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ADELAIDE

‘Givenness’...is the particular way in which the universe
enters in each particular thing;
it is
the exclusive way in which each of us contains the universe.

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_Where are you, Adelaide? _ I whisper.

My bedroom is pitch dark. The only thing I can make out in the darkness, through the window, are the clouds on the horizon, faintly illuminated by the lights of the city beyond. The clock on the night table tells me that it is already past midnight, and I am still awake, unable to sleep, possessed by a strange feeling of nostalgia that has haunted me throughout the day.

An answer comes swiftly from nowhere: _I ‘m dead._

_No, _ I reply in earnest_ you’re *not*._

I am, indeed. Remember, last September? You attended my funeral about this same time last year.

_I remember... But, my sweet friend, how can you be talking to me if you are really dead? _

I am not. You are talking to yourself.

_I don’t think so... _I say, puzzled. I hear faint sounds of sirens in the distance; I picture in my mind a building surrounded by the red glow of flames.

The tone of the silent speaker is now irate: _If I am dead, for heaven’s sake, how can *I* be talking to you? _ It sounds so familiar.

Because, Adelaide and my reply comes from a place of knowledge that, I realize, is not

within my immediate grasp, _ you are talking *through me*... _

No answer reaches across to me this time, but in some unknown, deep, layer of my being, I can feel the warmth of Adelaide's smile spreading like a tide.

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It happens quite often, this familiar stir. The clear feeling of a presence quietly permeating a space within me: a gesture fleetingly glimpsed as I cross in front of a mirror might trigger it; or a sound; or an emotion that I suddenly recognize; a landscape; a feeling that surges from nowhere; an impulse that catches me unprepared. The sound of Chopin's music, for example —especially if it is his *etudes*, or his *waltzes*— is enough to bring forth my mother's presence in an intense, muted, sort of way, the way, maybe, in which you would perceive the subtle aroma of a perfume... Then, surging within me, I recognize the emotion she must have felt at the sound of the piano, and her little high-pitched humming comes vividly to mind, just the way she used to hum going about the house when the record player was playing Chopin. It is in that sharing of the emotion born from the beauty of the music that her presence manifests to me, an unspoken sharing which brings her back with a rare poignancy.

Adelaide and I used to talk about these things occasionally when, for some few, precious days we managed to escape our domestic lives. We prepared diligently for these occasions, planning in advance for time away from work, and labored intensely ahead of time in order to assure, we felt, the survival of our husbands and children while we were away. It was during one of those “leaves of absence”, as we called them, at a quiet place by the seashore, that I mentioned the Chopin thing. We were taking a long walk on the beach on a beautiful, sunny afternoon, and I started reminiscing about my recent birthday:

_ You know, Adelaide, _ I advanced, with a sigh _ it amazes me to think that I have already reached my fifties... _ I continued: _ Looking back, though, I have to confess that it feels like a very long journey... _ I sighed again.—Adelaide was half listening, her mind set in carefully positioning herself to skip a pebble on the water's surface.

_ The wonder of it all _ I continued, talking more to myself than expecting her to be listening _ is that most of the time there has been music. When I was a child I was not really aware of it. I believe

that, maybe, it is because as children we are all a part of the music itself; we dance *within* it. Later on, though, when adolescence came, I could hear it loud and clear, and it was intensely exciting and exhilarating; _ I giggled _ but then it was, for sure, a concert for a *solo* instrument. _ I paused to savor the memories. I was in a strangely pleasant mood that afternoon, triggered by the serenity and splendor of the extensive views of the ocean, and the bluish silhouette of the mountains far in the distance. For a brief moment I was able to taste, once again, the excitement of the adventure of life extending before me, the thrill of all the untapped possibilities. _ Later on, _ I continued, _ there came a time when the music vanished, like the water in a well going dry. But fortunately, just at the time when I was starting to suffocate in a pool of emptiness, the music resurfaced... and now, Adelaide, _ I lifted my head to look at her, _ now, the music is like a symphony. _

It was that last thought which brought my mother to mind, and then I told her about Chopin.

At that, Adelaide stopped her pebble-skipping, and granted me her full attention. She gave me a curious and somehow stubborn stare, and then said that she thought it was all very clear: it was just a memory; the memory of my mother stirred by the sound of the music she liked.

_ That is too simple an explanation, _ I told her, and that was the beginning of one of those peculiar conversations that were the treasure of our friendship.

