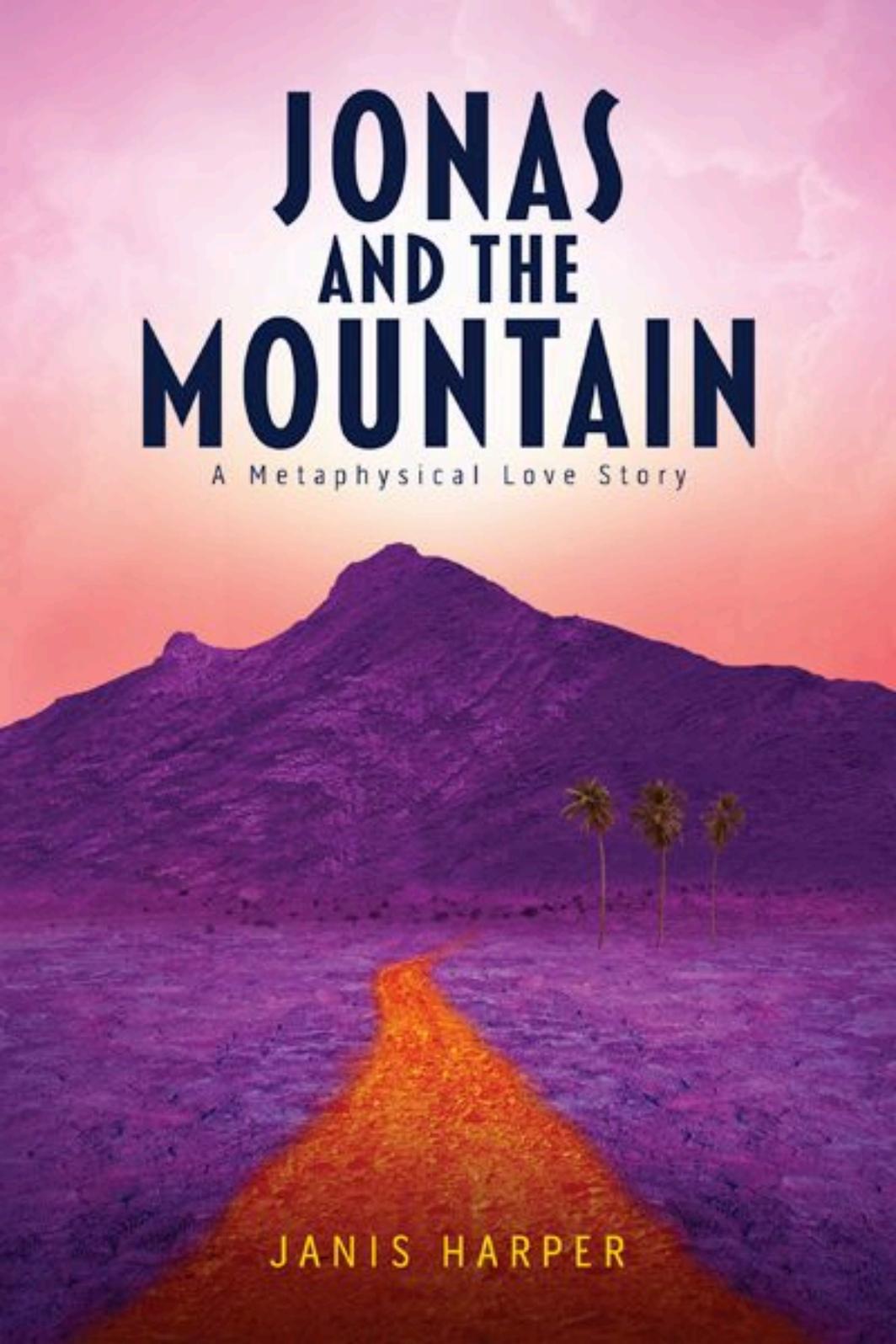


JONAS AND THE MOUNTAIN

A Metaphysical Love Story



JANIS HARPER

Excerpt - Not for Resale

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Jonas and the Mountain: A Metaphysical Love Story

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We are always seeking ourselves.

