DEAR MCSWEENEY'S,

I've just come home from my fourth lifetime outing as an ad hoc, highly unorthodox wedding rabbi. (Previously, I was the "rabbi" at the "wedding" of Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly—actually, it was Spiegelman's fiftieth birthday and when Françoise asked him what he wanted by way of a gift, he said what he was really pining for was a real wedding, since their actual marriage, twenty-five years earlier, had been at City Hall only for anar-chistic green-card purposes, so she recruited me as the rabbi and R. Crumb headed up the party band! More recently I'd officiated the marriage between two guys in Houston, the Art Guys, and a tree, nuptials that went tragicomically bad, and which you can read about by googling a little piece of mine called "Dogged by Trees.")

Anyway, this time was for the wedding of my dear artist friends Trevor Oakes (one of the "perspective twins") and his longtime on-and-off-and-on-and-off-and-finally-on-again ladylove, the ex-architect painter Gerri Davis. Gerri had hit upon the idea of staging the ceremony a few hours from her parents' place near Asheville, North Carolina, in the lee of the Great Smoky Mountains, in the tiny creekside hamlet of Topton, along the very spine of that recent transcontinental total eclipse, on the day of the eclipse itself. "Come for the eclipse," went the invite, "and stay for the wedding!"

And believe me, the total eclipse itself (between 2:38 p.m. and 2:40 p.m. on a blessedly cloudless afternoon) was

all that and more: don't even get me started.

About twenty minutes afterward, though, with the sun peeking well past the now fast-receding moon shadow, a makeshift band of instrumentalist friends (amateur oboist, trumpeter, ukuleleist, keyboard player, and guitarist: the Eclipse Philharmonic, as I'd taken to calling them) launched into a surprise flash-moblet rendition of "Here Comes the Sun," herding the scattered, still-awesmacked congregants Pied Piper–like over two little bridges and onto a leafy, breezy little island in the middle of the lazy rapids, where chairs and flowers and candles and a podium had been set up. Once everyone was seated, I led the mother of the bride and Trevor's father led the groom over the bridges to their respective places (a few moments earlier I'd ducked away to don my rabbinical gear, beige suit and tie, draped over with a black-stripped white tallit shawl, all capped by a red yarmulke), and then on the far side of the bridges the trumpeter (Gerri's father) launched into a buoyant New Orleans–style solo medley, culminating in "Here Comes the Bride," his radiant daughter clinging to his side as he now led her over the bridges to the podium, where Trevor and I stood, awaiting her splendid arrival, awesmacked all over again.

The congregants *ooh*ed and *aah*ed and finally grew silent, whereupon I approached the mike to begin my homily. (Do Jews even do homilies? Beats me.) "About four months ago," I pronounced solemnly, "I got this pesky little splinter on my pointer finger, which thereupon began to bleed continually, so I called Gerri here in North Carolina, asking her to ask her mother about it, because I knew her dear mother was some sort of hand therapist. I told her it seemed like I was suffering from a stigmata sent down upon me

by a singularly incompetent god, which Gerri repeated to her mother, whereupon in the background I could hear her mother's confused retort, 'But Gerri, he's Jewish, isn't he, and Jews don't *get* stigmatas, do they?' 'Precisely,' I responded. 'Like I said, we're dealing here with a singularly incompetent god! Guy doesn't even know whom to smite, let alone where.'"

And then I continued to recount to the congregation how just a few days ago, our mutual friend Bill had asked me what I was doing for the coming weekend, and how I'd told him I was headed down to North Carolina to serve as the rabbi at Trevor and Gerri's wedding, at which point he'd asked, hesitantly, "But neither Gerri nor Trevor is Jewish, are they?" To which I'd responded, and now told the congregation, "No, but then I'm not really a rabbi, either." Whereupon, reaching into the depths of the podium, I pulled out a full-on sort of Hasidic-style headpiece (actually a pleated cardboard approximation) and placed it upon my head. For greater authenticity, I hoped, somewhat haplessly.

Anyway, I thereupon launched into the meat of my rabbinical discourse. Because hadn't that eclipse been something, or what? Everyone whooped in concurrence (always good to get the congregation on your side at the outset is what I believe and try to practice). And yet, I went on, it's worth pausing for a moment to ponder the near infinite, indeed precisely *astronomical*, odds against such an occurrence even transpiring at all. Because for total eclipses to happen, on any planet anywhere, the sun and the moon in question have to occupy precisely the same acreage, as it were, of celestial real estate. Which, in the case of our own planetary system, happens only because the sun is precisely four hundred times the size of the moon, and the moon just happens

to be precisely four hundred times closer to Earth: hence the perfect, veritably lid-like fit. And what are the odds against that sort of alignment? In science-fiction films, one regularly sees total eclipses happening on other planets, but it's not bloody likely that such an uncanny congruence occurs elsewhere, certainly not in our own solar system, likely not anywhere else in our galaxy. Top that near-inconceivable coincidence off with the fact that it should occur on the very planet upon which life has evolved that's intelligent enough to appreciate and marvel at it—what an infinitely further unlikelihood. And not only that, but it's even more unlikely that such intelligence coincided with the relatively tiny temporal window in which such perfect eclipses have been occurring on this planet—for the moon's orbit is gradually receding from Earth: several million years ago it was too close, and several million years hence it will be too far, the required conditions thus pertaining for only a relatively minute fraction of the planet's entire existence—*what are the odds of that?!*

"Makes you wonder," I pronounced, portentously.

