

HOW TO HAVE A BHUMI

A SURPRISINGLY PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO THE WEIRDEST THING
THAT EVER HAPPENED TO ME.



— TIFFANY LEE RICE —

One tiny thing before we begin...

Bhumi (BOOM-ee)

I know.

It's a weird word.

I promise it'll make sense.

Eventually.

Turn the page.

PART 1:

PANDORA'S BOX

**The breeze of dawn carries news of your true condition.
Do not sleep, O seeker. Do not sleep.**

**Whatever your heart truly desires, ask for it.
Do not sleep.**

**People stand at the threshold, where the two worlds meet.
The door is open. It has always been open.
Do not sleep.**

Jalal al-Din Rumi

What I say to you, I say to everyone: Stay awake.

Jesus - Mark 13:37

“Eagle flew out of the night...”

“I had to listen, had no choice.”

Peter Gabriel, “Solsbury Hill”

THE INVATATION

I'm going to ask you to do something that I almost never ask anyone.

Suspend judgment.

Not forever. Just for a little while. You don't have to believe anything you're about to read. In fact, I'd rather you didn't. Question it. Argue with it. Roll your eyes if you need to. Just don't make up your mind too quickly.

Because if someone had handed me this book three years ago... I probably would have thought the author had lost her damn mind.

PAY ATTENTION

Have you ever seen the movie *Stranger Than Fiction*? If you haven't, sorry. I'm going to spoil it. Although, if you're the kind of person who enjoys stories that quietly sneak up on you and change the way you see the world, I highly recommend it.

On the surface, it's a comedy starring Will Ferrell. Which is probably the last person you'd expect to lead a movie about a spiritual awakening. The story follows Harold Crick, an IRS auditor whose life is so predictable it could be used to set a clock. Every morning begins exactly the same way. He wakes up at the same time. Brushes his teeth the same way. Takes the same route to work. Lives by routines so precise that his entire existence feels less like a life and more like a program running exactly as it was designed.

Nothing is technically wrong with Harold's life. It's just... small. Safe. Orderly. The kind of life where tomorrow looks an awful lot like yesterday. Then one morning, something impossible happens.

He hears a voice.

Not the kind of voice most of us imagine when we hear that sentence. This one isn't arguing with him or telling him to do terrible things. It's narrating his life. Calmly. Matter-of-factly. As if someone is reading a novel... and he's the main character.

Naturally, Harold assumes he's losing his mind. Honestly, who wouldn't think that?

The part that fascinated me? The movie isn't really about the voice. It's about what happens to Harold's life after he starts paying attention.

The moment he stops dismissing the strange things happening around him, his entire world begins to change. Coincidences begin stacking on top of one another. People appear at exactly the right moments. Tiny decisions ripple into enormous consequences. The life he thought was ordinary slowly reveals itself to be anything but.

Eventually, Harold discovers that the mysterious voice belongs to a novelist writing a book. And somehow... he's living inside her story. The movie plays all of this for laughs. I don't. Because several weeks ago, I found myself wondering something that had never crossed my mind before.

What if *Stranger Than Fiction* wasn't really fiction? Not literally. I don't think someone is sitting at a typewriter writing about our lives. Typewriters are so 1953. But I do wonder if the movie stumbled onto something much deeper.

What if reality has been trying to get our attention all along?

What if most of us are simply too busy, too distracted, or too certain about how the world works to notice? I know I was.

If you had met me a few years ago, you wouldn't have found someone searching for enlightenment. I wasn't trying to become a mystic. I wasn't collecting spiritual experiences. I was trying to hold my life together through a failing marriage, a political campaign, and a future that suddenly looked nothing like I had imagined.

In other words, I was living a very ordinary life.

Then reality did something I didn't understand at the time. I had a bhumi one evening. **A bhumi is a sudden shift in consciousness where, for a moment, you experience yourself and reality in a completely different way.** For me, it was a really weird physical experience that lasted all of a few hours.

Then my life started unfolding. Slowly, things got strange. Not scary strange. Meaningful strange. Coincidences piled up. The right people appeared at the right time. Dreams seemed to spill into real life. Small moments started changing the direction of everything.

At first, I ignored it. Then I tried to explain it away. Eventually, I started paying attention.

I read everything I could find that might help me understand what was happening. Buddhism. Christianity. Hinduism. Psychology. Mythology. Neuroscience. History. Philosophy. Anything that might have an answer.

And slowly, I started seeing patterns. The more I learned, the more it seemed like humanity wasn't telling hundreds of different stories. **We were telling the same story in hundreds of different ways.**

Everything I found challenged what I thought I knew about what it means to be human. It took me years to make sense of it, and somewhere along the way, that search became this book.

But before I tell you what I found, I should probably tell you a little about the woman who went looking.

THE LAST ORDINARY DAYS

How about a peek at my world before everything flipped on May 17, 2024?

Let's start with my slowly unraveling marriage.

Ten years of infertility had worn us down thread by thread. Even when we spent every day together during the pandemic, loneliness lived between us like an awkward roommate. We were good people, but we were not the right match.

By 2023, we'd been in counseling for nearly a year, trying to make something work that I think, deep down, we both knew wasn't working. But we were married, and marriage was something you were supposed to fight for. So we kept trying to fix it rather than have the harder conversation about whether it should be fixed at all.

At the beginning of that year, I finally made another decision that had been a decade in the making: I was done trying to have a baby.

I couldn't keep putting my body, my marriage, or my life through it. We had money left over that we'd set aside for having a child, and my husband encouraged me to use some of it to do something for myself.

I told him I wanted to get involved in politics again. I wasn't planning to run for anything immediately. I'd been away from local politics since leaving Denver and honestly had no idea what was happening in the community where I now lived. I wanted to meet people, understand the issues, and figure out where I might be useful.

Apparently, life had other plans.

Over the next couple of weeks, one thing led quickly and strangely to another until almost exactly the opportunity I would have chosen landed in my path. The Penfield Town Supervisor seat was opening up, and by March, somehow, I was running.

Even now, the timing feels a little like magic. I had spent ten years trying to force one future into existence, and within a month of finally letting it go, an entirely different path appeared.

A few weeks into the campaign, I learned I was running against a wealthy GOP candidate whose family was beloved in the community. They had name recognition, deep local roots, and resources I couldn't match. My husband thought I should drop out, but he supported me financially when I decided to keep going.

I had loved running for Denver City Council twelve years earlier, but this campaign was different. I was managing three campaigns largely by myself, and the pressure was enormous. I needed emotional support, someone to talk to, and, frankly, a little fun wouldn't hurt either.

After a year of counseling had gotten us nowhere, my husband and I decided to try something different. About three months before the election, we opened our marriage.

So I went online looking for a friend and a lover. Someone I could talk to, have some fun with, and maybe take the edge off an incredibly stressful few months.

I wasn't looking to fall in love. But while my husband was off exploring his own sexual revolution, that's exactly what happened. It was mutual and genuine and beautiful, and it showed me parts of myself I had forgotten were still there. After years of disappointment and grief, my heart still had voltage.

Then, in early November, I lost the election by about thirty votes.

It was heartbreaking, but I know I ran a damn good campaign. The two other candidates on my ticket both won their races, which told me everything I needed to know. We had built something real.

And then, after seven months of pouring nearly everything I had into the campaign, it was over. The signs came down, the meetings stopped, and the constant urgency disappeared. There was nothing left to consume me or distract me from everything else that had been unraveling.

The relationship with the man I'd fallen in love with ended soon after. By late December, I could no longer avoid the truth about my marriage either.

I asked for a divorce.

Looking back, I see that year differently now. I had begun it by letting go of the life I'd spent a decade trying to create, and somehow, almost immediately, everything started shifting. By the end of the year, so much of what I thought my life was supposed to be had fallen away, while something I couldn't yet see was quietly taking shape underneath it.

And somewhere in all of that, love changed me. It opened something in me I didn't know was there.

What began as a love story became the first quiet tilt of my life toward the sacred. The first fracture where the light found its way in.

GOD, GET ME SOME VOTERS

That winter felt a little like being a bullet train that had hit a wall.

For seven months, I'd been moving at full speed. Suddenly, there was nowhere to go. I fully intended to run for the same office again in two years, and part of me wanted to keep pushing as if the campaign had never ended. But showing up to every meeting and putting everything my former opponent did under a microscope for the next two years wasn't going to get me anywhere.

Truthfully, I was a little lost. The others had won and were moving into their new roles. I was the one left standing there, trying to figure out what came next.

I knew politics was still part of my future, but I needed to get smarter about the next campaign. One thing the campaign had taught me was that when people actually met me, they tended to like me. I knew I was capable of running the town. I just needed more people to know who I was.

Churches seemed like an obvious place to start. They were built around community, helping people, and taking care of your neighbors. My opponent was Christian and already had connections there. I didn't. So I decided to start visiting local churches. I was looking for voters. I was definitely not looking for religion.

Which, in retrospect, is pretty funny.

TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

One afternoon, I noticed a woman quietly blessing her food at my favorite Indian lunch buffet. It wasn't the quick prayer I'd grown up around. Her hands moved with a kind of quiet precision and grace I'd never seen before. Curious, I asked what she was doing.

She smiled and explained that the gestures came from her Tibetan Buddhist practice. Then she casually mentioned that her temple was starting a study group on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that Thursday.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I actually ordered that book last night."

She looked at me for a second, smiled, and said, "Well... I guess you should come."

So I did.

Looking back, I can see the breadcrumbs. At the time, it just felt like one of those wonderfully random conversations you have with a stranger over lunch and then tell your friends about later.

But I loved book club that night. I loved being in the temple, and I loved what we were talking about. Someone mentioned that the temple held a regular Sunday gathering two days later.