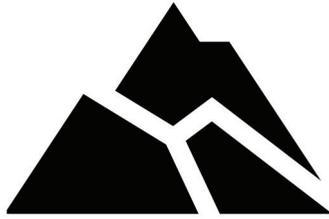
— Anamika

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I: THE MOUNTAIN

(Earth)



*A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora*

— *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from “Kubla Khan”*

CHAPTER 1

Either the world exists, or it doesn't. Jonas drops into meditation easily, like a pebble into a deep pool falling down, down into the quiet dark. The light flickering of thoughts occasionally nudge at the edge of his consciousness, but mostly there is silence. Stillness. Nothing.

A deep breath expands his lungs, and he feels the welcome peace fill him, palpable, soft. And although he doesn't think this, because he isn't thinking, it feels like pure relief. Or maybe he is aware of the feeling when those flickers of thoughts filter down like wavering ribbons of light from the surface into the depth of his still pool. Relief. One flicker. The awareness of the slowing down of breath. Another flicker.

Either there is something out there, or it's all in here and reflected out there. The world mirroring our own inner landscape, allowing us to meet what we need to. The world as symbol, metaphor, always personally meaningful if you can see it, if you can understand, interpret the symbols.

This is what Jonas's post-graduate English degree in literary criticism was good for. He was adept at interpretation. He could apply the same skills he learned to analyze metaphor, symbol, plot, theme, and structure in literary fiction to his own life, another kind of fiction. What is the overarching theme? Main conflict? Important metaphors? Repeating symbols?

In life as in literature, repetition is very important, a big clue, pointing to issues that are uniquely yours. Repetition can indicate theme, and theme gives a life shape, separates it from others, creates individuality, or at least the illusion of it.

What's the theme of Jonas's life? The major theme? For a period of three years, the theme seemed to be betrayal. Betrayed by his wife of ten years, by the college he gave seven years of his life to as a sessional instructor, by his best friend. Everything fell apart, one after another in close succession, like a line of dominoes falling down. No, dominoes don't create a sturdy structure, and Jonas's life used to feel sturdy. Maybe it was more like an earthquake that shook a house down to shambles on the ground. Or a tornado that swept it up in its vortex, bits and pieces of staircase, table legs, and light fixtures flying around.

Nothing he did for a few years was right. His whole world looked wrong; he was wrong. Obviously, "the universe" was banging him on the head, trying to get his attention. No, wrong way! Stop! But it wasn't until he had nothing, not until his life was unrecognizable, that he finally stopped fighting for himself (or was he fighting *with* himself?) and heeded the call.

He never asked himself, "Why me?" People who did that seemed to not understand something fundamental, that being what you imagine to be "a good person" doesn't mean you aren't going to experience bad things. And why would you not want to experience it all? The whole life show, including the ugly parts? Why would you think you should be exempt from a whole realm of experience just because it doesn't feel good? Maybe there are some people who do feel like they're better than others. Maybe they are the ones who ask, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this?"

Or maybe there are those who naively believe that if they're being as good as they know how to be, nothing bad will happen. Cause and effect. Karma. Of course, Jonas didn't "deserve" it, any of it. He was the victim, any way you cut it. And there's another strange thing: why people believe that some people deserve what they get and others don't. You often hear this kind of thing said about

murder victims: “She didn’t deserve to die.” What does that even mean? Anyhow. “Why not me?” is the better question.

Falling apart is common enough in literature. It’s almost a requirement. And more often than not it precedes greater personal awareness, a never-before-imagined perspective, a setting out on a new path toward a new world. Jonas could see those possibilities after the fact, a long time after. At the time, he could barely see a thing; he just concentrated on getting through each day, which took all of his attention and effort. But that’s how stories end: crisis is reached, conflict is resolved, denouement occurs, and the protagonist walks away changed, into a new, better life.

So, did he have to go through all that to get here? Where is here?

Sitting with thirty other people at the feet of his guru, D, in the open-air meditation hall in an ashram at the foot of a holy mountain in India. And obviously not meditating anymore. His dark still pool is now all lit up by these thoughts. Just let them go, Jonas. It’s okay. Be here now. He breathes in “here,” he breathes out “now.”

