after a few minutes he realized that she was saying, "You're snoring; you're snoring." He had at first thought she was saying, "You're boring; you're boring," so he felt a small trickle of relief begin to fill his brain.

"Would you like to know about Praxis II?" he asked her.

"No," she assured him, "I most definitely would not."

“Good,” he answered, and told her about the smaller scale of Praxis II, how it offered the possibility of a case that demonstrated a kind of representational completeness that might be an emblem for the perfectibility of human understanding.

Lucy Curt held a finger to her lips. “Shhh,” she commanded him. “Did you ever see a film called *Wings of Desire*? It’s about angels who love too much and fall to earth. I think Peter Falk is one of the fallen angels, and he knows there’s an unfallen angel next to him. He says, ‘Hey, I can’t see you, but I know you’re there.’”

McMann was confused. “And that’s supposed to be comforting?”

Lucy Curt crossed her arms. “I’m only going to tell you this twenty-three times,” she said, “so listen very carefully: a proof of the existence of unprovable true statements already exists. You’re beating a dead horse.”

McMann immediately thought of the potato chip can with its shadowy female figure whose arm was poised above her head. “I don’t get it.”

“I can only repeat what I said twenty-two more times. Are you sure you want to use up one of those repetitions right now?”

McMann shook his head, thanked her, and started to leave the office. He hesitated for a moment, but then he opened his desk drawer and took out the transparent box with the mirrored sphere floating in its center. He cleared his voice, and when Lucy Curt looked up, he pointed to the box and said, “Praxis II.”

“Go away,” she said, “But come back . . . eventually.”

McMann left to teach his literature class. He attempted to remember what he had asked his students to read, but his most pressing goal was to remember the name of whatever film it was that Lucy had mentioned.

Iterations of Lucy

McMann sat slumped at his desk. His head was twisted to the side, and a thin thread of drool stitched its way down his cheek. He was dreaming another Lucy Curt dream, and his face twitched out a code that named the fears he dreamt. In his dream, he was following her. He could see that one end of a large cement culvert — the one far behind Lucy — opened into an eroded trench. Somehow, he knew that it was meant to carry away the floodwaters of late winter, but it also seemed to serve as a sort of cesspool where the poor dumped their garbage and their dead. A trickle of sewage from the shanties cut small gullies down the banks and collected in black pools. Clouds of black flies rose and fell, stirred by the passing shadows of birds.

Squatting children, their pale blue skin blotchy with infection, watched Lucy disappear into the tunnel's mouth. When she had been swallowed up, a small boy with an eye like the dead eye of a heron watching for fish, stood up and began to urinate, his stream tinged with blood. When he finished, he shook himself dry, and then he squatted again, his knees nearly up to his ears. McMann knew that the boy had once had a sister, and that she too had gone into the tunnel.

The other end of the culvert opened onto the Argand Plane, a dry field that had cracked into a curling grid of imaginary coordinates. A stack of paper lay on the ground, and McMann watched Lucy bend to pick up a tattered photograph of a logician standing at a chalkboard. She held up the photograph, and he could see that the mathematician had drawn a circle and a cross on the board. McMann watched her tear the photograph into small strips and drop them onto the ground. The strips landed in the deepest of the cracks whose edges were rimmed with dark grass. McMann knew that Lucy was not fooled by their thick shadows, and they both knew how small they really were, spiny asphodel that not even the goats would eat.

The dry earth looked as though it could be pried up in small squares, and McMann wondered why paper was made in white squares, why it was not in random colors that would bleed into each other when some reader's hand, sweaty with the words' excitement, dampened the pigment. Lucy would like that — McMann told himself — a book that took on the body of its reader, a book sweated through the pores of a small boy squatting in a filthy trench and wondering where a woman was going and if that made her his sister. When he awoke from his dream, he would want to tell her that.

By dusk McMann had followed her for about a dozen miles. In the far distance, almost to the horizon, he could see a small hospital bed — he did not know how he knew it was a hospital bed, but was sure that it must have been one — and on the bed lay a mathematician, a writer, a priest, perhaps a Jesuit who was all of these. McMann understood that he was dying of thirst in the middle of the Argand Plane. The priest's suffering was connected to his discovery that he was a coordinate point, that he was something discrete and disconnected. At most, he felt, he was a coordinate of a real need and some imaginary rooted in the reality of an unmet desire. He tried to think about the possibility of continuity on the number line, but he could not, for he had a cancer in his spine, and was starving to death under the noonday sun.