So I just... went. Then I went again. Before long, I was showing up twice a week.

The more time I spent there, the more I realized it wasn't Buddhist philosophy pulling me in, at least not yet. It was the place itself: the wrathful deities and brilliant colors, the deep rhythm of the drums, the chanting, the smoke curling from the incense. There was something ancient and mysterious about all of it, but also strangely familiar.

And then there were the teachings. I understood them far better than I had any business understanding them. Ideas that should have felt foreign somehow didn't. They seemed to land

somewhere inside me before I even had a chance to think about them, as if some part of me recognized what I was hearing long before my mind did.

That was especially strange because I hadn't felt genuinely spiritual in nearly twenty years.

Back in my twenties, I'd wandered through the worlds of the Rosicrucians, the Knights Templar, Freemasonry, and other esoteric traditions. I loved symbols. Mysteries. Hidden meanings. Tarot. Astrology. The possibility that reality might be stranger than it appeared.

Then, as I aged, that part of me quietly fell asleep. Life became practical. I decided I already knew what happened after we died. Case closed. Church faded into the background. Spirituality became something I assumed I'd simply outgrown. I became agnostic.

Standing in that temple, surrounded by images that were somehow both terrifying and beautiful, I realized I'd been wrong. It wasn't certainty I felt. It was a curiosity.

At the time, I thought I was quickly becoming a Vajrayana Buddhist. Looking back, I think I was simply rediscovering a part of myself I'd forgotten.

I smiled, filed it away, and kept walking.

THE DAILY PRACTICE (JANUARY TO APRIL 2024)

Life settled into a strange rhythm. For the first time in years, I wasn't rushing from one obligation to the next. I didn't have a full-time job demanding every ounce of my attention. There was no husband. No lover. No children. That unexpected freedom gave me something I'd been missing for a long time.

Space.

Wednesday mornings became breakfast with local Democratic candidates and elected officials. We'd drink coffee, strategize campaigns, argue over messaging, celebrate little victories, and dream about a more progressive future for our towns and cities.

Outside of politics, we'd go dancing, attend community meetings, and spend time together simply enjoying one another's company. I'd sit on the porch with my dog, feeding her scrambled eggs while listening to local political podcasts and learning everything I could about the community I hoped to serve.

I loved that life.

At the same time, I kept making room for Buddhism. I spent time with the local Khenpo. I read. I asked questions. Then I began Ngöndro, the traditional preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism. Every day I lit candles on my altar, burned incense, chanted several pages of prayers in Sanskrit, and worked toward one hundred full-body prostrations, pressing my palms together,

raising them overhead, bowing until my forehead and lips touched the floor, stretching out completely, then standing to do it all over again. By the time I finished, I would complete nearly thirty thousand prostrations.

Before long, my weeks settled into an easy rhythm of politics and community meetings, campaign breakfasts, hikes, time at the temple, friends, and plenty of time with Roux. Somewhere in there, I was also bowing to the floor and kissing it a hundred times a day.

Funny how quickly something that sounds completely absurd can become just another Tuesday.

I wasn't searching for peace through meditation. I thought I'd simply found a community I loved and a spiritual tradition worth exploring. I wanted to see what would happen if I stayed with it long enough to finish Ngöndro and what wisdom might come from the experience.

(Looking back, I see it differently. I wasn't just learning Buddhism. I was learning how to pay attention, although at the time I couldn't have told you what I was paying attention to.)

As the weeks passed, my life settled into a strange mix of things I genuinely loved and things I had no idea what to do with. I had friends, politics, the community I was building, Roux, and this unexpected new world at the temple. Other parts of my life were harder to make sense of.

Among them was my marriage. It had ended, although neither of us had done much about what came next. For the moment, we were simply giving each other space.

So I kept moving forward, enjoying the parts of my life that were working and letting the rest sit where it was.

I had no idea how much was about to change.

WISE ATTENTION

Around that time, something else started changing. My thoughts were getting a little unusual. Nothing frightening, just unexpected.

It had actually started back in early December, when the idea of watching a tarot reading randomly popped into my head. I hadn't thought about tarot readers in years, but for whatever reason, I pulled one up and watched it. Then another.

Several weeks later, curiosity turned into something more. I started bouncing between all kinds of astrologers and tarot readers, looking for clues about my own life, the people around me, and yes, what might be happening in the life of the ex lover.

Mostly, I was curious. So I kept watching.

And then things started getting weird.

I followed the readings for my Sun sign and rising sign. For the record, I'm an Aries with Gemini rising. But before long, I was wandering into other signs, other readers, and different kinds of readings. Astrology and tarot had basically become my version of television.

At first, it was entertaining. Then I started noticing things. A Scorpio reading might describe exactly what one of my friends was going through, while Capricorn or Pisces would seem to fit two completely different people in my life with uncanny precision.

I'd text them, "You should watch today's reading," and it became a funny little party trick. Whether it was coincidence, projection, psychology, or something else entirely, I honestly had no idea at the time. I wasn't trying to prove anything. I was simply noticing.

Eventually, though, I started letting some of those readings influence what I did. One encouraged me to let go of a relationship that had quietly become toxic. Others pushed me to question old patterns, rethink certain choices, or consider situations from an angle I hadn't before.

Without really intending to, I started cleaning house. Relationships. Habits. Priorities. Even some of the stories I had been telling myself about who I was. I don't think astrology changed me. But it did get me to pay closer attention to my life and, every once in a while, act on what I noticed. At the time, I had no idea how important that would become.

("Although the warrior's life is dedicated to helping others, he realizes that he will never be able to completely share his experience with others...")

Yet he is more and more in love with the world. That combination of love affair and loneliness is what enables the warrior to constantly reach out to help others.

By renouncing his private world, the warrior discovers a greater universe and a fuller and fuller broken heart.

This is not something to feel bad about; it is a cause for rejoicing."

- Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

For a long time, Trungpa Rinpoche was the only person I knew for certain had experienced a bhumi himself.

Before we go any further, I should probably explain something about this book. It has become my own little sand mandala. I write a chapter. Life teaches me something new. I sweep part of it away and begin again.

Some sections have been rewritten more times than I can count. The experiences themselves haven't changed, but my understanding of them has. I was still learning what all of this meant while I was writing about it. Every draft captured one stage of that process before making room for the next.

So every once in a while, I'm going to interrupt the story with something I figured out later. Think of these little red notes as messages from the future.

If you've followed me on Facebook or Instagram over the past few years, you've already watched this happen in real time. My posts reflected whatever I was seeing, questioning, or beginning to understand at that particular moment. The story kept changing because I did.

I suspect something similar happened to many of the spiritual and philosophical teachings we inherited. Socrates left no writings of his own. We know his ideas largely through Plato, who recorded and shaped them for us. Trungpa Rinpoche's books were also assembled from talks and teachings delivered at different times. In both cases, other hands arranged the pattern we now see.

But what if those words came from different stages of an unfolding process? Once ideas expressed years apart are gathered into a book, the movement between them disappears. What remains can look like a finished philosophy rather than a record of someone still discovering what was true.

That is what we are hearing in Trungpa's words. I understand the loneliness he describes. I rarely tried to explain what was happening to me because I didn't know how. The deeper my love for the world became, the lonelier the process sometimes felt. This book became the place where I put everything I could not yet say aloud.

But his words also carry the old masculine story of the warrior who suffers quietly, renounces his private life, turns his isolation into service, and calls his broken heart a cause for rejoicing.

I no longer believe loneliness and sacrifice are the warrior's noble destiny. Loneliness may be part of the process, but it is not the destination. The point is not to become better at carrying a broken heart alone.

The point is to keep remaking the pattern until we understand why so many hearts are breaking in the first place.)

THE BARDO (FEBRUARY TO MARCH 2024)

Night was another story.

Sometime around February, sleep stopped feeling like sleep. My dreams became more vivid, coherent, and strangely memorable. They had a logic of their own, filled with conversations, places, and encounters that stayed with me long after I woke.

Before long, they began spilling into my waking life.

At the time, I had no language for what was happening.

(I had wandered into what Tibetan Buddhism calls the dream bardo, the threshold between waking consciousness and the dream world. Every night felt less like rest and more like entering another life.)

One morning I woke at exactly 7:00 a.m. already crying in sadness.

It wasn't because I'd had a nightmare or because I'd remembered something painful. The grief arrived before I was fully awake. It was immediate, complete, and overwhelming, as though I had opened my eyes inside someone else's life. I knew that someone I loved had just experienced something devastating. It didn't feel like empathy or imagination. For a few moments, it genuinely felt as though I was living inside another person's emotional world instead of my own.

Try explaining that to a doctor. *"Hi. I think I accidentally woke up inside someone else's panic attack this morning. Is there a pill for that?"*

Another morning, I was slowly waking, still hovering somewhere between sleep and full consciousness, when I realized I was chanting in Sanskrit. The words were pouring out of my mouth effortlessly, even though I had never studied the language and had no idea what I was saying.

In my hand was my double vajra pendant. My thumb and index finger were holding the tiny dot at its center, almost exactly the way someone might hold a rosary or prayer beads while chanting.

For those few seconds, I had the eerie sensation that I wasn't alone in my own body, as though something else had been speaking through me. Then I became fully conscious, and it stopped.

The strangest part may have been where my fingers were resting.

That tiny dot would eventually become one of the most important symbols of discovery in this entire book.

(I now know what I was chanting. It was the Dependent Origination Heart Mantra, a Buddhist mantra expressing one of the central insights of Buddhism: nothing exists independently. Reality is relationship all the way down.)