Jonas drops again into the deep, dark pool. He feels his body relax, his shoulders fall, his stomach muscles unclench, his breath slow. Relief. Here comes the soft peace.

CHAPTER 2

Two months before Jonas found himself in India, something unusual occurred. Sunk deeply into a familiar stagnant pool of limiting thoughts, he came up for air and heard himself crying out, Where do I go from here? And an answer came.

Where are you now?

The voice seemed to come from somewhere, but he couldn't determine the location. Was it outside his body, over there to the left? Or inside of him somehow. In thin, ringing tones he both heard and saw the words, each one turning into a balloon, disappearing in a moment and filled with that sound.

The ringing echoed in his head. Where am I now? What a question. Then Jonas knew the answer:

I am here.

That felt right. Here. He was just here. It was enough. He wasn't anywhere ugly; he wasn't on the brink of desperation; he wasn't stuck between a rock and a hard place. He had thought he was there, but he wasn't. He was just here.

Jonas felt something loosen inside. It was as if he had tightened the strings on his guitar too much but didn't know it, and now they were loosened. They could make sounds. He could hear the voice again, less thin this time, fuller, sweeter, a chord. Maybe A. Or D.

I am here too.

Jonas knew that if he thought too much about what was happening that he would get in the way of it. He felt an opening, the size and shape of an almond, and it started to vibrate. He knew somehow that there was a kind of backlog occurring, something—words? sounds? images?—was piling up. Jonas heard a popping sound, and felt himself recede.

*Great galleons cross faraway oceans
to bring untold treasure and delicacies
to those gathered around bonfires
outside the caves that are their homes.
Time is measured by the motions
of currents and wind and moon.
Moods allow for rhythms of feeling
that synchronize with the wonders of nature.*

*Why has this boat come in?
There is little on it.
Where are the provisions, the food?
This one is not bringing in but carrying away,
and there are some who may choose
to leave on this boat
and take it to a far-off shore
undreamed of in the measured moments
and pungent air in the caves.*

CHAPTER 3

Anna was eleven years old when she started having nightmares—or “night terrors” as she overheard her mother whisper in her “concerned” voice to Auntie Joy on the telephone. They weren’t just bad dreams with scary people in them chasing her. *Those* were bad dreams, or maybe even nightmares. “Night terrors” might just be the right term. They were terrifying, but not in a movie way, not like a horror movie-nightmare.

Anna was so afraid of having these “dreams” that before she went to sleep, she put out her colored felt pens and paper and asked her mom to tell her to draw a picture the next time they came. She knew she’d need help to get her out of her scary place and back to normal. Her mother had been bringing Anna to the living room to look out the window at the city lights of Vancouver as a way to get her out of it. But it didn’t help. The darkness, the squares and pinpoints of light from the buildings across English Bay, out the huge window...all that kept her in her scary place. Even with her mom by her side, saying gentle things to her and putting her arm around her, Anna didn’t come back to her “normal” self. She just heard her own voice coming from far away, through a long tunnel.

“God. Oh my God. Oh my God.”

Anna tried to describe her night terrors one day to her mother, but could only say stupid-sounding stuff like, “It’s like there’s this one black hair, and it’s at a

normal distance away from me, then suddenly it's huge right in my face, then it's going back back back and it keeps going back, and the empty place where it was is huge in my face, but it's still back and there's no end."

Anna was not in time and space. She was not in her body. Dimensions appeared and disappeared. She glimpsed infinity. And when she did, of course it was too immense, too huge for her perceptive faculties. Waking up didn't take her out of it because it wasn't really a sleep-dream state. And she was overwhelmed because she didn't know what was happening to her—and that was the most frightening part.

In biological terms, Anna's pineal gland was opening. In Western science, which still finds the pineal gland mysterious, it supposedly regulates sleep-wake patterns and reproductive hormones. Rene Descartes called the pineal gland "the seat of the soul," and in many philosophies it is considered a portal to the spiritual world, a physiological "third eye." The opening of the pineal gland isn't uncommon in adolescence, and is often the precursor to creative pursuits, the flaring up of artistic passions. And in Anna's case, it was a creative time indeed: she was bridging worlds. She came tumbling through the portal. Her third eye opened wide and didn't blink. It was as if she were on top of a mountain and could see the entire lay of the land, everything, stretching out every which way she looked.

