

JEALOUS GOD

Dave W Currie



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One

That feeling in the pit of my stomach has stopped me right in the doorway again. It's an odd feeling. Sometimes my mind convinces me that what I'm feeling is a perfectly normal gut ache. But it's not. It's a void yet it's a mass. It's a sucking gravity that pulls my shoulders down towards my knees and forces me to stop and catch my breath. I don't seem to be breathing properly, almost like I've forgotten how, or that I'm forcing an invisible weight off my chest with every inhalation. If I close my eyes I feel like I'm falling, or like I'm in a fast car that's just passed over a peak in the road. It almost feels like excitement.

But you don't want to keep your eyes closed too long with this feeling. Your mind goes down into that whirlpool in your guts and is replaced by that creeping emptiness. The empty dining room I'm looking in on, the empty kitchen behind me. Down the hall are the three empty bedrooms. The guest room made up in a state of perpetual and futile readiness. The master bedroom down the hall with not one physical item missing, yet all that made it the jewel of the home now suddenly and imperceptibly gone. The room set aside for the baby, still empty.

Keep your eyes closed too long and that strange feeling in your guts and that empty feeling in the house start to become one and the same.

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I gave up sleeping in the marital bed after only a handful of nights. It just didn't seem right anymore and my conscience wouldn't let me get any rest between those sheets. I've moved a bundle of nondescript bedding from the wardrobe in the guest room onto the couch in the lounge. Some sheets, pillows and blankets, not really arranged into anything conventional but it does the job. I don't leave it unless it's to go to the bathroom or fix something to eat. I'm not much of a cook, but I have no appetite either. I'm eating only because I know I should. I get by on toast mainly. I fixed myself

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bowls of cereal the first few days before the milk ran out. I never really picked up on food that takes a lot of preparation. I've found that keeping all the bread in the freezer keeps it from going mouldy in the winter damp of the kitchen.

Between my bed in the lounge and the food in the kitchen is the dining room. The bulb is blown in this room and I don't see any pressing reason to change it. I shuffle through the cold, dark room on my way too and from the kitchen, trying to ignore the dusty dinner table in the centre of the room with it's vacant chairs standing around in silent witness.

The hall that runs to the bedrooms is constantly draughty and I only go through it to get to the bathroom. Everywhere else in the house I leave well alone.

I have showered occasionally. The wet towels lie on the floor in the lounge for lack of anywhere else to put them. I don't notice them, they've built up too gradually, but I bet they stink. The stubble on my face has gone unchecked for days now. Twice it's gotten to the point where I can pinch it between the tips of my fingers, a new experience for me. The first time I noticed how far it had gotten away on me I attempted to shave it the same way I would have normally done every morning, but the razor clogged up and blunted on the tough hair. My razor is an old style metal one which takes double-edged razor blades. You can take the blades out and turn them around to try and get a sharper edge. You can rattle them around the wall of a glass of water or run them across a wet bit of stone to sharpen up the worn ones. You can absent-mindedly pick them up with the palm of your hand and effortlessly slice into the webbing between the bases of your fingers. Never a deep cut but a surprising amount of blood all the same.

The blunt, feeble razor raked across my face in uneven movements, catching the skin where it bunched up and producing an ugly spot of red. I don't have the patience to go up against that sort of resistance a second time. The beard is allowed to grow. Every time I attempt to brush my teeth I spit pink minty gum-blood, so I don't do it too often either

In the lounge is my couch, now my bed. I may not notice the wet towels or the plates of leftover toast from days earlier, but even I can tell that my bedding reeks. Not that I mind, or that I could do anything about it if I did. The house is too clean as it is, I

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reckon, and I know its cleanliness doesn't comfort me in any way. The TV is generally left on while I lie on the couch and watch without any real involvement. I've taken to going to sleep in the small hours of the morning, only once there's nothing but infomercials to watch, and waking some time in the mid afternoon. The thick curtains are always drawn and sometimes the TV is the only source of light in the house. I'll watch old video tapes sometimes when I can muster the initiative to get up and put them into the VCR. I'm almost always asleep before they end though, and the TV flicks into blue screen mode once the tape reaches the end of its reel. Often I'll stir in the night and instead of the sun shining through my shut eyelids it's this sterile blue light, mixing with the translucent blood vessels in the thin lids and making a cold, purple impression on my waking mind.