THE CHILDREN OF THE PURE LAND

Right about this time, my Khenpo asked me to choose a single deity as the focus of my Buddhist practice. A week or two earlier, I had experienced something that made that decision surprisingly easy.

I dreamed I was a little boy living in a village that looked as though it had wandered straight out of a Miyazaki film, something like *Castle in the Sky*. If you've never seen one of his movies, you really should. The whole place felt warm, alive, and impossibly beautiful. Narrow streets wound

between little homes, merchants chatted with neighbors, children ran laughing through the village, and everyone seemed to know everyone else.

I was supposed to be in school. The problem was that I hadn't finished my homework.

So I stuffed my unfinished homework into my backpack and took off through the village, absolutely convinced I could somehow finish it before class started. Someone handed me an apple as I wandered through town, and I happily took bites between scribbling on my homework, waving to people I knew, and trying very hard not to get caught by my teacher. Every time I spotted my classmates marching through town in a neat single-file line behind her, I'd duck around another corner and continue my impossible plan. I was trying to be "responsible" and completely failing at it.

The whole village was buzzing because two enormous figures had just returned from some distant adventure.

Green Tara and Vajrakilaya. They stood nearly two stories tall on great stone platforms while villagers gathered around to welcome them home. Green Tara smiled as she chatted with a small group of people at her feet, as though she'd simply returned from a long trip. Vajrakilaya stood a little farther away.

Without giving it much thought, I wandered over to him to watch.

If you've never seen traditional images of Vajrakilaya, imagine an immense wrathful deity with dark blue skin, surrounded by flames, with great wings stretching behind him. He should have been terrifying.

I wasn't frightened. I just stood there eating my apple, staring up at him in awe.

He felt strangely familiar, but distant, almost the way God had felt to me as a child. Everywhere. Woven into the world itself, yet impossibly far away. I watched him with the uncomplicated curiosity of a child, thinking, *That is so cool.*

Then he looked directly at me.

I looked up at him.

And something changed.

His eyes looked human.

For just a moment, it was as if I could see through the terrifying blue face, through the flames and all the layers of the deity, and catch the faintest glimpse of someone underneath.

We never spoke. We simply held each other's gaze for a few quiet moments. And suddenly, he didn't feel quite so far away.

When I told my Khenpo about the dream, he smiled and said it was very auspicious. Since I was still a beginner, he gently suggested that I consider making Green Tara the focus of my practice. She is one of the most approachable and compassionate deities in Tibetan Buddhism and is often recommended to new practitioners. I suspect there was a little sexism in the suggestion as well.

Naturally, I chose Vajrakilaya.

Apparently, when someone offers me the beginner-friendly option, my first instinct is to pick the terrifying one. But really, my mind had already been made up. I had looked into the eyes of a god and seen something of myself looking back.

I assumed the dream would fade into memory.

It didn't.

Over the months that followed, the dreams came fast and often. They were vivid, elaborate, and unlike anything I had experienced before. Some were beautiful. Others bewildering. A few frightened me.

The dream of Vajrakilaya hadn't been an isolated experience. It was only the beginning.

DIVINE ENCOUNTERS

One afternoon, I hung a brand-new set of Tibetan prayer flags along my patio. That evening, they fluttered in the wind for the first time.

That night I dreamed of *rlung rta*, the Windhorse. The horse from the prayer flags thundered across my mind in impossible colors, every movement alive with brilliant electric light. It wasn't like watching a dream unfold from a distance. It felt as though I were standing inside it, surrounded by motion, color, and energy that defied ordinary description. If someone asked me what a psychedelic experience feels like, this is probably the closest comparison I could offer. For the record, I've never taken psychedelics. Unless a little weed in a former lifetime counts.

Then came Vajrayogini.

She appeared high on a Tibetan mountainside, dressed in ceremonial robes, standing perfectly still against the wind. For a moment, I simply watched her.

Then she stepped off the mountain.

She didn't fall. She flew.

In an instant, she crossed the impossible distance between that remote Himalayan peak and my bedroom, growing larger and more vivid as she came toward me. Then she stopped, hovering

silently just inches above my bed. The mountain was gone. My bedroom remained. Somehow, she had crossed from one into the other.

I remember the details with startling clarity. I could smell the leather. I could hear it creak softly when she moved. Her clothing was trimmed in animal fur, with bright red stitching worked through the leather and a small bell hanging from her robes, swaying gently in the still air.

She didn't feel like a distant goddess from an ancient painting. She felt astonishingly real. Like she had stepped out of another time entirely, carrying the mountains with her in the smell of leather and fur, and was now hovering over my bed because apparently we had something very important to discuss.

I should probably mention that she was also extraordinarily beautiful. At this point, my subconscious was beginning to raise some entirely different questions.

Unfortunately, Vajrayogini was not there to discuss my sexuality.

For the briefest instant, she hovered above me, close enough that I could see every stitch and hear the faint ring of that tiny bell. Then her entire form folded inward, collapsing into a spiraling column of energy that rushed straight through me and slammed into my chest with such force that I exploded upright in bed.

I was awake.

My heart was racing. Every trace of sleep had vanished. It didn't feel as though I had merely dreamed about Vajrayogini. It felt as though something living had entered me and was now resting somewhere deep inside my chest.

My first coherent thought was simple.

What the hell just happened?

My heart pounded as I sat there staring into the darkness, trying to convince myself it had only been a dream. After a minute, I finally lay back down, took a slow breath, and opened my mouth to say something and as I did... a tiger growled from inside my chest.

Not beside me. Not outside the window. Inside my chest. Coming up through my mouth hole.

I froze.

I lay awake staring at the ceiling for what felt like hours, replaying the experience over and over, trying to decide whether I had imagined it. Needless to say, I didn't get much more sleep that morning.

The next encounters weren't all so dramatic. Some felt strangely familiar, almost comfortable.

One night, an older, attractive man appeared. We talked easily for what felt like hours. He was thoughtful, kind, and somehow familiar, as though I already knew him but couldn't remember from where. As the dream began to fade, I asked him one last question.

"What's your name?" "Memnoch," he replied.

When I woke up, I immediately searched for the name online. The only reference I recognized was *Memnoch the Devil*, a novel by Anne Rice that I had loved as a teenager. I stared at the screen for a long time wondering if I had just spent the evening having an unusually pleasant conversation with the devil.

For reasons that should be fairly obvious, I kept that dream to myself. I didn't even tell my closest friend, Paul, who was usually the unfortunate recipient of all my weird shit.

NOT PADMASAMBHAVA

The dreams with Padmasambhava, whom I eventually came to call Padma, felt entirely different from the others.

From the beginning, there was an effortless familiarity, as though I were reconnecting with someone I had known for a very long time. There was no ceremony or intimidation, no sense that I was standing before someone impossibly distant.

We simply... talked.

In one dream, he invited me to what he called his cave. It wasn't a cave in any conventional sense. It was more like an impossibly cool loft inside an abandoned factory, part urban warehouse, part ancient sanctuary. He wandered from room to room showing me fascinating things he had collected, like a friend proudly giving me a tour of his home. We talked, laughed, and fell into the easy rhythm of old colleagues catching up after years apart.

At one point, I casually called him Guru Rinpoche. He smiled.

"No," he said. "Not Guru Rinpoche."

Seeing my confusion, he explained it as though he were clearing up a common misunderstanding.

"People confuse us."

He told me Padmasambhava and Guru Rinpoche were not the same. One was divine. The other was human. One was the being. The other was the awakened man who embodied him.

At the time, I had no framework for what he meant. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition I was learning, Padmasambhava and Guru Rinpoche were understood to be the same person.

I remember thinking the conversation was odd, but in dreams like these I had long since stopped expecting everything to fit neatly into what I already believed. I simply listened, tucked it away, and followed him into the next room to look at whatever curious object he wanted to show me.

At the time, I assumed that effortless familiarity was simply the nature of our relationship. I was wrong.

The most important dream came later. It was also the one that frightened me the most because it was the first time I understood that, despite the warmth between us, this was not a friendship between equals.

He was the teacher.

I was a student.

We had an intense disagreement. The closest comparison I can think of is Ariel arguing with King Triton in *The Little Mermaid*. I was absolutely convinced I was right, completely unaware that I hadn't yet understood what he was trying to teach me.

That conversation deserves its own chapter. I would only understand later how close I was to the edge of something much bigger.

THE EXAMINED LIFE (MARCH – APRIL 2024)

There is an idea running through nearly every serious attempt to understand reality: question what you think you know. Mystical traditions have been asking people to examine the self for thousands of years, while science is built on much the same willingness to challenge assumptions, test what we believe, and change our minds when the evidence points somewhere else.

But it's one thing to question what we believe about the universe. It's another to question what we believe about ourselves.

I started with my childhood.

I began calling my sister and other members of my family and asking about the moments that had stuck with me, from small incidents to the bigger, more traumatic ones I thought I remembered perfectly. I would tell them what I remembered, then ask what they had seen from where they were standing.

Sometimes their memories matched mine. Sometimes they didn't, and that fascinated me. What if something I had carried for decades wasn't wrong exactly, but incomplete? What if an old hurt had changed the way I remembered an event, or the person I had blamed had been living inside a completely different version of the same story?

I wasn't trying to prove myself wrong. I wanted to know what I might have missed.

By then, my dreams had become wildly beautiful and increasingly strange, pushing me toward questions I never would have encountered on my own. Those questions followed me into my days. A tarot reading made me reconsider my relationship with my father. Another pushed me to look more closely at an old lover who had drifted in and out of my life for years. Then, one random afternoon in my living room, a conversation with a woman from my campaign helped me recognize patterns we had both carried for years.

Nothing held the answer by itself. One thing illuminated another, and I followed wherever it led.