But it was also as if she were being given something that was almost too much for a person, for anyone with a body—much less a skinny little-girl body with long brown braids that curled at the ends and dark almond eyes that crunched up into crescent moons when she smiled. How can anyone experience such ineffable enormity, such expansiveness, such powerful creative energy; how can anyone see through transparencies in reality and into other dimensions just as real, and still be able to walk and talk and eat soda crackers with butter and play kick-the-can with the kids down the block?

It can be done. Anna did it. But as she grew through some very rocky teenage years into an adult, she was always aware that she was merely keeping

up appearances. She'd inherited her mother's talent as an actress to mimic other people—more than mimic, to understand their motivation, why they said and did what they said and did. So she acted as if she were in the same play they were in. She was good: she could tell in an instant what part someone was playing and what part she should play in response. And she could play with the best of them—because she knew the range of motivations and emotions and which were appropriate for which scene and cast. She was good with language, too. (She had also inherited that from her mother, who had taught high school English after her acting career ended.) No one suspected a thing.

Anna the 25-year-old had several friends, a casual boyfriend, a job tending bar at a local watering hole, and the occasional role in a community theater production. She still had long brown hair, loose now and curly, and crunchy eyes. And she knew everything. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt all of the answers to all of the big questions, all of the “whys” and even some of the “hows.” She just didn't know what to do with all of it. So she hid it. She wanted to be liked, after all. She had inherited that from her mother too.

And it was so hard to express, for another thing. It was so different at its very roots from what others were saying. She had tried college for two years, and read eagerly, trying to find what she knew in literature, philosophy, science, psychology, religious studies. Anna was an excellent student and asked many good questions. She certainly *looked* like she was on an academic path. She then turned to the mystical and heretical, the metaphysical, the spiritual, the paranormal. Her friends saw the books on her coffee table. She certainly *looked* like she was on a spiritual, maybe even “new age-y,” path. And she did find bits and pieces of what she knew to be true in various places: Eastern spirituality, Western mysticism, ancient Greek philosophy, neuroscience, quantum mechanics, metaphysics, channeling.

For Anna wasn't on any kind of path. She was retracing her steps, doing it backwards. As much as it looked that way to others, Anna was not looking for the truth. She already knew it, of course. She was looking for some discipline, some

system, someone *else* to have come up with it, too. For how could she continue to live a life faking it all the time? She wanted to belong to a community—or, at least, she needed a way to be herself in the world. Being able to point to something else and say, yes, I'm that too, would be nice and normal. She'd have someone to really talk to. She began to envy religious people and political activists.

Sometimes she thought she would explode with all that she had to keep inside of her. So, occasionally, 25-year-old Anna would experiment, usually when she was having a drink or three after her shift at the bar was over: she consciously, albeit tipsily, fell out of character and told the truth when she was asked her opinion. And the results were usually disastrous. People got very angry. She occasionally tried this sober, too, in serious settings with open-minded, intelligent people. Same results.

So Anna took a different route. One day, she simply receded from the world. She all but disappeared from the face of it.

And this is how Anna, the little girl who sat in the dark with her mother on a living room couch, looking out at the city lights of Vancouver and uttering “Oh my God,” became Anamika, the nameless one. And how she came to appear at the holy mountain of Arunachala in the state of Tamil Nadu, in the land of India.

CHAPTER 4

Jonas came out of what could be called a “trance,” and shook himself. He grabbed the nearest pen and wrote down the words that he...heard? Felt? Saw? They seemed to form a kind of poem, though he’s pretty sure no one in academia or in the literary community would call it one. He wasn’t sure what to make of it, but there was something about it that he liked, some quality. What are *galleons*? He looked up the word. Wikipedia said, “A galleon was a large, multi-decked sailing ship used primarily by European states from the 16th to 18th centuries.” That was it, the quality: it had an “old” feel, 18th century-ish maybe. Jonas himself would never use words like *delicacies* or *untold*. And the people in the caves? The boat is for *carrying away*, leaving for unknown shores, not for providing sustenance to the cave-dwellers, not toward maintaining a lifestyle. Interesting.