"And yet all of that is as nothing," I said, rounding the corner on my extended analogy, "is as nothing," I repeated, "as all of us here gathered (their endlessly put-upon friends) certainly realize, compared to the odds against *these two*, our beloved Sun Lady and Moon Man, ever getting their act together enough to finally marry, for god's sake!"

And so forth: it was a fun ceremony. Great after-feast, fantastic honky-tonk dancing into the star-dusted night.

But the reason I'm writing *you kids* about all this is that in the days since, I've been thinking, and I no longer think it was all mere coincidence, or at any rate sheer random happenstance, that intelligent life

arose here, on what may well be the sole planet anywhere whose moon and sun were thus arrayed, and indeed during the relatively tight interval, geologically speaking, when they were thus arrayed.

Isn't it perhaps rather the case that it was the occasional occurrence of such total eclipses (granted, very occasional, only a couple hundred times a century, spread all about the globe's surface, such that the chances of any individual tribe of protohumans ever seeing one were themselves virtually infinitesimal) that in turn (because, really, the sudden unexpected occurrence of such a celestial event *is* utterly astonishing, terrifying, unnerving, enthralling, certainly profoundly memorable, and unlike anything else that the primitive creatures would have ever witnessed) might itself have jump-started, as it were, an ensuing cascade toward the kind of abstract intelligence we humans all now (granted, to varying degrees) seem to evince and take for granted.

I say "primitive," but as Jared Diamond and Yuval Noah Harari and their like keep reminding us, it's a complete misprision to imagine our distant forebears as knuckle-dragging morons of any sort. If anything, they were all, every single one of them, much more intelligent than any of us are today (stupefied as we have become by all our labor-saving conveniences)—they had to be (little naked near-defenseless runts that they were) just to get through the day, to evade predators and secure food, shelter, clothing, fire, and so forth for the night. And come evening, in a world bereft of other entertainments (or distractions), what must it have been like for them to gaze up at the stars, and (for the yet more intelligent among them) to begin to note the patterns in the waxing and waning of the moon, the way individual stars seemed to rise at slightly different times

and in different places along the horizon, the way such patterns aligned with the changing seasons—and then, completely out of nowhere, suddenly, one afternoon, to experience the world-upending spectacle of a total eclipse!

It might have been like that early scene in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, only minus the intervening aliens and their monoliths (unless aliens were themselves the ones—or maybe God, the One—who somehow managed to pull our moon into its uncannily unique alignment with the sun). Maybe I had *2001* on my mind because one of the congregants at the wedding was our friend Michael Benson, fresh in from Ljubljana—"I couldn't help myself: suddenly I just watched, spellbound, as my fingers typed in the plane reservation"—who'd just completed the manuscript for his fiftieth anniversary study of that film and its director, Stanley Kubrick, and author, Arthur C. Clarke, due out in the spring of 2018, and we'd dallied a good part of the evening discussing his findings.

Anyway, so yesterday I mailed a synopsis of all this to another mutual friend, Walter Murch, the legendary film and sound editor and all-around polymath, who was the subject of my own most recent book, *Waves Passing in the Night: Walter Murch in the Land of the Astrophysicists*, chronicling his improbable excursions into a whole other branch of gravitational astrophysics, and I wasn't the least bit surprised (nothing about Walter surprises me anymore) to receive, by return email, the following:

> Yes, I agree. The beginning of *2001* actually begins with eclipse imagery, long before the monolith is ever introduced.

Walter continued his email with a journal musing of his own from October 2003:

If Earth had been cloud-covered, like Venus, would we have developed mathematics to the extent that we did? There is a proof somewhere of how humans could deduce the existence of stars even if they had never seen them. Perhaps we could have done so, potentially, but would our minds be predisposed to think in that direction? Does not the night sky pull our imagination off the surface of the earth and make it dream and speculate: what if? Then add the fact that humanity emerged along with the existence of perfect solar eclipses. The moon is moving away from the earth, so perfect eclipses didn't exist ten million years ago, and will not exist ten million years from now. Does not the eclipse light the imagination? Did it somehow help to create this wondering animal?

Walter's email went on:

Given the few humans alive one hundred thousand years ago, when language (or so we think) began to emerge, and the infrequency of solar eclipses, the ability of an eclipse to kindle the human imagination must be one of those crucial "singularities" in history (like the "eukaryotic singularity") when the event triggered a paradigm shift in one individual (or a small group) and then it spread outward from there, carried by language. Solar eclipses are not experienced "globally" by everyone at the same time (the way we experience lunar eclipses)—I have seen only one eclipse in my life (a partial eclipse in London in 1999). The total eclipse that the United States has just experienced is the first to transect the continental United States in one hundred years, more than the average human lifetime. And it was a thin line of totality, only a few miles wide. Imagine the world of one hundred thousand years ago, and how few people there were back then, and how many would have seen a similar eclipse, unprepared for it by any prediction. And without language how would they have spread the word? Partial eclipses are more common, of course. Much to think about…

Much to think about indeed. But what it all got me thinking about is where ideas come from. In this particular case, had I even come to this sudden supposed insight in any sense "on my own," or wasn't it perhaps rather the case that a prior set of influences in my immediate past (Kubrick, Clarke, Benson, Murch) had all lined up just so, perfectly, in such a way as to render that momentarily blinding supposition—*ha*! eclipses, monkeys, the jump-start toward subsequently cascading intelligence—all but inevitable?

Maybe all thought is just the world itself daydreaming and marveling at itself.

Anyway.

Love to all,

LAWRENCE WESCHLER
PELHAM, NY