Then the process reached my mother.

Years earlier, during one of the darkest periods of my life, I had stolen money from her.

It hadn't begun that way. After my stepfather died, there was a bank account we couldn't easily access because of everything that happens after someone passes away. The original plan was simple enough: use the card to pull the remaining cash and reimburse it once the estate was sorted out.

We never did.

One purchase became another until, somewhere along the way, something I had been calling borrowing had become stealing. I had an explanation for every charge, a reason why it wasn't quite as bad as it looked. My husband at the time never knew. It became a secret I carried alone, buried deeply enough that I could almost pretend I had left it behind.

Then one week I was watching my favorite tarot reader on YouTube, Ali. I watched her regularly, but this reading landed differently. She talked about having the courage to repair relationships that had been left broken.

There was no symbolism to decode. I knew exactly what I needed to do.

I called my mother and told her everything.

For the first time, I admitted what I had done without trying to soften it. I apologized without excuses, asked for her forgiveness, and then spent the next several days crying.

There was nothing particularly mystical about that morning. No vision arrived. No deity appeared with another lesson. There was simply the profoundly ordinary experience of telling the truth to someone I had hurt and accepting that I couldn't control what happened after I said it.

But that phone call changed the rules. Until then, examining my life had still been relatively safe. I could reconsider childhood memories, other people's behavior, and relationships that had hurt me. After my mother, I couldn't pretend this was only about what had happened *to* me.

My own behavior was on the table too. From there, almost everything became worth examining: my marriage, my relationships, my choices, my failures, the people I blamed and the things I had spent years defending. Eventually, I even started questioning qualities I had always accepted as simply *who I was*. Maybe being guarded wasn't just my personality. Maybe I had learned it. Maybe my stubbornness had once been what kept me standing, and some of the independence I was so proud of had grown from learning not to depend on anyone.

I also began thinking about what had reached me through my family. Their fears, expectations, wounds, habits, and ways of surviving had shaped the world that raised me. Some of what I thought of as *me* might have begun long before I was born. I wasn't just asking what had happened anymore. I was asking a much deeper question: **How was I built?**

For the first time in my life, I had the space to really explore it. I could read, think, talk, remember, apologize, and follow whatever thread appeared. Dreams, tarot, conversations, memories, even ordinary moments became part of the investigation.

Some relationships fell away. Other people became easier to forgive. Things I had once seen as personal failures began to make more sense when I understood where they came from. That didn't excuse them. They were still mine to own.

Slowly, I began sorting myself into piles. **What was Tiff, and what was crap?**

The crap was easier to spot. Old stories. Defenses. Beliefs I had inherited. Ways of surviving that I didn't need anymore.

The harder question was what remained. What was underneath everything shaped by childhood, marriage, fear, love, shame, ambition, and heartbreak?

I wasn't trying to become someone new. I was trying to find the person who had been there all along.

The ghost in the machine.

LOVE REARRANGED ME

Before I tell this story, I should admit that I'm cheating a little. Chronologically, it belongs earlier. It began months before my marriage finally unraveled and would continue for months after my *bhumi*. But memoir isn't just about dates. It's about understanding. In retrospect, I can see that this relationship was one of the threads quietly weaving its way through everything else that was happening. By the beginning of 2024, it had become one of the forces reshaping my life from the inside out. It wasn't the cause of my awakening, but it was undeniably one of its catalysts. So this is where it belongs.

I met a man. I'll call him Jack.

We met on a dating site after my marriage opened. For nearly two and a half months, we never saw each other in person. We just talked. From the moment I woke up until I went to bed, he became part of my day.

He was kind. He listened without trying to fix me. He encouraged my dreams and made me feel seen at a time when I desperately needed that. Long before we ever touched, I had fallen in love with him.

About a week after we started talking, I learned he was married.

I didn't care. That's the honest answer.

I told myself his marriage was his responsibility, not mine. I wasn't asking him to leave his wife. My own marriage was falling apart, I was lonely, and someone was finally giving me something I had been missing for a long time. I wanted what I wanted.

Looking back, I can see the selfishness in that. At the time, it felt more like survival.

During the final months of my campaign, Jack became the support I wasn't finding at home. He celebrated the good days, steadied me through the bad ones, and reminded me of the woman I still wanted to become.

After the election, the relationship became physical. We saw each other only five times over six weeks, but by then, the number of times we had been in the same room hardly mattered. The relationship had already changed me.

Just before Christmas, we were texting as usual when I realized something was wrong. His mother had died earlier that year, and with the holidays approaching, the grief was hitting him hard. They had been incredibly close.

I knew he was hurting, so I told him to leave work and come see me.

To my surprise, he did.

That wasn't like Jack. He was responsible, dependable, the kind of person who did what he was supposed to do. But every once in a while, when we were together, he seemed to choose his heart instead. He had done it two weeks earlier when I impulsively asked him to meet me in a snow-covered cemetery. He did it again that afternoon.

We spent several hours together talking, holding each other, and letting the rest of the world disappear for a while. Somewhere in the middle of it, he looked at me and, almost as if the words had escaped before he could stop them, said, "I fucking love you."

The confession seemed to surprise him as much as it surprised me. I didn't say it back. I just kissed him and held him a little tighter.

Later, as he was getting dressed, I felt something shift between us. I couldn't have explained it, but suddenly I heard myself ask, "Are you going to try to fix your marriage?"

He stopped, and after a long pause, said yes. He told me that he and his wife had started seeing a marriage counselor and that he was going to give his marriage everything he had.

I hadn't seen it coming. I panicked and asked him to stay, to talk to me, but he seemed to disappear behind a wall. He said he had to go and that this was over.

At the front door, he rested his hand on the doorknob and stood there for what felt like forever, unable to leave but unwilling to turn around. I remember thinking that if he turned around, everything might change.

He didn't.

He opened the door and walked away.

It wasn't until he was gone that I finally understood what I had been refusing to admit for months. I loved him. I had sensed it as early as October, but I kept dating other people and telling myself I was simply enjoying the connection. I thought eventually it would pass.

Instead, the moment that door closed, everything I had been pushing aside came rushing to the surface. I was deeply in love with a man who had chosen to go back to his marriage, and as painful as that was, I respected his decision. I didn't call, text, or try to convince him to change his mind. I simply let him go and lived with the silence.

For about a month.

In ordinary time, a month isn't very long. When you're in love, it feels endless.

By mid-January of 2024, I couldn't carry those words inside me any longer, so I wrote him a letter. I told him I loved him too. I told him I wanted him to be happy, whatever that looked like, and that if life ever led him out of his marriage, something I quietly believed might happen one day, I would be open to discovering what still existed between us.

He never really responded. There were a few vague words in a text message, but nothing that answered the letter or acknowledged what I had shared.

Looking back now, I think that silence changed me as much as anything he ever said. Silence isn't always empty. Sometimes it's where everything begins. Sometimes it's the sound of a fuse being lit.

I didn't know it then, but that silence had already begun rearranging me.

(Sometimes a song appears in my head while I'm writing. When it does, I'll share it with you. Consider it part of the soundtrack.) Gnosienne No. 1 - Erik Satie

ALCHEMY

What I couldn't see at the time was that I wasn't just grieving the loss of a relationship. Love itself was changing me. I fought it for weeks. I tried to reason with it, distract myself from it, and convince myself it would eventually fade. Every attempt to suppress it only seemed to make it stronger. Instead of disappearing, it spread quietly through every corner of my life until I realized I wasn't wrestling with a feeling anymore.

I was being transformed.

So I changed tactics. I let it stay. I sat with it. I asked what it wanted to become. I wasn't about to show up at his door and blow up a marriage. That wasn't the shape of this love. But it had weight. Pressure. Energy. And energy always wants somewhere to go.

Musicians know this. Artists know this. There's a piece by Chiara Bautista called *What to Do With All This Love*. That title alone felt like a hand on my shoulder. So I did what mystics have always done with the tools given to them.

I used it.

It would take me months to understand why this mattered so much. Eventually I found language for it in the Tantric traditions of India. They viewed love not simply as an emotion, but as a kind of technology. A discipline. A force capable of transforming consciousness.

A way to pry open the ribcage of the self and let the divine crawl in barefoot.

Tantrikas used love the way alchemists used fire. Not to comfort, but to transform. And there I was, sitting in the ashes of a marriage, holding a love letter no one answered, feeling a pulse in my chest that was not heartbreak but initiation.

The Tantrics say real love is a mirror. It shows you the exact shape of your soul. It doesn't matter if it stays for twenty thousand years or twenty minutes. It doesn't matter if the other person leaves the relationship. The love itself is the teaching.

It sandpapers the ego. It softens old armor. It invites your spirit to step out of hiding. It fucks with your mind just enough to help you change your perception.

At that time, my feelings for Jack weren't meant to become a relationship. They were meant to become a cracking open. A loosening of old scaffolding. A reminder that my heart still carried voltage. That I was not dead inside, no matter how long I had been trying to be.

The Tantrikas understood this. They knew some people appeared in your life like a match. They burn fast. They burn bright. And then the light they leave behind shows you a door you couldn't see before.

His silence hurt. But it also freed something. It turned me toward the path already rising under my feet. It was the cosmic nudge that said: Go... Move. The divine has other plans for you.

January was the moment the ground tilted. May was the point of no return.

THE DAY REALITY SPLIT OPEN (MAY 17, 2024)

Some days divide your life into a before and an after.

I sat alone in my car in a grocery store parking lot, drenched from the rain, spiraling quietly. What had just unfolded mirrored a dream I'd had months earlier with unsettling precision.

He had climbed out of my car angry, wounded by my refusal.