Measured moments. He liked that. *Time is measured by the motions / of currents and wind and moon.* There was some sense there. Perhaps time isn’t a real thing or whatever in itself, but only a measurement we make. In the case of the poem that arrived, it is nature that dictates time, the movement of ocean currents and the moon and the way the wind blows. Or we use nature’s movements as a measurement, a way of ordering our day-to-day lives. There is night and day, after all. And seasons. But maybe those are not passages of time until we make it so.

The more Jonas studied this “poem” that came out of him without him knowing, the more excited he got. It was a different kind of excitement than he felt when he discovered a new way of looking at a poem in a literary analysis course. His body was actually tingling. But his mind seemed calm. What just happened, anyway? Of course, having studied English literature at university, the first person he thought of was Coleridge and the much-discussed way he wrote his famous “Kubla Khan” poem, one of his best. In Coleridge’s own words,

The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved.

In university, Jonas always attributed Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” to the painkiller he’d taken before a nap. But obviously he hadn’t thought about it much. Drugs usually don’t enhance creativity, but stifle it. He knows that now. He knows that well, after taking whatever pain-numbing kind of drug he could get his hands on after Carla left him, then adding amphetamines when he had to get back to a regular teaching schedule. And he wasn’t even trying to be artistically creative. The drugs seemed to wear away his very neural fibers so that just preparing his academic writing class felt like slogging through waist-deep mud.

You don’t get this from drugs. Jonas knew the lingo, too: “automatic writing,” even “channeling.” But he didn’t want to think about that now. He felt good.

Excited. Alive. Curious. Could it happen again? And what should he do with this poem thing?

Why has this boat come in?

.....

and take it to a far-off shore

undreamed of in the measured moments

and pungent air in the caves



Jonas didn't really know why he was going to India, except that a friend was going and invited him along. Since he was growing tired of his job at the print shop and was feeling that a daily change in his life was on the horizon, to match the inner changes he was experiencing, he said yes. Why not? He had enough money saved and India was cheap. Besides, he hadn't traveled since he and Carla took a trip to a resort in Puerto Vallarta, which was the beginning of the end of their marriage.

Jonas didn't know what to do with these inner changes. He had had several more "experiences" where something shifted inside of him, he backed off (it was indeed almost like taking a nap!), and the next thing he knew there were these images rising up and he felt corresponding words toppling out of the images, sometimes slowly, other times rushing up like a fountain. Now he always had a pen or keyboard handy to take dictation. That's what it felt like: taking dictation. Often his eyes were closed, and he didn't know what was going on until after, when he read the words written.

But he hadn't heard that voice again, that other voice that seemed to talk directly to him and asked him where he was. And he didn't want to address the "poem-giver," ask him or her (or it?) questions. He was scared of the response. He didn't want to be a channeler, didn't want to be thrown into a strange new world. What would happen next? People would want things from him, want to

hear what the poem-giver said. He would be labeled a “psychic,” a “medium,” a “channeler.” He knew about famous channelers who looked weird and spoke in strange voices when they were doing their thing. It polarized people, divided them into camps of skeptics and believers.

Jonas wanted a quiet life. He didn’t want to have to defend himself. He had enough of his own problems, thank you very much. He liked these apocryphal poems, though. They interested him, and made him feel something. Different. Special. Like there was indeed more to life. But he didn’t tell anyone about them. Except Bruce.

Jonas’s travel companion was a fellow worker at Kinko’s. Bruce never went to university but read voraciously, and often over a print job when it was just the two of them working overtime Jonas and Bruce would have long conversations about what Bruce was currently reading. Jonas admired and envied Bruce’s *joie de vivre*. He was Jonas’s age, mid-thirties, and had spent his life seemingly enjoying himself—working happily at various joe jobs while traveling intermittently to hot countries, surfing, climbing, and having casual relationships with hot women. He had an innocence and enthusiasm about life, and believed in everything. He was lucky, too. He hadn’t experienced the dark side like Jonas had. Bruce was also Jonas’s physical opposite—a perpetually tanned, blond, muscular, square-jawed, Greek-god type, a contrast to Jonas’s serious academic-nerd look: tall, pale, and skinny, with a long face under a mop of unruly dark hair. People think he’s Jewish, but he’s not.

