

# In the Museum Called Reality

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You stroll through a museum.

Many rooms, many paintings.

You come upon a large landscape. Fields, cottages, hills, valleys, mountains rising in the background.

While other people move past it with a glance, you walk closer.

It's lovely.

There, in the lower left-hand corner, you see the beginning of a narrow trail among a stand of pines. You wish you could...

A man is suddenly standing next to you. He's smiling.

"Go ahead," he says. "You can do it."

Absurd. And yet...

You wonder.

"All it takes is conviction," he says.

You look closer at that trail. Beyond the trees, there is a small cabin. It's perfect.

And then...you're walking along the trail. You can feel the soft earth under your shoes. You can smell the pines.

You walk faster, and in a few minutes you arrive at the cabin.

The door is ajar.

You enter.

One room. A bed, a small table, a chair, a fireplace.

On the mantle, there is a book bound in cracked leather. You walk over, pick it up, and open it.

You see drawings of a city. Crowded streets, people sitting in sidewalk cafes, cars, tall buildings. You can hear the noise on the streets.

It's the kind of city you'd like to visit. There you would be free, unattached. You would walk and live as an unknown person. You would be a stranger, but no one would know that.

The cabin is gone. You're exiting a ground-floor apartment in the city. You're emerging on to a street with a briefcase in your hand.

You open the briefcase. In it are several file folders.

You see a sheaf of papers. They seem to be a report. The name of the author...you sense it's your name.

You have a job. You think about it for a few seconds, and you realize you know where your office is. It's up the street and over three blocks.

Suddenly, you're sitting in that office. You look out the window. You're a dozen floors above the street.

A woman walks in and sets down a cup of coffee on your desk.

She lays a key next to the coffee.

"This is the one you wanted," she says. "I did a little research and found out it used to be a freight elevator."

She walks out.

You pick up the key and examine it. It's made of gray metal.

There is a circle inscribed in it, and inside the circle is a square.

You stand up and walk out of the office, along a corridor, and through an exit. There on your left is a large set of double doors.

You insert the key into a hole and the doors open. You step in.

The doors close and you feel the elevator descend.

After a minute, it stops and opens. You step out. The doors close behind you.

You're standing in a small room. On the walls, you see drawings and inscriptions, pictographs. Maps. Labyrinths. You see five, six, and eight-pointed stars. Animals. Circles containing squares. Other geometric figures. Numbers. Faces.

You turn back to the elevator. You look but you can't find a place to insert the key. You try to pry the doors apart, but they won't budge.

...Now, you feel as if you've been standing in that room for a very long time. You have memories of trying to decipher the drawings on the walls. You have memories of having almost succeeded, only to be stymied.

It seems you have a long history of having tried to decode secrets.

A man is standing next to you. He's smiling. His face is familiar.

"I only encouraged you," he says. "I'm no magician. I just gave you a little push. You supplied the conviction. That's the main thing you have to understand."

What does he mean?

A vague memory becomes sharper.

You were walking, a long time ago, in a museum. Yes.

And then you entered...something. And now you're here.

Without thinking, you say, "There's a rule against being bigger."

He nods as if he understands perfectly.

"If I were to exit this place, this whole place," you say, "I would be bigger. That's not permitted. It's a sign of..."

"Excessive pride," he says.

"Yes," you say.

"It indicates you're trying to become 'better than everyone else'. Which is a criminal offense."

You think about his words. They spell out a rule, but who made the rule?

"Everybody who is here," you say, "is smaller than they want to be?"

He smiles again. "That depends on what you mean by '*want*.'"

You repeat, "In this place, 'bigger' means 'criminal.' But who decided that?"

Then you realize you had a chain wrapped around your neck.

You reach up, and you can feel where the chain was. There is still an ache there.

The man is waiting. He's looking at you.

"Why are you doing this?" you say.

"Doing what?"

He shakes his head.

He slowly fades out.

He was some kind of artifact. He was a construct that appeared out of your own voice and your own thoughts.

You made him.

You made him out of the scent of pines trees and the sound of water running through the forest and clouds and a desire whose substance you can't quite fathom.

You sense you are betraying other people. That thought is made out of an old obsession to be like everyone else.

The obsession can become a life, a holy crusade.

But, you realize, it's not your life or your crusade.

There is a soft explosion just behind your head.

You feel an impulse that is going to lift you off the floor.

And then...

You're back in the museum.

You're standing in front of the painting of the pine trees and the trail and the cabin and the fields and the mountains and the sky.

You're trembling with relief.

A museum guard steps over to you.

"Are you all right, sir?" he says.

"Yes," you say. "Yes, I'm fine."

He nods.

You look into his eyes, and you see the small room just

outside the elevator. That room is inside him.

"How about you?" you say.

His face flushes.

"Have a nice day," he says.

"You, too."

He starts to turn away, but then he doesn't.

"Do you come to the museum often?" he says.

"I like the paintings," you say. "I'm here several times a week. It's a fine place."

"Yes," he says. "It is. I've wanted this job for a long time."

"Why?"

"I'm protecting something important. I watch the people moving through the rooms and looking at the paintings. I watch them walk into the paintings..."

You nod.

He strolls away.

You continue to walk through the museum.

There are many paintings. Many entrances.

How many people are living inside those paintings? How many ever get out?