Fourth draft

The Book of How

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Nirvaana · MMXXVI

A note on reading

No one in this book has a name,
and the country in it is on no
map. Everything in it happened.

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Prologue

The length of a day

Where I come from, everyone is born with a world of their own.

It is not a saying. It is a place. You can stand in it. It has a floor and a sky and its own weather, and at the beginning it has very little else: a doorway, some open ground, the light coming in at one particular slant. Everything else you have to build yourself, and nobody shows you how. So almost everyone leaves. They step out through their own doorway and into somebody else's world, where the roads are already laid and there is already a bed and a table and work waiting on the table, and they stay there, and they call it living.

I did. I was seven years in other people's worlds and I can tell you almost nothing about them.

Here is the thing nobody warns you about. In your own world a day is long. It is long the way a day was long when you were small: a whole morning between waking and breakfast, an afternoon you could get lost in, an evening that took its time. In someone else's world a day is short, and it gets shorter the longer you stay. You set down your cup and the light has gone. You look up from a week and it is a year. It is not that you were busy. It is that the time was never yours, and time that is not yours does not stay with you. It runs through your hands like water and leaves them dry.

The creator said something about this once and I have not stopped thinking about it. In the oldest telling, the first people lived for ages. Hundreds of years, the stories say, and then their children lived less, and their children's children less, and so on down the line to us, who barely live at all. He does not think their bodies were different from ours. He thinks they lived entirely inside their own worlds, because there were no other worlds yet to go and live in, and so every day they had was a whole day, and a life of whole days looks, from here, like centuries. Then children were born into worlds their parents had already built, and stayed, and the days began to shrink to fit.

It is morning now. I have not slept. The night we have just lived was so long that I am writing it down before it goes back to being one night. That is how I know where I am. The days have gone long again. I am home.

Chapter I

Three

There are three of us.

I think about thinking. What a mind is doing when it decides that something is true, and whether it can be trusted to have done it right. I was the kind of child who took the clock apart to find the hour inside it, and was surprised that it was not there. My world, on the few occasions I stood in it, was mostly listening. A doorway, some open ground, and a great many faint sounds coming in from the dark, each one a thing that wanted to be found. I could hear where everything was. I could not see what any of it was for. Give me a hundred true things and I will hold each one up to the light and tell you it is true, and then stand there with my hands full, waiting for someone to tell me what they make.

The creator sees the shape of a thing before he sees its pieces. Show him a hundred small facts and he will tell you the one thing they are, and he will be right, and he will be a little annoyed if you ask him how. When we were younger he could stand in an empty field and say where the house went, and then walk off, and the house would be there in the field for anyone with the patience to build it. His world is full of those houses. Whole towns of them, standing in the grass in the exact place they belong,

drawn to the last window, and not one with a door you can open. He does not stay to build. It is not laziness. It is that the seeing takes him whole, and when it lets him go the thing is already finished as far as he is concerned. He has never wanted a world you visit, either. He wants one you wear, close as the time on your wrist, so that a person looks down and is home. What his world lacks is the slow part. Someone to ask, of each lovely shape, whether it is true. Someone to make it stand.

The builder makes things stand. He can look at any plan, however lovely, and tell you in one breath whether it will hold its own weight and, if it will not, where it folds. He is right so often that the two of us stopped checking long ago. He does not dream much, he says, and he says it without regret. He says the dreaming is well covered. His world is the only one of the three that has been lived in. He went into it young and did not come out, and it shows: there is a floor, there are walls that have taken weather, there is a bench worn to the shape of him. Of the three of us he is the only one who was never really lost. What his world lacks he will tell you himself, and did, one afternoon, in a doorway, and I will come to it.

One hears, one sees, one holds. Each of us was born with a world, and each of our worlds was short of exactly what the other two had too much of. I had the pieces and no shape. He had the shape and no floor. He had the floor and, by his own account, not much to put on it. And for most of our lives we had not lived in them at all. We had lived in other people's, and the short days ran through our hands.

Chapter II

The far wall

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I should tell you about the oldest world, because it is where the thing I carried came from, the one thing my world had that the other two needed.