Lately, Bruce had been on a serious spiritual kick, learning to meditate and chant, and reading about Buddhism and, more recently, Hinduism. Jonas could contribute to the conversation because he had taken a couple of courses in Eastern Religious Studies at university, and did some yoga and even meditated sometimes. Bruce had read some of the *Bhagavadgita* and various books about eastern mysticism and philosophy, like *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. After he read a book from the 1930s, *A Search in Secret India*, by Paul Brunton, he got especially interested in Advaita Vedanta philosophy, or

non-dualism, and a prominent Indian sage who died in 1950 named Sri Ramana Maharshi who had lived in a cave on the side of a mountain for a couple of decades. As far as he knew, lots of people (and animals and insects!) were drawn to this quiet man who just liked to be alone and meditate in his cave. So when things got too busy and his group of followers got too large, he moved to another cave. Now there's a whole school of thought and teachings and a "lineage" of guru-disciples originating with Ramana, and he's considered to be one of India's greatest sages of all time. A real master.

Ramana's own guru was the mountain in whose caves he lived. Mt. Arunachala is supposedly a very special holy mountain in India. Jonas didn't understand a lot about this place. For instance, how can a mountain be a guru? And what's so special about this mountain that it draws all manner of spiritual seekers and gurus and sages from all over the world? And apparently it always has. The mountain is said to be the god Shiva incarnated. But in Jonas's knowledge of India, Shiva seemed to be incarnated everywhere. It's also called the "magnet mountain" because it draws people to it, and many find it difficult to leave. And it's supposed to be filled with iron ore.

Well, Jonas would soon find out for himself, because Mt. Arunachala is where he and Bruce were headed.



The cab ride to Tiruvannamalai from Chennai was four long, hard hours, and Jonas was still suffering from the two-day air travel from Vancouver through London and Delhi to Chennai, in Tamil Nadu, India's large southeastern state. And then, upon arriving, the shock of it all: the incessant heat, the swarms of people, the filth, the smelliness, the cacophony of honking horns. It's true what they say: India is an endless assault on the senses.

Tiruvannamalai, or "Tiru" for short, looked like all the other dusty, dirty towns they'd driven through on the way to get here: cows, dogs, oxen, motorbikes,

cars, rickshaws—and people—all weaving around each other on narrow garbage-strewn streets lined with tiny store fronts and food stalls. The difference in Tiru is that, in addition to the hundreds of Indians—women in brightly colored saris and men in plain lunghis—there were many white people walking around, dressed in traditional Indian clothes and riding motorbikes and bicycles. And another difference was the number of old Indian men draped in bright orange cloth, with long grey beards and knotted dreadlocky hair. “Sadhus, holy men,” their cab driver said.

After Jonas and Bruce found a room in a travelers hotel, Mountain View Towers (apparently there were cost-free rooms at Ravana’s ashram, but they were too tired to look into staying there), Jonas left Bruce napping in their room, and hiked up the four flights of stairs to the rooftop, where there was an open-air restaurant with cushions for seats and low tables on the cement floor. Jonas plunked himself down cross-legged on a cushion, grateful to be out of the car and sitting in a different position.

And there was the view, as advertised. Mt. Arunachala sat there, a nondescript lumpy red-brown hill, with some scrub on it and patches of rock. But as Jonas gazed up at it, wondering at its ordinariness, the tail end of his spine began to hurt. No wonder, he thought, my tailbone is aching after hours in the bumpy cab. But the sensation was different than an ache: it felt like there was a heavy weight in it. Sometimes after yoga when he was sitting and trying to meditate, he felt like this, like all of his body’s energy was settling into his base chakra. Jonas’s lower spine seemed to extend past his body and down down down into the earth, like the roots of a tree. He felt he would never move again; he was rooted to this spot. And that was somehow perfectly fine. He didn’t want to go anywhere. More than that, he had no desire for anything. His tiredness vanished—all he was aware of was the deep, heavy sensation at the root of his body. And a feeling of immensity. And peacefulness. Immense peace. He is here. After all.

END OF EXCERPT

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