You see, _ I said, _ it's not just a memory: Chopin's music really moves me in a very deep and particular way, and it is because of my mother. It is because of her genes in me that I am so moved by his music. I believe it is her sensitivity prolonged in me which makes me so susceptible and open to it, and so vulnerable in general to other beautiful things.—When I listen to Chopin's music, what I feel is the continuation of her emotion in me.—On the other hand, that sensitivity also originates from the fact that, when I was a young child, together with other music she liked, she more than often played Chopin, who was a favorite amongst her preferred composers; that is how, by the way, she awakened in me the love of music. You see, it is as if the ripples of her life were continuously touching mine, and not only with regard to music, but in many other ways. Sometimes, _ I paused, trying to gather my thoughts, _ during those moments of connection, it is as if we had merged, and I find it very difficult to discern where *I* begin and where *she* ends. Sometimes, all of this makes me think that she didn't really die at all... _

_ You mean that you don't believe she is dead? And she comes and *visits* you? _ Adelaide had

this mocking, little way, of bringing you down in one second from the highest altitudes.

_ O.K.! O.K.! _ I conceded _ I reckon she is dead. In a certain way. But, in a certain way, she is not. Granted, her physical being is not here anymore: she does not fuss about the way she used to, nor worries about the way her hair looks any more. She does not speak nor breathe any more, and she cannot listen to Chopin's music anymore, either, but I do, and it moves *me*... — Don't you see? _ I said, looking at her _ She might not be alive, day after day, as we are, but she *is* alive, and will be forever, in the way her life influences, and will continue to influence, future moments, and I am one of them. She is a part of me which I cannot change, which I cannot deny nor evade.—She is an ingredient in my soup— Her presence in this world, even if past, is intertwined with me now; it is part of my givenness —if I can call it that way— and of my brother's, and of anything or anybody else she touched with her existence. The echoes of her life are still spreading and I hear them, loud and clear, because I am so close to the source... _

_ My dear friend! _ Adelaide interrupted, theatrically rotating her eyes and lifting her hands to the sky. _ I suppose this particular aspect of your charm is what continues to keep me intrigued, day after day; _ she added, mockingly, _ this way you have of turning everything upside down... _ She then turned to me with a smile: _ But I have to confess that I rather enjoy it _ she added. _ I must possess a weird sense of adventure hidden somewhere in a remote corner of myself. Because, let me tell you, whenever we engage in this kind of talk, it is as if solid earth was suddenly being pulled away from under my feet. _ She looked at me, curiously _ Don't you ever feel a little dizzy like that yourself? _

I looked at her and didn't quite know what to say. How could I explain to her how confused, and yes, dizzy, I feel at times, trying to sort out the real from the imaginary; the reality or non-reality of my emotions, for starts; of those nagging but unarticulated intuitions; of the eternal, unceasing, unrelenting, output of my mind... (And, what the hell *is* reality, anyway? I hope that when somebody comes up with a final, unmovable, answer he or she does me the favor of calling me soon). One thing I know for a fact, from undeniable personal experience, is that I am a walking embodiment of a very vulnerable chunk of feelings: is it possible, then, I constantly ask myself, to give my body or my bones, or this chair, for that matter, a greater degree of reality than to those emotions which seem to be the ultimate movers of my existence?

By ‘givenness’, continued Adelaide, without bothering to wait for an answer, _I suppose that you mean your genetic inheritance. Hence, if you and your brother have the same genetic inheritance from both your parents, your mother should also be visiting him quite frequently too._ She grinned.

_I am sure she does, _I said, ignoring her irony_ but he is not the type to notice. It is a question of paying attention to certain things..._

And of having a great imagination she quipped, without letting me finish.

_I agree. I personally believe that, sometimes, imagination, if used appropriately, can be a great tool for understanding things. Just think about it. Anyway, my brother pays attention to different things, and in a different way, than I do. He and I are very different, as you well know, in spite of our similar genetics. Givenness, as it has been defined, is a lot more than genetics. A lot more. It is all that which has contributed to you being the way you are...since the beginning of time.—It is like your being’s finger print—You and I, and everything else, for that matter, _I tried to explain _are each the product of a sequence of events which started at the very Beginning, with a capital B. So, a lot of stuff has gone into your mixture, including all what you have picked up from your ancestors. And that sequence of events, which is unlike any other, continues churning, moment after moment, into a unique you_ I said, looking at her rather solemnly.