If McMann could have spoken, he would have asked him for absolution, but McMann could not speak and the priest was too far away, so far away that he was not even sure that he was a Jesuit, or even a priest, or even a man, and whether it was really a hospital bed lying abandoned out on the plane.

When he looked around, he could not see Lucy.

The Music of the Spheres

After Lucy Curt left the college, McMann had begun a determined campaign to erase her from his memory, not because he did not love her, but because he could not bear her absence. He told himself that if he could forget, then she would not be absent, and he would not be lost. His system of forgetting had been simple: he would go to the high school, listen to the orchestra, and then go to Beggars' Banquet for a drink. The problem — his tears — had started while watching a rehearsal, and he immediately feared it might never stop, and he would never forget her. The students would play, and then he would realize that he was crying. He did not sob; his chest did not heave; he did not make sounds or draw attention to himself as he sat at the back of the darkened auditorium. But it was as if he had split open and her infinite absence was streaming out through his eyes. The salty water fell out of his face and landed on the front of his shirt where it spread slowly, a wound in his chest leaking tears. The next time, he had gone out into the hallway to compose himself, but a kind, relentlessly charitable woman had wanted to help him. It seemed that she wanted him to not cry. She asked him what was wrong; did he need help; had something happened? Her sympathy horrified McMann.

But the worst moment had come when he sat in the dark at the end of a row beside a little boy of perhaps seven or eight years. The boy's father sat beside the child, and pointed out the sister who played the cello. The lights went down, and the piece began with the sustained single note that identifies it. McMann's tears fell in the unlit room. But the pale child reached out through the dark and patted McMann's forearm with his little hand, a little white pattering of ghost fingers in the dark. And suddenly McMann felt as if something had broken in his face, as if a horde of mice were running out of his eyes and down his cheeks. His eyes were spastic automatons, hideously independent of everything he was trying to forget. They had their own life, spewing tiny wet rodents onto his face, soaking his shirt, taunting him with his own desires. It disgusted him, and he remembered his mother slapping his face for crying at his grandmother's funeral. When he remembered the sound of her hand striking his face, the tears stopped immediately. He slipped out of the auditorium and stood in the dark, waiting for the students to trickle into the parking lot. He sat on a bench, checked his watch, and allowed himself to think of Lucy for ten minutes.

McMann patted his shirt pocket to check for cigarettes and realized that he only wanted to smoke so he would have something to sacrifice, something that he could give up. It was the best way he could begin to forget her pale hands. He was sitting, his fingers woven into a small knot, when the officer's cylindrical flashlight tapped him on the shoulder. He looked up and saw the black shiny bill of the police hat. It made him think of the shirt Lucy Curt had given him, a shirt with a picture of Einstein wearing a police hat, and the words "186,000 Miles Per Second: it's not just a good idea; it's the law." The punctuation and capitalization had been different from how McMann now visualized it, but nonetheless it gave him the idea of leaving, and he started to stand up.

The officer held the long flashlight across McMann's chest and pressed him back into the bench. "Not so fast," he said. "What are you doing?"

McMann was perplexed. Did the officer want to know about the cigarettes, or about the elation of the students as their performance reached upward past their little auditorium and actually touched something they had only suspected might be true? Or perhaps the police officer wanted to know how he sought to make Lucy's absence manageable.

"Enjoying yourself?" the officer asked. "You have a kid playing?"

McMann knew that his unshaven face was grey and old. "Just here for the music."

"You like children that much, eh?"

McMann immediately understood. "I came for the concert," he explained. "I teach literature."

"This is music, not literature," the officer said. He tapped on the bench with his flashlight. "You're loitering." He added, "And you're making people uncomfortable."

"Somebody complain?" McMann asked.

"No, but you don't want that; you know, your name in the paper."

McMann shrugged.

The officer poked McMann's chest with his flashlight. "I don't want to see you around here."

McMann studied him. He extracted a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. He firmly tapped it on the heel of his palm, and then fished out one cigarette.

"Did you hear me?" the officer demanded. "I don't want to see you around here."