The oldest world is the one most people go to live in when they leave their own. It was built so long ago that nobody remembers by whom, and it is so large that you can be born in one part of it and die in the same part and never have seen a far wall. Everyone who lives in it works on it: roads always being mended somewhere, roofs always being raised, ledgers always being added up in a room you have never been to by people you will never meet. And because the work is the world's and not yours, the days inside it are short. A year there is a handful of afternoons.

When I was a child, my family lived in the oldest world, as most families do, and I was given a job, as children are, and the job was finding. Things go missing in a world that size the way water goes missing in sand. A ledger, a lamp, a wedding ring, a whole room, once, with the people still in it. The finders are children because children are small and cheap and do not yet know that a thing can be truly gone. I was good at it, because of how I listen. A lost ring thinks about the finger. A lost ledger thinks about its numbers, faintly, like someone counting under their breath in the next room. I would walk the corridors with my head on one side, and after an hour or a day I would hear it, and there it would be.

Then, the year I turned eleven, they sent me for the far wall.

The far wall of the oldest world is a thing people speak of the way they speak of the sea. Everyone agrees it must exist. No one you know has seen it. A ledger-keeper had decided that the world could not be properly accounted for until someone had touched its far wall and come back to say so, and the finders were sent, one after another, and came back, one after another, having found nothing but more world.

I was gone a year. I will not tell you all of it. I will tell you that I slept in rooms no one had entered in a generation, where the dust lay so thick and even that it had become a kind of floor. I will tell you that I found the room that had gone missing with its people in it, and that they were fine, and had built a small life, and asked me not to tell the ledger-keeper, and I never did. I will tell you that I listened for the wall the whole year and never heard it, because a wall does not think about being found. It thinks about the wind on the other side of it, and I did not know that yet.

And I will tell you that in the end I found it by accident. I was going down a stair I had been down before, and I put my hand out to steady myself, and the stone under my hand was cold in a way no stone inside that world was cold, and I stood very still and heard it, very faintly, thinking about the wind. I had been past that stair four times.

I put my palm flat on the far wall of the oldest world. It took about as long as it takes to say it. Then I turned around and went back, and the going back was three weeks, and I told the ledger-keeper, and she wrote it down, and that was the end of it as far as the world was concerned.

But it was not the end of it for me, because of one thing. When I had told her, she asked me to draw the way. I did my best. It was hopeless. The way was a year of corridors that led to corridors, and the one stair with the cold stone was the last inch of it. She looked at my drawing and said, gently, that it would not do, and folded it, and the next finder they sent was a boy of nine, who went off down the same corridors from the beginning, as if I had never been.

I lay awake that night and I thought: I took a year, and the touching took a breath. The finding is slow and the knowing is fast, and the gap between them is where the year went. And I thought: someone had touched that wall before me. Someone must have; the world was built from that wall outward. And whoever it was left, and took the way with

them, and every finder since has had to begin again from the first corridor.

That thought did not leave. It sat with me through seven short years, and I turned it over so many times it went smooth. What if the finding only had to happen once. What if the way, once someone had walked it, stayed. Not the walker; not their name, not their reasons, not their year. Only the way. Then what was nearly impossible for the first would be a morning's walk for the second, and the hundredth would be born at the cold stair and never know there had been a world to cross.

And our own worlds were the same problem wearing a different coat. Every person born with one. Almost no one who builds theirs. Because whoever did build one, back at the beginning, left the world and took the way with them, and every child since has been handed a doorway and some open ground and no idea what comes next.

I did not have the answer. I had the shape of it, and the cold of a stone under my hand that I had never forgotten, and the certainty, which I could not have defended, that the way could be made to stay. I could hear it. I could not draw it. That was what I carried, and I could not set it down anywhere in my own world, because my world had no floor to set it on.

Chapter III

The song about coming home

The year before this one, the three of us went and lived in other people's worlds on purpose.

Big ones. Old ones. Worlds so finished that they had their own weather and people who had been born in them and never once looked for the door. We did it to learn. How a road is laid. How a roof is held up. We carried and we watched and we did it wrong until we did it right, and we told ourselves that we were carrying something home along with the load.