_I always suspected I was unique, _she said, enthusiastically, while busily selecting sea-shells from a pile she had already managed to put together_ even if nobody else seems to appreciate that important fact._

_Oh, I don’t think *anybody* can possibly miss it, Adelaide! _ It was my turn to return the irony.

_Givenness “as it ha been defined”? Do you mean somebody else pays attention to this stuff? _

Many people do; and many people have written about it, too... I was happy to inform her.

_People that, I imagine, are curious about how their personal experience fits into the fabric of reality; people that are, maybe, intrigued, about the nature of reality itself, and want to understand how we fit in. _Adelaide, _ the question suddenly popped into my mind, _let me ask you something: have you ever had one of those experiences that make you feel that there is a lot more to things than what we perceive at first sight? _

I don’t know... she murmured, looking at me hesitantly, and slightly interested.

Well, let me tell you... I said, and moving closer to her and her pile of shells, I told her about the time when, being around twelve or thirteen years old, I thought I had met God in the fields, in the summer time.

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We used to spend at least one month in the summer, every year, by the ocean. My family and I; two families, in fact: my mother, my father (who came to stay with us only on weekends, because of his job); my brother; one aunt; one uncle; and three cousins, with whom we shared paradise. Those summer months by the beach were the closest thing to paradise that I have ever known: our only chores were to make our beds every morning, to sweep and dust clean our bedrooms, and to be home on time for meals, which was not a difficult thing to accomplish, considering that we all possessed extraordinary appetites.

Our first act upon arrival was to go to a farm close by and rent horses. Once on horse back, we quickly managed to expel the noxious fumes of city life by galloping through the fields, among the eucalyptus and the pine trees, inhaling the aroma of the eucalyptus leaves, and listening to the crunch of broken branches under the horses' hooves. And then there was the beach, the joy of playing with the waves in the surf. One after the other they came, and you either let yourself fall on the gurgling white foam, risking being carried away and tossed under, or you ducked under, and then emerged safely behind it, engulfed in the aroma of the salty ocean all around you. Aside from all those wonderful activities, there was always a pile of books available for the afternoon reading. No television, then. Just the wind, the sound of the surf hitting the rocky coastal edge, the sun, the joys of shared friendship, a book, you and your imagination. No planned activities. The days awoke clean and empty: they were there to be filled by us, youngsters, under the vigilance of the adults, but with no imposed agenda.

One of our favorite excursions was to take long hikes late in the afternoon, accompanied by our parents, towards the interior of the country side. Once there, sometimes we descended into a deep and beautiful ravine, the *Cordoba* Creek, which had a quiet little stream at the bottom, full of tiny fish, thousands of tiny, minuscule frogs, and all kinds of other wonderful creatures. We jumped from rock to rock, we sometimes swam in the occasional lagoons, we climbed, we explored caves, we laughed, we

teased.

_It was during one of those hikes, Adelaide, _I told her_ when it happened. I was ahead of the group, on our way back. I had climbed up the steep, winding, narrow trail, and emerged from the ravine on to the open fields. I was tired and content. It had been a beautiful, sunny day, and now it was getting close to sunset. The dried grasses that covered the field gave away an intense aroma of summer. I sat down to rest, happy to be alone for a while. There was a smooth breeze and beautiful, cottony clouds, slowly drifting in the sky. All was silence. All was peaceful in the twilight. All was perfect. My eyes stopped on a tiny, bell-shaped, empty seed shell, swinging atop a blade of grass, delicately stirring in the breeze. Delicately, so slightly, so beautifully. Suddenly, the beauty of that delicate movement seemed to expand all around me, and as in a flash, unspoken, unarticulated, devoid of all conscious thought, I was flooded with the absolute, clear, understanding that for that moment to happen, *everything* had had to align itself in a particular way since the beginning of the universe. If, I then fathomed, in the sequence of events that had led to that moment, anything whatsoever would have been altered, it would all have happened differently. ... I was then flooded with the awareness that everything, everywhere, always, is intrinsically interconnected with everything else, in one harmonious, flowing Whole. The feeling was so stunning that, in spite of my then burgeoning rebellion against all which I considered religious, for a moment I toyed with the idea that, maybe, I had just seen the face of God. _I remained silent for a while. _Now, _I added _looking back from the perspective of all these years, I know I did.... That moment, Adelaide, _I said, _making an effort to remember my Plato, was one of those that “are brought to birth in the soul *on a sudden*, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter nourishes itself.”¹

Then,—my story continued— voices and echoes of laughter approached. Everybody was reaching the top of the trail by now. The moment faded away and I joined the crowd to walk back home. I let it go as young people do, without turning my head, and without suspecting that it would stay with me forever. There have been other similar moments in my life since, but the awareness that came to me that day became a source of permanent wonderment in my life.

