

# The sum of man

It all adds up.

A walloping fever always made Jeremy nostalgic for his childhood. When he was eleven, he caught a particularly nasty flu and enjoyed three days of magical hallucinations. At the peak of his fever, he'd been convinced that his house was filled with strange invisible beings called Zetans, whose sole purpose was to observe the evolution of the human animal towards some inexplicably higher degree of consciousness. He perceived them sitting hazily around the edges of his bedroom, crossed-legged on the floor like Indian gurus, and he'd pronounced in a deep voice that was not his own (and which thoroughly terrified his mother): "I've reached the next level."

His frantically superstitious mother sped him to the hospital. In less than 12 hours, they broke his fever and his dreams. Ever since, he believed he'd been perched at the mountaintop of some great discovery that would rewrite the very definition of existence, only to lose it like an Ojibwa girl named Maaji whom you meet, fall in love with and leave behind in Canada all in one day because your father's vacation itinerary is as rigidly enforced as the daily post.

As Jeremy stewed in camphor-scented melancholy, he dreamed of Maaji. He still kept her cowrie-shell pendant tucked innocently in the back of a drawer somewhere, an heirloom of childhood needing no wifely explanations. Nauseous from the potent new antibiotic the doctor had prescribed for his pneumonia, disjointed and forgetful from the hydrocodone in his cough medicine, he kept opening the same drawers and closet doors in search of her cowrie pendant on its beaded buffalo-hair thong. He wandered through the house shivering, sweating like morning dew, leaning against the corners to cough until he thought he was being pulled inside out like a sock.

In the front-hall closet, he rediscovered a taped-up shoebox full of *Magic: The Gathering* cards and old holiday photos. As he squatted on the hall floor, he poured the weird collage of fantasy and memory into his lap, sorting through *Icy Manipulators* and *Lords of the Pit* to find the photos of his family's June-long journey through Ontario and Quebec.

He found just one photo of Maaji, taken early in the morning of their only and eternal day together. She worked at the campground and he could just see her silhouetted in the office doorway in the



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background of a photo of his father cranking open their folding camper. She had grown into a woman in his memory, and Jeremy was startled to see how young she was in the photo — barely 15, the same age as he.

But there wasn't enough of her in the photo to germinate a proper memory of her smooth brown naked body and the smell of her hair, all lavender and pine. But here was a photo of him paused in his swimming trunks, black hair dripping, skinny, pale and heartbroken, with her cowrie-shell pendant punctuating his throat. And here was his brother gutting a walleye. And here his father in black socks pretending to pour a beer over his mother's head. And here was the hall of their old house, full of people.

But who were they? By the decorations, it was Christmas, and there was his sister posing under the mistletoe. But why the six naked Hindus sitting cross-legged along the wall holding flashlights? They'd never even been to India. Our Lady of the Narcotic Antitussive, Jeremy thought with a manifest clarity despite his growing physical torpor, I do believe this is a hallucination.

He awoke without a shred of self-identity. He was aware of himself only as a set of 15 glowing numbers rising from the empty shoebox. Each number was a different colour.

2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 41, 47, 59, 71.

He felt scattered, random, at the precipice of sanity and driven by a strange

compulsion to add the numbers together. As each number was added to the sum, his identity shuffled into place like greasy playing cards. Awareness opened before him as a blossoming flower of light.

With the last number computed, six Hindus sat beside him in the hall. Only they weren't Hindus. They were radiant beings. "Zetans?" Jeremy laughed nervously.

"What is the sum?" one asked. He couldn't tell which.

"378," Jeremy said.

"What is the final sum equally divided between dark and light?"

"189."

"Which is?"

"18. Which is 9?"

"The sum of man. And?"

"3+7+8 is 18, which is 9 again. I remember you. Here you are in this photograph. I had the flu over Christmas that year. Why couldn't anyone else see you?"

"We are not sums."

"You are 3. You are prime. I am the square of a prime. Yours is a different set of primes. The Zetan set."

"We are mere states of possibility. You cannot perceive us because we are not always possible. We are but the mean of infinite universes bound together within 11 dimensions."

"But why can I see you now?"

"Because we are possible to you now."

"Faith?"

"You see, but you do not observe."

"My dear Watson."

"You must be born again."

"But can a man re-enter his mother's womb?"

They nodded and burst into electron curls of light. His fever broken, Jeremy was left alone and as empty as the taped-up shoebox. He thought he might bury his heart in it.

But at its bottom he found his lost cowrie-shell pendant. He lifted it by its buffalo-hair thong and pressed it to his lips, breathing in its last molecules of lavender and pine.

He can, he thought. Here she is. We are 15 again and the woods are deep and full of possibilities.

## Jeff Crook

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