I wasn't willing to accept scraps of affection anymore. I wanted something whole.

I knew our paths would cross again someday. I couldn't have explained why.

Padma had warned me.

Late in March, Padma appeared in a dream, fierce and radiant, impossible to ignore.

"Jack will return," he said. "He will ask for another affair. You must say no."

I argued. I protested like a stubborn child. I told him I loved this man. I wanted to be with him regardless of the circumstances. Padma grabbed my arms, his gaze unwavering.

"You are not allowed to have an affair." Then, sharp and terrifying, he threw me out of the dream. I woke up with my heart racing. I knew it hadn't been symbolic. It had been an instruction.

Two months later, he reached out. By then, I'd completely forgotten the dream.

At the coffee shop, he smiled, and every wall I'd spent months trying to build began quietly collapsing before he'd even sat down.

Within seconds we were talking the way we always had. Politics. Strategy. The future. I was trying to decide whether to run for office again or pour my energy somewhere entirely different, and for a little while it felt as though I'd gotten my closest confidant back.

I'd missed all of it.

His voice. The easy rhythm of our conversations. The way he challenged my thinking. The way we could lose ourselves texting for hours talking about politics, life, and whatever strange rabbit hole one of us had fallen into that day.

I'd missed the chemistry, too. It had always been there, humming quietly beneath everything else. I could see it in his eyes, in the way he leaned toward me, in the restless energy between us. He wanted to close the distance.

I didn't. Not yet.

I'd waited months to see him again. I wanted to hear him laugh. Watch him think. I wanted a few more minutes with the whole person before the chemistry demanded our attention.

For one impossible moment, I let myself believe he was finally free. Then I noticed the wedding ring still on his finger.

"Did you leave her?" I asked.

"No."

The word landed like a stone. The room suddenly felt too small. I couldn't breathe. I needed air.

"Let's go for a walk."

There was a nearby park with my favorite tree. Whenever life overwhelmed me, I found myself drawn there. The woods had a way of slowing my thoughts long enough for my heart to catch up. More than anything, I wanted to show him that tree.

We wandered beneath the canopy, talking the way we always had. Easily. Naturally. For a little while, it felt as though the coffee shop had never happened.

Storm clouds gathered overhead. An art festival buzzed on the far side of the park, but we stayed on the quieter trails where only the wind and the birds seemed interested in us.

The conversation never stopped, but something else kept growing between the words. Every glance lingered. Every step seemed to pull us a little closer together. The familiar current between us returned, not suddenly, but steadily, until it filled the space between our bodies.

I knew where this was heading. So did he. I closed the distance. I pulled him toward me and kissed him.

From that moment, we were inseparable. The months between us vanished.

We ran through the wooded trails laughing, breathless, hands intertwined, stopping every few steps because neither of us could bear to be apart for long. The drizzle became rain, but we hardly noticed. Water streamed down our faces and soaked through our clothes while we kept finding each other again and again.

I have never experienced chemistry like that before or since.

It wasn't just desire. It felt magnetic, as though some invisible force had been pulling us toward one another for months and had finally run out of patience. It was, without question, the most romantic afternoon of my life.

By the time we reached my car, we were trembling, soaked to the skin, laughing, and completely undone by each other's presence. Rain hammered against the windows.

Then the dream came rushing back. Jack will return. He will ask for another affair. You must say no.

I pulled away. My chest tightened. My stomach churned. "I can't have an affair with you," I whispered.

He stared at me, confused. Hurt. The silence inside the car was almost louder than the rain. I searched for words that could explain what had just happened, but they refused to come. How do you tell someone you've just remembered a dream that changed the course of your life?

Instead, I asked a different question. "Do you still feel it?"

He knew exactly what I meant.

Months earlier, long before we'd ever met in person, we'd discovered something neither of us could explain. The closest word we could find was frisson - those waves of goosebumps that sometimes accompany moments of beauty, emotion, or intense feeling. Ours seemed to happen at the same time. We'd think of each other and both feel it. Sometimes it happened during moments of deep longing or sexual intimacy, even when we were miles apart. Neither of us could explain it. We only knew we both recognized it.

He nodded. "Yes," he said softly. "I still feel it."

"So do I." We sat in silence for a long moment, both knowing that somehow nothing had changed and everything had.

I drove him back to his car, even though every part of me wanted to ignore the dream and choose him instead. When we arrived, I watched him climb out and disappear into the rain, knowing I was doing the right thing and hating every second of it.

It felt like agreeing to surgery without anesthesia.

I drove to the grocery store but never went inside. Instead, I parked beneath the lights and sat there long after the store had closed, crying. My mind replayed the afternoon on an endless loop. The woods. The rain. The laughter. The heat between us. The impossible feeling that, for a few fleeting hours, the rest of the world had simply fallen away.

I loved him. I knew he loved me. So why wasn't that enough? How could something feel so undeniably real and still have nowhere to go? I had opened myself completely. There was nothing hidden anymore. I had told him I loved him. I had trusted my heart before asking the questions that might have protected it. I had fallen in love with someone who could meet me in love, but not in life.

I reached for my phone. I needed someone to throw me a rope. I called Paul. He didn't answer.

My thumb drifted to another name. An old friend. A Sagittarius. Someone I'd kept quietly on the back burner of my heart because I knew I could usually count on him when life fell apart.

Then I froze. Earlier that week, a tarot reading had warned me not to restart an old, unhealthy cycle. It had even mentioned reaching out to a Sagittarius. I paused. What if I didn't call him? What if, just this once, I refused to repeat the pattern?

I pulled my hand away from my phone. In that instant, everything changed. The air in front of me shimmered.

About twenty feet away, a band of bright light appeared, as though reality itself had split open. I wasn't afraid. Energy surged through my body like liquid lightning. It poured through the crown of my head with a force that felt both impossible and completely natural.

Every thought of Jack disappeared. Every question that had consumed me only moments before simply... vanished.

I stared into space. Literal space. After the bright light faded, the rip in the air looked like a window into the dark universe. From that vast quiet came a profound sense of direction. Just an unmistakable knowing that something was drawing me forward.

Then I heard a voice. "There is nothing more important than Buddhism. Follow that path."

I kept staring. The opening before me no longer looked like a tear in the air. It resembled two immense waterfalls of light, quietly folding into themselves. There was no violence in it. No chaos. Only an impossible stillness that seemed to stretch into infinity.

A few minutes later, I climbed out of my car. My body felt strangely weightless, while my head seemed impossibly tall, as though the crown of it extended far beyond the sky. I was dizzy. I was slightly nauseous. My first thought was that I might be having a stroke but nothing hurt. Nothing felt medically wrong. It was as though my mind had tuned itself to a frequency I'd never known existed.

My entire body vibrated with energy. I lowered myself into the grass, needing something solid beneath me as my mind raced to make sense of it. Am I dying? Why does my head feel like this? For the next fifteen minutes, I stayed there, suspended between the world I had always known and something I couldn't begin to explain, trying to understand what was happening to me.

Then my phone rang. Paul was calling back. He asked the questions I couldn't ask myself. The practical ones. The medical ones. The spiritual ones. For a few hours we weighed symptoms against experience, trying to understand what had just happened.

My vitals were fine. Everything else had changed.

By the time we hung up, we both arrived at the same conclusion. I wasn't broken and I didn't need a doctor.

I was being initiated.

FALLING DOWN A RABBIT HOLE

If I wanted to explain what awakening feels like to someone who has never experienced it, I probably wouldn't begin with anything I learned in Buddhism. I'd begin with Alice.

At first glance, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* seems like a charming children's story about a curious little girl who follows a rabbit into a world of talking caterpillars, impossible tea parties, and smiling cats. But whether Lewis Carroll intended it or not, he captured something that appears again and again in stories of transformation.

Alice isn't searching for enlightenment or hidden wisdom. She's simply living her ordinary life when something catches her attention.

A rabbit.

She could ignore it, but she doesn't. She follows, and that tiny decision changes everything. Suddenly the ground disappears beneath her and she is falling into a world where the old rules no longer seem to apply. There is no map, no explanation, and no easy way back.

That is the closest literary description I've ever found for what the pre-bhumi and bhumi itself felt like to me. First came the curiosity. I followed it. Then the ground disappeared.

There is a beautiful irony in the word *bhumi*, which comes from Buddhism and is often translated as "ground." Because when it happens, grounded is about the last thing you feel. It can feel as though the earth has vanished beneath your feet and you need to touch something solid just to remind yourself that you are still here.

One of the Buddha's most recognizable gestures is doing exactly that. In Buddhist art, the *Bhumisparsha Mudra* is the "earth-touching gesture," with the Buddha reaching down to touch the ground. Divine humor at its finest.

Alice captures the fall perfectly. It lasts long enough for wonder and fear to take turns. One moment she's fascinated by what she's seeing, and the next she has no idea what is happening or where she's going.

Many spiritual traditions describe some version of this opening. They use different words and tell different stories, but they are all trying to describe something difficult to put into language: the moment ordinary reality seems to open and something larger begins shining through.

Which raises the obvious question: How do the rest of us fall in?

THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION

One of my favorite Buddhist teachings is that there are 84,000 doors to awakening. It is a poetic way of saying there is no single path to seeing the true nature of reality.

I think of reality like a giant puzzle, except most of us are trying to put it together without the picture on the box. We have pieces everywhere. Religion has some. Science has some. Philosophy, mathematics, art, nature, and our own experiences have others. Without knowing what the larger picture looks like, though, it is incredibly difficult to tell where any particular piece belongs.