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Adelaide listened quietly. No ironic comments this time, nor funny stares. I remember her clearly today, as she was sitting on the sand, her elbows on her knees, and her head bent down. After I finished my story, she remained silent for a long while. Now, as then in my story, the sun was setting. The birds feeding along the edge of the water looked like Giacometti sculptures, their long legs deformed by the

dwindling light and its reflection on the wet sand.

Finally she lifted her head, and without looking at me, she said _So what you are trying to tell me, and I think you mentioned it before, is that there was a lot more to that blade of grass than just *it*?_

_Yes, _I whispered, a little moved _the whole universe... _

I wish I had your imagination for one moment she said softly. Her tone had a sad edge to it. _How come I never experience anything like that? _

_Maybe it *was* imagination, Adelaide! _ I blustered _ but a kind of imagination which finds its wings in an overpowering *feeling*, or better yet, in a sense of profound knowledge that cannot be described! When it happened, I was not thinking about anything in particular. On the contrary, I was completely imbibed in the beauty and peacefulness of the surroundings and, suddenly, there it was, that overpowering moment. Through some kind of weird bend of consciousness, call it some kind of immediate intuition, I was allowed to prehend the reality of that little event beyond what my eyes were seeing. It has taken me a long time to put that moment into words, and when I do so—like I am doing now— the words I choose barely reflect the reality and the power of what I experienced. It took me a long time too, to take that experience seriously and surrender to its significance. It was not until I read about similar episodes in other people’s lives that I recognized that this kind of experience is more common than I had thought; that humanity has been encountering them throughout the centuries.—I am certain that today people continue to have experiences like this and, I am sure, Adelaide, that you have had them too. —But, you know, I think that today we have lost the power to recognize those moments because our culture doesn’t believe in them. We don’t pay attention to those intense moments of connection; we dismiss them because we cannot explain them; and if we do pay attention, we are embarrassed to talk about it.—A culturally sanctioned conspiracy of silence, I might say. _ I paused for a moment, while Adelaide, now distractedly, continued to toss away the discarded sea-shells. _It is as if, in a certain sense, we had all been neutered.—Maybe my brother does, after all, occasionally sense the presence of his mother within him, but if he is moved by it, he doesn’t dare talk about it. Or he thinks that such feelings are just fleeting impressions not worth dwelling on, not really important in the landscape of his life— Yes, that is exactly what I was trying to tell you, that there was a lot more to that blade of grass than just a tiny seed shaken by the breeze; just as, I believe, there is a lot more to

everything than just the aspects we can perceive. We have become so convinced in our contemporary world, that what we perceive is *it*, that we keep forgetting that our whole perception of reality is based on abstractions that we, from our limited perspective, have made up in order to function in the world. We forget that what we see is not all there is. And, therefore, when our intuition tells us that there is something more, we suppress it, we make fun of it, and doing so, we also kill our imagination. _

_ Well...I think you have a point there, _ Adelaide said, now fully engaged _ I have had some magical moments myself, but I don't know if they would qualify. Maybe I didn't stop to grab them, and they slipped away_ she sighed. _ You know, I deal with intuition in a different way than you do: for me, it comes forth through the creative process, when I design. But when designing a building, I have to transform that creative intuition into something solid that can stand straight, and resist winds and earthquakes. Everything has to fit into place and in the right order —structure and system at the service of intuition— that is the way it should be. That is, by the way, how I have come to love the beauty of structure, of a clear and solid system of thought. But unfortunately, nowadays we tend to forget the intuition behind the system: a professional deformation of sorts, I suppose, that comes with the times. Maybe, in so forgetting, _ she added, thoughtfully, _ I have become too much of the all-logical one. But where I can certainly follow you is regarding the fact of the many faces of things. _ She stopped to think for a while. _ When I design a building_ she added, turning towards me and waving a hand in the air, _ I see space and light, proportions and colors, and I see them through the eyes of the people who will walk and live in my spaces...So you can say that every design starts with a dream; or with that leap of imagination you talk about, based on some given facts, and on an intuition of beauty projected towards those who will inhabit it. However, and this is the sad truth today, most of the times when a financing party knocks at my door to have a building put together, whoever he or she might be, they are solely concerned with the amount of rentable area that it will generate, and the profits to be obtained. For a real estate person, you see, _ she continued, looking at me intently to see if I was paying attention, _ a building is primarily and above all, a source of revenue, and the most efficient way of extracting profit out of a piece of land. For the architect —for me— on the other hand, a building is a work of art, an act of giving; a contribution to the community. The developer has the capital...and the capital has the upper hand. So, my friend, _ she was now speaking with passion _ I will give you this in return for your