McMann could not find his usual apologetic impulses. “Well,” he said, “if you don’t want to see me here,” he said, reaching into his pocket for his lighter, “you can stay away.” He flipped open the Zippo, lit his cigarette and inhaled. “If you’re not here, you won’t see me.”

The officer reached into his own pocket and pulled out a pack of square cards. At first, McMann thought they were playing cards or a pack of British cigarettes, maybe a pack of L&Bs, but when the officer dropped them in his lap, he saw that they were pictures of unclothed children.

“What you got there?” the officer asked.

McMann stood up without touching the cards. “I’m going,” he said. The cards tumbled to the ground, and he let the officer pick them up so that he wouldn’t leave fingerprints. He stopped and examined the glowing tip of his cigarette.

“I thought so,” the officer said.

McMann reminded himself that he hadn’t been asked for ID, so this was likely to be the end of the event. He would finish his cigarette on the way to Beggar’s Banquet, have a drink while he read the program from the concert, and then walk home to his little apartment. The circuit would be complete.

Jesus and the Walnuts

McMann decided that his only option was to write to Lucy Curt. He would tell her the story about the can of walnuts his grandmother sent. Lucy would read it, and she would understand that he loved her and that even though they might never meet again, his heart would always be tattooed with scars whose shape was congruent with the shape of her skeptical soul. What he hoped to accomplish remained his deepest mystery. He knew the mystery was real even if he could not name it, and this seemed to console him. He wrote quickly and without revision:

Dearest Lucy,

On my fifth birthday when I was five and living in the little house that my father built — a wooden thing on a two-acre lot whose boundaries were planted with pines — my Swiss grandmother sent me a large metal canister from Oregon where she lived with my grandfather’s ashes. It was a New Era Potato Chip can, the one with the silhouette of the woman who seems to be pointing at the phrase, “Artificially Preserved.” It had arrived wrapped in brown paper with my name printed in large block letters.

I opened it after supper, and was thrilled to discover it was filled with walnuts. I was thrilled because I remembered another gift of walnuts (in a cardboard box), and how my father had taken me to the garage and shown me how to set them on edge, tap them with a hammer to split the shell, and extract the meat. I did not especially like the taste of walnuts, but I loved opening them.

For some reason, on the same evening that I received the canister, my parents decided to tell me about Christianity. They seemed to have forgotten to do this (or any other religious instruction), and I heard a jumbled story about the dead who really weren't dead, a kindly magician, and Nazarene parents who must have been surprised to find that their child really was exceptional. I imagined that they must have been very happy. The part about him getting killed they left out.

When I woke up the next morning, I put on my slippers and my winter coat, and I lugged the canister of walnuts into the garage. I climbed up on a chair and took down my father's hammer, and then sat on the floor by the furnace, pried open the can, and began opening walnuts and eating the bitter-tasting meat. The floor was cold, but I was happy.

And then I began to think about Jesus, and how there must have been a specific time in his life when he realized, "Hey, I'm the magician." It must have been a very wonderful moment for him. I thought about it for a while and figured a voice must have come out of the sky or from behind the furnace to tell him, "You're the one. You have the magic." And then I remembered that he was supposed to reappear at some uncertain time. This made me realize some kid in some place at some time would hear a voice saying the same thing: "Hey, you're the Jesus guy."

Lucy, this is what I want to tell you. It suddenly came to me that there was a very very very very very very slight chance that I might be the next Jesus. Even at age five, I knew it wasn't very likely, but I did know that the possibility existed. The thinnest of all possibilities — infinitesimal — that a voice might speak to me, and I might be the sort of special person who could heal up all the wounds and gaps that make people so sad. Even my own. And even though I knew it wasn't likely, I felt like it was my responsibility to find out, so I put down my hammer and listened for a long time, watching the leafless branches of the dogwood outside the garage window. A square of light came through the glass

and crept across the floor toward my feet. If it was going to happen, it was going to happen while I was in my slippers and pajamas and winter coat, cracking open walnuts with my father's hammer. I did not expect to be called, but it seemed important to listen. There was no voice, no call. I might have dozed off and missed something, but I remember going back into the house satisfied to know that it wasn't me who had the magic. At least I knew.

Please write back. I miss your voice.

Love,
McMann