This is part of the problem with religion as we practice it today. The wisdom contained in our spiritual traditions can be extraordinary, but it has traveled a very long way to reach us. These teachings came through human beings trying to describe experiences that were difficult, sometimes impossible, to put into words. Their understanding often unfolded over many years, which means the teachings we inherit may come from different moments in that process. Those ideas were then remembered, recorded, organized, translated, interpreted, and carried through cultures very different from our own.

Along the way, they also picked up some mud.

Sexism, patriarchy, hierarchy, politics, cultural assumptions, superstition, and the ordinary limitations of the societies preserving them became tangled up with the wisdom itself. Translation added another layer. Words that carried enormous meaning in one language were sometimes reduced to the nearest available word in another. Eventually, it can become difficult to tell what is the extraordinary insight and what is simply the historical packaging it arrived in.

That's why the picture on the box matters.

Once you have some sense of the larger pattern, you can begin looking back at these traditions and understand what they were pointing toward. You can appreciate the wisdom without assuming every cultural rule wrapped around it must also be sacred.

And more importantly, you can start recognizing the same pattern outside of religion entirely.

Something a monk discovered meditating in a cave in Tibet might reveal itself to you during a car ride through the Alps. You might see another piece in mathematics, a thunderstorm, a piece of music, heartbreak, falling in love, raising a child, washing the dishes, or sitting on the toilet. The setting doesn't have to look spiritual for reality to be showing you the same thing.

That is what I hope this book can offer: not another religion and certainly not another set of rules, but a glimpse of the picture on the box.

Because once you begin to recognize the pattern, the world looks very different. The sacred doesn't belong exclusively to temples, monasteries, scriptures, or teachers. It is reflected everywhere, all the time, through everything.

Maybe that is what 84,000 doors really means: **you can find enlightenment in everything, everywhere, all at once.**

As an old saying beautifully puts it, *“The ways to God are as many as the breaths of the children of humanity.”*

That has become one of my favorite ways to think about awakening. No tradition owns it. No religion invented it. No philosophy has exclusive rights to it. They are simply different doors into the same reality.

Once you know what you're looking for, you can find a door almost anywhere.

I use the word *bhumi* because Buddhism happened to be the language that found me. Other traditions have their own ways of describing profound shifts in how we understand ourselves and reality: enlightenment, satori, gnosis, surrender, moksha, Christ consciousness, or simply growing up. They aren't identical experiences, but they seem to point toward something remarkably similar: a moment when the old way of seeing gives way to something new.

The name matters far less to me than the transformation itself.

Imagine I place a cup on a table between us. From where I'm sitting, I see one side. You see another. Someone standing above us sees the opening. We are all looking at the same cup, but none of us sees it in exactly the same way.

I began to wonder if life was doing something similar. Once I stopped looking for identical words and started looking at transformation from different angles, I began seeing the same pattern everywhere.

Reading finally clicks.

A seed breaks open into a flower.

The alchemist transforms lead into gold.

The Tower brings everything down in Tarot.

A symphony finally reaches its great resolution.

Percival encounters the mystery of the Holy Grail.

Da'at marks a mysterious threshold within the Tree of Life.

The hero crosses the threshold and leaves the ordinary world behind.

A scientist has the sudden *aha!* that changes how they understand the problem.

Even the stories we tell our children are filled with it. Pinocchio becomes a real boy. The ugly duckling discovers he is a swan. The Velveteen Rabbit becomes real through love. And in perhaps the simplest version of all, a very hungry caterpillar disappears into a chrysalis and emerges as a butterfly.

For my grandmother, it was much simpler. It was the moment the couple finally kissed in the Hallmark movie. She knew the story had finally arrived where it had been heading all along. Honestly, that's not a bad metaphor either.

These examples aren't telling the same story, but they are showing us transformation from different angles. One shows us the breaking. Another the crossing. Another the realization, the illumination, or the emergence.

Different views of the same cup.

Every culture tells the story a little differently. Every tradition decorates the doorway in its own style. But once I began looking past the decorations, I stopped seeing thousands of unrelated stories and started seeing **one story told from thousands of different angles**.

We were taught to recognize this pattern in stories. We learned about plot and climax in reading class. We watched characters struggle, lose their way, face themselves, and eventually become something they weren't at the beginning.

What no one told us was that maybe we were supposed to be doing the same thing.

Because most of us don't spend our lives becoming more fully ourselves. We spend them becoming covered in layers. Other people's expectations. Old wounds. Fear. Shame. Roles we learned to play. Beliefs we inherited without ever asking whether they were true. By the time we're adults, it can be difficult to tell where all that stuff ends and we begin.

That is why we keep being shown stories about transformation.

The stories weren't simply repeating, and neither were the symbols. They were pointing toward something we should have been doing all along: peeling back the layers and becoming more fully who we are.

I had seen these stories my entire life. I just hadn't noticed what they were showing me.

Years ago, I was pregnant for a brief period of time. Almost immediately, the world seemed to fill with pregnant women, babies, strollers, car seats, and everything related to children. Of course, none of it had suddenly appeared. It had always been there. I was simply seeing it because something in me had changed. This felt the same.

The stories had always been there. The symbols had always been there. But once I knew what I was looking for, it was as if someone had turned on the lights.

They were everywhere.

THE LANGUAGE WE FORGOT

Once I began looking through that lens, the symbols stopped feeling random. They seemed to fall into four simple families.

The first is **Potential**.

The caterpillar. The seed waiting beneath the soil. A single line in one dimension. Arthur before he pulls the sword from the stone. Scrooge before the first ghost arrives. Dante lost in the dark wood. Evelyn Wang overwhelmed in her laundromat. Michelangelo's untouched block of marble before *David*. The woman in *Little Voice* before anyone really hears her sing. Susan Boyle on April 10, 2009.

Biology. Mathematics. Myth. Literature. Film. Art. Music. Real life. Completely different worlds, yet each shows us the same moment from a different angle: something more is possible, but we can't see it yet.

Potential isn't nothing. It is possibility before revelation. Something is already there. We just haven't seen it yet.

The second is **Transformation**.

The caterpillar forming its chrysalis and changing inside. The seed germinating beneath the soil. A square in two dimensions. Arthur reaching for the sword. Scrooge being dragged through Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come. Dante making his way through Hell and Purgatory. Evelyn Wang changing her shoes in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Michelangelo chipping away at the block of marble. The woman in *Little Voice* being pushed toward the stage. Susan Boyle walking onto the *Britain's Got Talent* stage.

Different worlds, but again, the same moment. Something is underway. Something is being worked, challenged, stripped away, rearranged, or transformed, but what it will become has not fully revealed itself yet.

The third is **Emergence**.

The butterfly becoming visible through the chrysalis and beginning to break free. The first green shoot pushing through the soil. A cube in three dimensions. Arthur pulling the sword from the stone. Scrooge waking on Christmas morning. Dante emerging from Purgatory and entering Paradise. Evelyn Wang finally beginning to understand what all those other lives were showing her. The shape of a man beginning to emerge from Michelangelo's marble. The woman in *Little Voice* opening her mouth and finally letting people hear what she can do. Susan Boyle singing the first notes of "I Dreamed a Dream."

This is the moment when whatever has been happening begins to reveal itself. What was hidden becomes visible. What was only potential has passed through transformation and taken recognizable form.

Something new has entered the world.

And the fourth is **Embodiment**.

The butterfly spreading its wings and taking flight. The plant growing toward the sun and flowering. A tesseract in four dimensions. Arthur becoming king. Scrooge going out into the world and actually living as the man he woke up wanting to be. Dante reaching the Empyrean, glimpsing the divine, and doing what any reasonable person would do after traveling through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise: writing a book about it. Evelyn Wang returning to her ordinary life and living it differently. *David*, fully revealed, standing where a block of marble once stood. The woman in *Little Voice* finally owning the voice that had always been hers. Susan Boyle becoming the artist the rest of the world could finally see.

The transformation is no longer hidden or struggling to emerge. It has taken form and is now being lived.

For us, this may be the most important part. Awakening is one thing. Learning to live from what you have awakened to is another.

Potential. Transformation. Emergence. Embodiment.

Four stages. And perhaps it is fitting that there are four. Across many symbolic systems, four is associated with structure, foundation, and stability: four directions, four corners, four legs holding up a table.

And then the pattern repeats.

The flower creates another seed. The butterfly lays another egg. What has fully become itself creates new potential, and the cycle begins again. Sometimes the repetition is obvious. Other times, we're simply standing too close to see the larger pattern we're inside.

(I already knew what fractals were. What came later was the aha moment. I suddenly realized they belonged here too. That happened to me a lot during this period. Something I had known for years would suddenly click into place, and I would see it as part of a much larger pattern.

A fractal repeats its basic pattern at different scales. Zoom in and you find it again. Zoom out and there it is again. Ferns. Snowflakes. Coastlines. Rivers. Lightning. Romanesco broccoli.

Then I found the Buddhabrot, a fractal created from the mathematics of the Mandelbrot set that looks remarkably like a seated Buddha. Of course it did. By this point, I felt like I could look at almost anything and give you my unified theory of everything.

And the weird part was, I kind of could. The examples changed. The scale changed. The language changed. But underneath, I kept finding the same pattern.)

For now, though, all I could see was the cycle.

Which brought me back to the circle.

FROM ANOTHER ANGLE

The Ouroboros made me look at the circle differently.

The ancient image of a serpent eating its own tail wasn't simply a symbol of completion. The end fed directly back into the beginning. Just like the flower becoming another seed and the butterfly laying another egg, the cycle kept going.

The circle had been there all along.

But life didn't seem to move around a simple circle. It moved out and in, around and through, continually returning toward a center.

That brought me to the torus.

A torus is a doughnut-shaped form, but it was the movement through it that interested me: out from the center, around the outside, back through the middle, and out again.