blade of grass story: every time you walk along the streets and you see rows of cold, dehumanized buildings, remember, again, that there is a lot more to them than what you see. Aside from steel and cement, they are also, more than probably, some architect's broken dream, but most of all, and this is the tragedy, they are the expression and the legacy of a profit oriented society, left there to last for years on end. That is why, from my perspective of things, I cannot agree with you more about our culture today: maximized profit seems to be most important determining factor, more than people's contentment, more than beauty. The architect's vision of what a building should be is seen as a secondary whim that shouldn't be taken too seriously. _ Ping! Another sea shell discarded into the distance, this time with more energy than necessary.

Her anger caught me by surprise. We saw each other almost everyday, and I had never suspected that behind her somehow coquettish, ever joking, self-assured countenance, she carried that type of frustration. She had occasionally mentioned her intention of, one day, quitting her profession, but I had never realized that behind her sometimes flippant statements lay such a feeling of disenchantment. This was a side of her that I had never seen before: another case, I thought, of "what you see is not all there is". I told her so. She smiled.

_ I had never before seen your mother behind you either _she said_ but from now on, I will never again be able *not* to see her shadow walking behind you._

And my father's... I joked.

And your grandfather's, and your grandmother's, etc., etc., and the first primate's, the first mammal's, and so on, until the beginning of the universe she dutifully recited.

_Right on! _ I exclaimed, enthusiastically._ And you forgot the first atom! _ She waived back, with a smile. I was moved to see that now, in her smile, there was no scorn.

_You know what all this makes me think of? _she said, thoughtfully, shaking her head _It is as if each of us carried behind an invisible trail, something like the bright tail of a comet, I figure, that connects us with the beginning of everything...and in it, marching in the light, at the sound of the drums, like in Fellini's film *8 1/2*, everybody and everything which, as you said, has contributed to each of us being the way we are... _

_Yes, but remember that the trail is internal, it is *inside* each of us; it is part of our inner substance,

and it expands to contain the whole of the universe. And, just like with my blade of grass, if anything in the sequence that put it together would have been different, we would not be exactly what we are... Therefore, the whole universe (isn't it amazing?) had to be just the way it is, and not any other way, for you and I to be just the way we are. All the comet tails are intertwined, Adelaide: each of us carries the whole universe inside, in a different, unique mixture..._

God, what a feeling... Adelaide murmured.

We both remained silent after that, taking in the beauty of the evening: everything had turned pink and soft magenta. The few clouds in the sky swirled like plumes, their edges on fire with the remnants of sun light. The soft, lapping, layers of the incoming waves reflected the colors of the sky, and the wet sand continued the mimicking effect. We were surrounded, above and below, by a soft, delicate, palette of colors. The birds, quiet silhouettes against the mirror-like background, seemed to be, also, concentrated in the contemplation of the light. The ocean, as always, sang.

Slowly, the light dwindled, and it started getting chillier. After a while, Adelaide stirred and stood up.

We she said _are getting cold. We think it is time to start moving and get ourselves back home._

We? I asked, surprised. She turned her head to look behind herself. Then she looked back at me. I saw the spark on her eyes: she was playing again.

_I, _ she said _and all those who are in *my* soup, in the invisible comet tail that connects me with the rest of the universe, would like to go home. It's getting cold. What about a hot cup of tea?

It seems like a good idea: we are cold too I replied _Let's go_ I got up, brushing the sand off my slacks. Adelaide came towards me, and smiling, put her arm around my shoulder. She looked behind her, again, and then proceeded to carefully peek over my shoulder. Then, turning to look back at me with a big grin on her face, she asked, innocently _Do you think that we have enough tea at home for everybody?

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¹ Andrew Louth, The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: from Plato to Denys, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981), p. 13