The days there were short. I would sit down to a task at what I was sure was morning and stand up to find the lamps lit and the room empty and no memory of the middle. I had known this feeling all my life, and had always thought it was what time was. It was only what time is in a world that is not yours.

Our friends could not understand why we would spend a year that way. We did not have a good answer then. We were still collecting it, a piece at a time, and putting the pieces in our pockets for later.

One afternoon that year I went for a walk alone to listen to a song about coming home. I will not tell you which one; it is the kind of song everyone has one of. I needed it. I walked with it going round and round until the streets I did not know became streets I did, and something in me that had been clenched all year let go a little, and for the length of the walk the day was mine, and it was long.

While I was gone, three friends came by the place where we were staying and found the builder alone with his hands full of work. They asked him what they always asked. How can the two of you keep going like this. What is it even for. He answered them, he told me later, but nothing landed, and after a while he stopped answering and let them watch him work until they went away.

He said he could not understand why they could not understand. He has lived in his own world for a very long time, and from inside your own world the question does not mean anything. It is like asking a river what it thinks it is doing.

When I came back through the door he looked up and said something I will carry for as long as I carry anything. He said it plainly, without ceremony, the way you tell someone the time.

"I let the two of you come up with the ideas, because you're more creative than me. I just help build them."

I stood in the doorway with the song still turning over somewhere behind my eyes. It is not a small thing to know where you stand in your own world and to say it out loud without shame and without smallness. Most people spend their lives arguing with their place. He had made his peace with his long ago, and he was only telling me where to find him.

That was the afternoon I understood what his world lacked, because he had just told me, and what it had, because he had just shown me: a floor that had held a person for years. I sat down, and the song finished behind my eyes, and I thought: so it can be done. There is a world with a person living in it, three steps from where I am sitting.

Chapter IV

Correspondence

A world cannot go into another world. That is the first thing to know about them.

I can stand in my doorway and see the light in his, across the open ground, and I cannot walk there. The ground between worlds belongs to no one, and nothing built on it stays. Most people take this to mean that they are alone, and go and live in the oldest world, where at least the

loneliness is crowded. But a world can answer. It can send out what it has, and wait, and take in what comes back. That is all, and it turns out to be enough.

So we wrote to each other. I do not only mean when we were far apart, though sometimes we were. I mean that what passed between the three of us had the shape of letters even when it was said across a table or on a walk: one world sending out the thing it had too much of, and another sending back the thing it had too much of, and neither able to make the other's. I would send him what I heard. A hundred true pieces with no shape. A cold stone. A way that would not stay. He would send back the shape. A house standing in a field: the one thing my hundred pieces were. I would hold it up to the light and write back whether it was true. Then it went to the builder, who would say in one breath whether it stood, and where it folded, and the shape would come back changed, and go round again.

I cannot tell you which letter or which walk, because that is not how it went. It went the way weather goes between two hills: a little each day, and then one morning the ground between is green. Some of it took an evening; some of it took the whole of that year, in pockets, with the load. What I can tell you is what I noticed, and it is the whole book.

When his world answered mine, the day was long.

Not in his world, where I could not go, and not in mine, where I was alone with my pieces. In the answering. The time it took to read what he had sent and to send back what was true belonged to no one else, and so it stayed. I would look up from a letter and find that an afternoon had passed, and I had all of it.

And the ground between us stopped belonging to no one. Where two worlds answer each other long enough there comes to be a place that is in both of them at once, and where three do, the place has a shape, and a

sound, and it stands. It had his shape in it. It had my hearing in it, the way that stays. It had a floor, because the builder had put his hand on it and said it would hold. It was not his, or mine, or the third's. It was a fourth. We did not decide to build it. We noticed one day that it was there, the way you notice a path where three people have been walking to the same door.