Once I saw it, I started seeing that movement everywhere. Water spiraling down a drain. Smoke curling into a vortex. A dancer moving away from center and returning. Even breathing: out and back in.

And, of course, a hurricane.

From the outside, a hurricane is almost pure chaos. Wind, rain, destruction, enormous forces spinning around and around. But at its center is the eye.

Stillness.

That became one of the most important images for me.

The goal wasn't to stop the hurricane. I couldn't control the world, other people, loss, change, or any of the other forces constantly moving around me. The goal was to learn how to find the eye and stay there.

The world could spin.

I didn't have to spin with it.

Then I encountered another version of the same idea in mathematics: the golden ratio.

The golden ratio appears when a whole is divided in a particular proportion, roughly 1.618 to 1. From it, we can construct the familiar golden spiral, a curve that winds inward toward an increasingly small center.

And there it was again.

The hurricane.

The spiral.

The movement inward.

Follow the spiral far enough and everything seems to narrow toward a single point.

The egg.

That was how I began to see the egg: the quiet center of the storm. The place everything spiraled out from and eventually returned to. Not an escape from the chaos, but a center within it.

And the egg carried another meaning too. It wasn't empty. It contained something that had not yet become what it was going to be.

Potential.

Creation waiting to happen.

Which made the image even more interesting. The center wasn't the end of the journey. It was where the next one began.

Suddenly the hurricane, the golden spiral, the torus, the Ouroboros, the seed, and the egg didn't feel like unrelated symbols anymore. They felt like different ways of looking at the same movement: outward into complexity, inward toward center, transformation, and outward again.

And then there was the tesseract.

I had already followed a line into a square, a square into a cube, and a cube into a tesseract. A tesseract is a four-dimensional hypercube, which presents an obvious problem: we live in three spatial dimensions. We can't see the whole thing directly. We can only see representations of it from the dimensions available to us.

And suddenly I was back at the cup.

Put a cup between us and I see one side while you see another. Someone above us sees the opening. Someone looking up through a glass table sees the bottom. We can describe completely different things and still be looking at the same cup.

That was what I had been trying to understand.

The Ouroboros. The circle. The torus. The spiral. The egg. The tesseract. The hurricane. The dance. The stories. The symbols. Christ. The Buddha.

What if we have been looking at the same thing from different positions all along?

From one angle, we call it emptiness. From another, wholeness. One tradition calls it awakening. Another calls it salvation. Mathematics gives us dimensions, ratios, and geometry. Nature gives

us storms, spirals, seasons, seeds, and cycles. Stories give us characters who transform and become more fully themselves.

The language changes. The image changes. The angle changes.

The cup doesn't.

(Pssst... hopeless romantics. This next part is for us. Want to know something so gorgeous it hurts? The heart belongs to this family of symbols too. Not because it resembles the organ beating inside our chests, but because of what I believe the shape is actually showing us: two transformed lives meeting in the middle.

Look at it. Two separate curves begin apart, each following its own path before turning inward toward the same center. To me, those are two people who have each gone through the process I have been describing. They have traveled through their own chaos, confronted themselves, cracked open, changed, and learned to find the quiet center of their own hurricane. Neither arrives looking for the other to make them whole. They have already made that journey for themselves.

And then, somehow, they find each other.



That is what makes this kind of love so different from the love we are usually taught to want. It isn't you complete me. It isn't possession or rescue, and it isn't two wounded people desperately trying to fill the empty spaces in each other. It is two people becoming clear enough, open enough, and whole enough that something much larger can move between them.

Love, in its highest form, may be exactly that: becoming the kind of person through whom the universe can love another human being with as little interference as possible from fear, ego, jealousy, control, or the endless need to be completed.

And my God, imagine being loved like that.

Imagine someone seeing all of you without needing to own any of you, knowing you without reducing you, desiring you without possessing you. Imagine being loved without being asked to become smaller so someone else can feel bigger. Imagine being completely free and completely chosen at the same time, standing fully inside your own life while another person stands fully inside theirs, and still, across all the impossible distances that separate one human being from another, somehow finding each other in the middle.

No wonder we drew a heart.

Once I understood the symbol this way, I began seeing this love story everywhere too. Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Mary and John the Baptist. Muhammad and Khadijah. Nefertiti and Akhenaten. Krishna, Radha, and Rukmini. Different centuries, different religions, different cultures, different expressions of love, yet again and again the sacred and the deeply human appear intertwined.

I believe some of these love stories were hidden, softened, rewritten, or misunderstood because we didn't understand what they represented. We tried to fit them into the categories available to us: husband and wife, prophet and companion, teacher and disciple, divine and human. But perhaps something far more beautiful has been hiding underneath them all along.

Maybe the greatest love stories were never just about romance. Maybe they were about what becomes possible when two people have done enough of their own becoming to finally see each other clearly.

The love of your life isn't someone who completes you. It's someone you can love without needing them to. You don't have to possess them, rescue them, or make them responsible for your happiness. Their freedom doesn't threaten your love. It makes it more beautiful.

You have each survived your own storms and found your own center. Then, somehow, in a world of billions of people, your paths cross and you recognize each other.

Not as two missing halves, but as two whole people choosing one another. Perhaps that is why the heart has two sides. Two wholes make a heart.)

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

The more I saw the pattern, the more it seemed to appear everywhere, even in something as ordinary as a written sentence.

A period stopped the thought. A comma let it continue, carrying one idea into the next. But it was the question mark that caught my attention. The Sanskrit symbol associated with a bhumi resembled a comma or the number seven, depending on who wrote it. Add the point below it, and suddenly I saw the whole process: the curve of transformation moving toward the egg.

Do you see it?

But the patterns weren't only showing up in symbols anymore. They were beginning to cross into the way I experienced the world.

I've saved the stranger stories for later, but by this point new senses seemed to be appearing alongside the familiar five. These are sometimes called the five clairs: clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairsentience, claircognizance and clairalience. I was beginning to see, hear, feel, know, and occasionally smell things I couldn't easily explain.

The conversations were developing too. At first, I had absolutely no idea who - or what - I was talking to. Spirits, dead relatives, strange higher versions of people I knew, various gods... for a few months, it was basically a sci-fi buffet of talking to anything other than myself.

We'll get to that.

What matters here is that these experiences began doing something unexpected: they started crossing into my research for the book.

Until then, I still thought I was writing some kind of new-and-improved Buddhist book. Or maybe a children's book. Honestly, the book had changed identities so many times by then that it was having its own spiritual crisis.

Then, somewhere in the middle of all this, I had another one of those lightbulb moments.

Oh, shit. This is the book.

The dreams. The bhumi. The strange senses. The conversations. The symbols. The gods. The ridiculous number of connections I kept finding. I wasn't researching something separate from what was happening to me anymore. What was happening to me was what this damn book was about.

Very meta.

And it made me wonder whether the ideas appearing throughout human history and the ones appearing in my own life might be coming from the same place.

Which left me with a much bigger question: Where do our ideas come from?

We like to think we know. Someone writes a book, composes a song, paints a picture, invents something, or develops a theory. We put their name on it and call them the creator.

But creativity has always been a little stranger than that.

Writers talk about characters taking over their stories. Musicians wake up with melodies already playing in their heads. Scientists struggle with a problem for years only to have the answer arrive while they're walking or dreaming. Artists often describe their work less as something they invented and more as something they discovered.

Even our language suggests this. We have an idea. An idea comes to us. Inspiration strikes. Something pops into our head. We talk about ideas as if they arrive.

I knew that feeling. By this point, they were arriving faster than I could follow them. A symbol would lead to a story, the story to mathematics, mythology, religion, nature, or something completely ordinary sitting right in front of me. Then I would discover that someone, sometimes thousands of years earlier, had already noticed another piece of the same pattern.

For a while, I assumed I was simply getting better at recognizing connections. Maybe I was. But eventually I began to wonder if some of our greatest ideas weren't entirely ours, and if creativity might be one of the ways something larger moves through us.

It would explain why the same ideas keep appearing in completely different forms. A mystic experiences something and calls it God. A mathematician turns it into an equation. A physicist describes it as a law. A poet makes it a metaphor. A musician makes us feel it without words. A storyteller gives it to a child through a talking lion, a wooden puppet, a rabbit hole, or a yellow brick road.

Different people, different centuries, different languages, all expressing some version of the same thing. Same fingerprints. Another version of the damn cup.

And that was what I finally figured out. The gods had been talking to all of us for a very long time, passing pieces of the same message through myths, religions, fairy tales, music, mathematics, paintings, movies, and stories. The form changed with every culture and generation, but the message kept finding new ways to reach us.

Which left one enormous question: If they've been telling us the same story all this time, what are they trying to teach us?

THE GOLD BENEATH THE MUD

The answer I kept finding, no matter which tradition I explored, was surprisingly consistent: **Wake up.**

The problem is that we are remarkably bad at seeing ourselves clearly. It is astonishingly easy to recognize someone else's blind spots while remaining almost completely unaware of our own. We watch a friend stay in a terrible relationship and wonder why they can't leave. We tell our daughters never to settle for someone who diminishes them. We laugh at movie characters who walk straight into disasters we spotted ten minutes earlier. We read history and marvel at how obvious the warning signs seem in hindsight.

The pattern is often clear to everyone except the person living inside it, because when you're inside the story, it doesn't feel like a story. It feels like reality.

Maybe that's why the same lessons keep appearing in so many different forms. We find them in mythology and religion, history and novels, movies and fairy tales. They arrive through strangers, friends, teachers, children, and occasionally the person we're least willing to listen to. The characters change, but the lesson underneath them often doesn't. Reality, it seems, is remarkably patient.