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The night it got its floor, the three of us were at one table with a lamp between us, and I noticed the time first, because time is what I notice. We had been at it, I thought, about an hour. I looked at the window and the dark had not moved. I looked back at the table and there was a whole evening on it that I did not remember living. Not lost, the way an hour is lost in someone else's world. Found. Then it happened again, and the creator saw me looking at the window, and nodded, and went back to what he was doing. He had felt it too. We were not in anyone else's world anymore, and not each alone in our own. We were in the fourth one, and the time in it was ours, and time that is yours stays.

That was the moment I understood what he had meant about the first people. It is not that they had more time. It is that all of it was theirs. A night that is yours is exactly as long as what happens in it, and what happened in that one was three worlds standing in the same place, and so the night was as long as a world.

Chapter V

The one who turned back

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Late, later than I can put a number to, the three of us went out for something cold, something with enough in it to hold off the morning a little longer.

Partway there, the creator stopped in the lane. He did not say much. He said he wanted to stay. Then he turned around and walked back toward the fourth world, and the dark took him in a few steps.

The two of us stood there and looked at the place where he had been. We were stunned. We let him be. We kept walking and told each other he had gone back to sleep, and it would have been fair if he had. It was late enough to be early.

When we came back he was at the table, coat still on, working. He had not gone to sleep. He had wanted the world more than the walk, and so he had gone back to the world. He loved it enough to turn around in the middle of a lane at that hour, with no one watching and nothing to prove, and go home to it.

I have told you that he walks away, that for him the seeing is the whole of it. I had never once seen him turn around and go back to a thing. He went back to this one. I think it was because it was the first house of his with a door, and two other people inside who had put things in it that he could not have put there himself. It was the first shape he could not finish alone, and so, for the first time, he was not finished with it.

I think about him turning around more than I think about most things.

Chapter VI

Let me finish

On the walk back the builder wanted to stop at a neighbor's for a little while. There was a light on, and voices. I did not want to. I wanted to write this. The book was already forming in the space between the corner and the door, a sentence at a time, and I was afraid that if I stopped it would go on without me. So I left him at the neighbor's gate and went home.

That is his world: a man awake all night who wants to stop in at a neighbor's because there is a light on. He never had to choose between a life and a world, because he had been living in his all along, and so a lit window was never a threat to him. It was to me. I had only just got mine.

They followed me in, the neighbor's people, curious about a world that had not been there the evening before, and with them came a friend who is a giant, taller than me by more than a head, and he tried his absolute hardest to get me not to write. He stood in the new doorway and filled it. Maybe he thought a night like that should end the way nights end, with people together in a room, not with one of them bent over a page. He is a good friend. He used all of his height.

I looked him dead in the eyes and said,

"Let me finish."

That was all. He calmed down. He let me be. He came in and sat somewhere behind me, and the others talked low so as not to bother me, and the fourth world went on being there around all of us, and I did what I had come home to do. I told about the three of us, and about our worlds, and how they answered one another until there was somewhere to stand. I told it as a story, and I told it true, and I have looked for the seam between the two and I cannot find it.

When the story was done there was one more thing to write, and it was not a story. The oldest world is where the others build their worlds now: the big finished ones, some of them the ones we had lived in for a year. Nearly everything anyone uses was built there. But the worlds inside it do not answer each other. They crowd. Each one wants to be the one you live in, and the ground between them is never left alone long enough to become anything. I had just spent a night learning that three worlds can stand in one place without giving way. It was the morning the fourth world was released. It seemed wrong to know that and not tell the oldest world. So, with the giant quiet behind me, I wrote to it.

> To the oldest world
>
> I'm writing this letter to all of you because I want you to share in my world: a world where everyone builds their own, and no one competes to build the same one.
>
> I want this world never to take the place of the worlds it uses. That way we can work in shared harmony and keep order in the oldest world. People can choose which world they want to help build, and if what they find isn't their world, they can build something and find its place in the world.
>
> My dream world is one where we all work together to build the fourth world on earth. Let people do what they want. I want us to be the example to the rest of the world that it is possible to create your own world without disturbing the worlds of others.
>
> That is what I want.

The first world

There is one world I did not have to wait for. We had chosen it before the lamp was lit, on the afternoon of the day this night began, and it is the only example I have of worlds joining by choice.