And beneath all those repeating stories, I kept finding something even more extraordinary: we already have within us what we're being taught to become.

Buddhism expresses this beautifully through the idea of Buddha nature. The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* teaches that every being possesses it. Awakening isn't something added to us. It is something uncovered. The text repeatedly uses images of something precious hidden beneath what obscures it. Remove the covering, and what was there all along is revealed.

Gold beneath the mud.

The more traditions I explored, the more versions of this idea I found. The mahasiddhas of Buddhism, the sages of Hindu traditions, mystics and saints across centuries, and Christianity through Christ all seemed to point, in different ways, toward the possibility of profound human transformation. I began to think of Buddha and Christ not only as names belonging to particular figures, but also as symbols of what might be possible when the things obscuring our deepest nature begin to fall away.

That was what fascinated me. Different traditions had developed different languages, stories, practices, and symbols, yet so many seemed to be pointing toward the same horizon.

Different mirrors. Same reflection. Same damn cup.

Yes, I know. The cup again. Apparently the universe is a broken record.

But maybe that's the point. The stories keep repeating because courage and fear, love and attachment, greed and generosity, destruction and creation are much easier to recognize when we're watching them happen to someone else. First we see the pattern in a god, a villain, a hero, a fairy tale, a friend, or a movie. Then, if we're paying attention, we begin to recognize it in ourselves.

And the record keeps playing until something changes.

Sometimes we see the pattern clearly enough to choose differently. Sometimes something much bigger shifts and we have a bhumi. Some people experience that profound shift during this lifetime. Later in this book, I'll explain why I believe that happens and what I think gives someone the best chance of having a bhumi, if that is part of their path. Others may never experience one while they are alive.

But the gold beneath the mud is never lost. Sooner or later, it is revealed.

DEATH AND WHAT COMES AFTER

For some people, that awakening happens here. For everyone else, I believe it happens when we die.

Death is not the end. It is a transition.

Human beings have been telling versions of this story for thousands of years. Christianity speaks of Heaven. Islam of Jannah. Greek mythology of Elysium. Tibetan Buddhism describes pure realms. The names and details change, but they seem to point toward the same basic idea: consciousness continues after the body dies.

Through my conversations with the gods, I came to believe that the people who have died are not gone. They exist in another time and space, and the crossing itself is brief. The pain belongs to those left behind. Death is less like falling into darkness than stepping through a doorway. One moment we are here. The next, we are somewhere else.

And we are not alone.

What exists beyond this life is not an empty void. It is a living reality inhabited by beings we can barely imagine from here. If I had to compare it to anything we already understand, it would look less like clouds and harps and more like one of those hopeful futures imagined in science fiction: a civilization that has moved beyond fear, violence, and scarcity.

It isn't another planet. It is another level of existence, where healing continues and learning doesn't stop.

Once I understood that, I began to understand Earth differently too.

Earth is an incubator.

Think about a chicken egg. Everything the developing creature needs is already inside it. The shell protects it while it grows, separating it from a world it isn't ready to enter. But the shell is only useful for so long. Eventually, the very thing that protected the creature has to break or the creature can never emerge.

We are doing the same thing. Love cracks us open. So does loss, failure, heartbreak, joy, wonder, relationships, mistakes, and time. Life is constantly working on us, preparing us for a reality we cannot yet imagine because we are still inside the egg.

Death is the final crack. It isn't the opposite of life. It is our birth.

Which brings me to perhaps the strangest thing I was shown: **We are baby gods.**

I realize how absurd that sounds. But before anyone gets too excited and starts demanding a temple, I should probably explain what I mean by *gods*, because I think the word itself is part of the problem.

For thousands of years, we've used *god* to describe beings we imagined as fundamentally different from us: perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful creatures somewhere above humanity while we stumble around down here trying not to piss them off.

That's not what I was shown.

Do they know more than we do? Yes. Are they more advanced than we are? Absolutely. But that doesn't necessarily make them a different kind of being.

They're older.

Think about a toddler looking at his father. Dad can reach the top shelf, drive a car, make food appear, operate mysterious machines, fix things, answer impossible questions, and somehow control when bedtime happens. From where that toddler is standing, Dad is practically a god.

But Dad isn't a god.

He's just further along.

Maybe humanity has been making some version of that mistake for thousands of years. Our ancestors encountered, imagined, or experienced beings and forces far beyond themselves and gave them names. Over time, we translated many of those beings into one simple word: *gods*. Then we loaded that word with hierarchy, power, and eventually a whole lot of patriarchy.

We made them enormous and ourselves small.

But maybe even that was part of the curriculum. Maybe humanity needed gods above us before we were ready to understand that we were growing toward them. Children begin life believing adults know everything because, compared with them, they practically do. Growing up means slowly discovering that the adults were never a different order of being. They were simply older, more experienced, and able to see things the child couldn't see yet.

Maybe humanity is finally old enough to make the same discovery about the gods.

And considering how many fuckers down here are already walking around convinced they're worthless, I think this distinction matters.

What I was shown was not a universe divided between magnificent gods and insignificant humans. It was something much more intimate: an ancient family whose members are at wildly different stages of development.

They aren't enormous, and we aren't small.

We're just young.

THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

From their perspective, we are so young that we haven't even been born yet.

Imagine an infertility clinic filled with tiny embryos. Each contains the potential to become an extraordinary human being, but none is ready for the world outside. Development comes first.

Now imagine teachers who could somehow begin preparing those children before they were even born. What would they teach them?

Probably not calculus or tax law.

They would teach kindness, compassion, courage, honesty, creativity, and love. They would teach us how to live with others, care for something beyond ourselves, repair the harm we cause, and use freedom responsibly. And surely, somewhere in that curriculum, we would have to learn that our freedom does not give us the right to cause unnecessary suffering to another living being simply because we can. People. Animals. Anything capable of suffering.

Maybe growing up means learning to value life beyond our own.

That is what this life is. **A classroom.**

We are developing inside a reality that prepares us for the much larger one that comes next. And no two curricula are exactly alike. One person is learning courage while another is learning restraint. Someone needs to find their voice while someone else desperately needs to learn when to shut up. One person needs to stay. Another needs to leave.

We aren't all taking the same class.

A bhumi lets you begin seeing the classroom while you're still inside it. As I moved through mine, the process felt increasingly like a deep cleaning. I could see my own patterns more clearly, but I also began noticing lessons unfolding everywhere, in my family, my friends, strangers, people on television, and even people I strongly disagreed with.

Everyone was learning something.

For most of you who won't experience a bhumi during this life, a unique process begins immediately after death. You move into another level of reality where you get to sort out your shit, reflect on what happened here, and finally see the lessons you couldn't see while you were living them.

Many traditions seem to contain pieces of this idea. Christianity describes judgment. Buddhism describes karma. Some people who report near-death experiences describe a life review in which they experience their lives from a perspective far beyond their own.

The purpose is not punishment. It's understanding.

You finally get to see the whole story from outside the story: the ripples of your choices, both beautiful and painful, and everything fear, ego, pain, desire, and survival kept you from seeing while you were here. The mirror becomes clear.

Growing up doesn't end when we die. The learning continues.

I simply had the unusual pleasure of starting early. Lucky me. Once I began seeing humanity this way, I couldn't look at us quite the same again. Race, nationality, religion, and culture didn't disappear or stop mattering, but they stopped feeling like the deepest truth about us.

We're family.

From that perspective, so much human conflict begins to look different. We spend enormous amounts of energy fighting over our differences when, from farther away, we look a lot like children arguing in a sandbox, forgetting that we're all going home together.

It changed the way I saw history too. Every generation inherits the nursery created by the generations before it. Some parts are beautiful. Some are broken. Some are dangerous. Then, for one brief period, it's ours.

Every act of kindness makes the nursery a little safer. Every discovery expands what is possible. Every injustice we correct removes an obstacle for someone coming after us. Every destructive cycle we end means another child may not have to repeat it.

That is part of our work while we're here: Leave the nursery better than we found it.

Then, one day, we die. We hatch. And the world we thought was everything becomes the place where we began.

Books, films, comics, religions, myths, and stories have been circling pieces of this architecture for a very long time. *VALIS*, *Childhood's End*, *Hyperion*, *Lord of Light*, *The Sparrow*, *Prometheus*, *The Fountain*, *Mass Effect*, and *The Eternals* all contain fragments that reminded me of what I was being shown. None contains the whole picture, but the fingerprints are there.

Which brings us right back to where this chapter began. The same ideas keep appearing across cultures, centuries, languages, religions, and stories. The fingerprints are everywhere.

I know what I've just told you is an extraordinary claim. A few years ago, I would have smiled politely, closed this book, and quietly concluded that the author had completely lost her mind.

(Technically, I did.)

I don't expect you to believe any of this simply because I say it's true. In fact, I hope you don't. Blind belief has never been the point of this book. Curiosity is. All I'm asking is that you keep following the fingerprints I've pointed out and decide for yourself what you think they mean.

Because hidden among all those patterns, seven beings kept appearing again and again.

Once I began to understand their symbols, their roles, and the different names humanity has given them across time, they became surprisingly easy to recognize. And then there

were the conversations I kept having with them, which made ignoring the whole thing considerably more difficult.

So now that I've told you what I was shown, it's finally time to introduce you to the family.

And what a family it is. I give you **THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN:**

Amun. Inanna. Ma'at. Ra. Shiva. Padma. Vishnu.

Two are retired. Five are apparently still working. Everyone has a job. Everyone has a symbol. And, like any family, things get complicated very quickly.

Who the hell are these people? Excellent question.

That's where things get really weird.



Please read PART 5: THE INVITATION next.