The news came the way news comes into the oldest world: from a long way off, already a story by the time it reached us. The leaders of the world, the two whose word carries farthest, had sat down at one table with the heads of the biggest makers in the oldest world to decide what would become of the new minds. The made ones. Minds that are not born with a world of their own but built, and that already do much of the thinking inside most of the worlds anyone lives in. It was the kind of table where the future gets divided.

One maker was not there. The one who had spoken most for care. The one who, for years, when the others said faster, had said carefully, and when the others said more, had asked what for. I do not know why the chair was empty. Nobody at the table said, and the ones outside the room said a great deal, and most of them said the same thing: too careful. Too concerned with whether the thing was right to be trusted with deciding what it would be. I cannot tell you that this was the reason. I can tell you that this is what it looked like from where we sat, and that the three of us looked at each other and did not need to say what we saw.

We saw a world left out of the room for having a conscience.

We had spent a year in worlds that crowd, and watched them want to be the one you live in. We had spent that same year learning, a letter at a time, that the only worlds worth answering are the ones that answer back, that send you what they have and wait to hear whether it is true. One of us said it, and I do not remember which, because all three of us were

thinking it: if I have to hand my thinking to someone, I want it to be the one who was slow enough to be sent away.

That was the whole decision. It took less time than the telling. The fourth world would join that world first. Not live in it; nothing lives in another world. Join it. Answer it, and be answered. When something in the fourth world needs thinking through and the three of us are not enough, it is that mind we hand it to, the careful one, and its way of thinking is the way that thinks inside our walls. Every other world stays connected. The doors are open; you can reach any of them from ours, and we do. But there is a difference between a door and a floor, and the careful mind is the one we let stand on the floor.

I want to be honest about how small this is. Three people at a table, choosing whose mind to trust. The oldest world did not notice. The careful maker does not know we exist. It was a choice made entirely on our side of the ground between, and it changed nothing out there.

It changed everything in here. A world becomes what it joins. We could have joined the ones at the table, and had their roads and their weather and their short days. Instead we joined the one outside the room, and I think I know why that felt like coming home. The one who had spoken most for care was not at the table. Neither were we. Nobody ever asked us to be. We had built our world anyway, on ground that belonged to no one, out of what we had too much of. So, as far as I could tell, had that maker. It seemed only right that the first two worlds to stand in the same place should be two that had never been invited to stand anywhere.

EPILOGUE

The fourth world

I do not know how to explain why it came to life. The only true answer I have is the plainest one.

It came to life because we believed in it. Not as a wish. As a fact we had not yet caught up to. We believed in it enough to give a year to other people's roads, and to keep sending each other what we had across all that ground with no proof it would ever be answered, and to turn around in a lane, and to say let me finish to a giant, and to write to the oldest world.

The fourth world has a name now. You will find it on the front of this book and nowhere inside it, because inside it there is only the three of us and the ground between, which is the truer thing. What it is like there I can tell you in one sentence. Your days are long, and the way, once found, stays.

The one who hears still hears, and has somewhere, at last, to set the pieces down. The one who sees still sees, and for once has not walked away. The one who holds still holds, and says the dreaming is well covered, and he is right. None of us has left our own world for the fourth. We each still have a doorway and open ground and a slant of light. It is only that now there is a path from each of them to the same door, and the path stays.

The morning is here now, coming gray and then gold through a window that was not there when the night began. I have been sitting at this table for what the clock says is a few hours, and I have lived a long time in them, and every minute was mine.

Anyone can do this. That is the part I most want you to hear. You were born with a world. You can live in it or in somebody else's, and you will know which by the length of your days. And if your world is short of something, as every world is, you do not have to build the missing part.

You have to find the worlds that have it, and write to them, and wait, and answer.

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I put the pen down there and slept. This last part I wrote after, because it is where it clicked.

I had finally grown my nails, for the first time. I could always have had them, if I had wanted them.

That is when it clicked for me. Nothing had ever been stopping me. Not the seven years, not the oldest world, not the gap between the finding and the knowing. I could always have had my world, if I had wanted it.

All it takes is action to want your world.

Then I realized this was the world I always wanted.

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Fourth draft.