My laptop is on the coffee table angled towards where my head lies on the couch. It's an old model, completely obsolete by now and probably not worth a cent of what I paid for it. We decided a laptop would be better back then. You can move about the house with it. You can put it away, out of the reach of children. There's probably a bill in the letterbox I should pay one of these days if I don't want the internet access cut off, but I haven't left the house in fourteen days and the world's going to have to do better than that to shake me out. I used to spend a lot of time online at the beginning of this but my browsing has become so routine and boring that I've even started to think I wouldn't miss it if my access was suddenly cut. The laptop is sitting more or less where it was fourteen days ago when I got Gloria's email.

Getting an email from your wife, one that isn't a simple hello or a forwarded joke, is a strange thing. Gloria probably knew this. She knew how I hate discussing things in writing, how seeing something written down can seem so calculated and hostile. She would never email me, not at home, not at work, even though I was likely to be closer to four computers than I was to a single phone. I made it very clear early on in our relationship that written communication was out. It's just my nature, I guess. I will sit and stare at a letter made out to me and take everything at face value. Sarcasm, wit and subtlety are completely lost on me, and I find myself going crazy trying to find some deeper or hidden meaning in the message.

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Gloria knew this, that's for sure. Her email, sent the day after she didn't come home, contained no text, but instead an attached video file. It now sits, ready to be played at any time, on the laptop's screen.

The first frame shows her static head and shoulders. Her head is at an odd angle and even through the blocky file compression you can see around her eyes is all red. She's been crying, that much is obvious. Her high cheekbones have a certain sheen to them that the poor contrast can't account for. Her hair is ruffled and looks like it's been pulled back off from over her face a number of times. Her lips look strange, the camera catching them in an odd moment of contortion. She has been crying pretty hard.

Pressing play on the video the first thing Gloria does is take a big sniff through her little nose, as if trying to pull herself together, then without pause begins to talk.

"Thomas," she begins, speaking in an almost breathless exhale, and immediately coughs a little. "I'm not coming home."

I open the video file again and a second instance of it starts running from the beginning. Now there are two crying faces on the screen. "Thomas, I'm not coming home," starts the second one. I open the file again. Now there are three, all talking and choking on tears like sick children, singing a round.

I open another, and another. Five faces now. The computer is having difficulty playing them all at once. Some frames are skipped, some audio is disrupted by ugly glitches. With every imperfection I feel that strange feeling in my stomach shift. I can't tell if I'm helping it or hurting it, but it is moving. I open more.

"I know what you've done," says the first face, and the rest of them quickly echo. I open more. There are well over ten videos playing on screen now and the laptop can hardly handle it. Slowdown. The time within the videos is stretched and distorted and my wife's face freezes, then jerks into place some seconds later a dozen times over. Inside the machine each video is jostling for space, fighting to be updated on the screen before my eyes. The quality of the image and sound starts to suffer tremendously as the computer deals with trying to keep up.

This is pretty much a daily ritual for me. My guts tighten, accentuating the feeling of a vacuum there. I stare at the screen and open another instance of the video. You can almost hear the

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computer groan as the images on screen lock up at various points in the file. A single digital sample of my wife's voice plays continuously, caught in a loop it can't get out of, until it's stripped of all meaning. I go to open the file again but there's no response, the machine has crashed. That empty feeling has risen to this distorted audiovisual display like a charmed snake and now has me bent over almost double with anxiety. Perhaps like digging into my skin to pick out a splinter, this is the way to start to deal with her being gone. The machine always fails right when I feel near to getting that splinter, though, and leaves me feeling worse off for hours later. I'll spend the rest of the afternoon in a cold sweat right here on this couch, hands in a fist, unkempt fingernails digging into my palms. Once soon after putting myself through this I had to get up and vomit. Still, I'm trying something, whether or not it's the right thing, I'm trying something. So when my thoughts drift to that old metal razor and its double-edged blades I know that I do not truly want to kill myself.

That usually works.

I try to recall what Gloria herself would say about it. How this life is not mine to take, that it is God's. One should never try and steal and squander the gift of life that He has given. He has a plan for us, and to destroy ourselves is the worst sin you can commit. What plan is this then? And how do I know when the plan is curtailed and the punishment begun?

The laptop screen is still frozen. At least I'm trying something.

Once my breathing is back under control I reboot the computer, a hard restart. It won't like that, I think to myself, having the rug pulled from under it like that. Before too long the laptop might end up carrying around the same feeling in its stomach as I do. After its lengthy start-up and the standard complaints about not being shut down properly I open up the video file but do not play it, leaving Gloria's face motionless on the screen in preparation for next time. Tomorrow or whenever the need strikes again. So far I've hardly ever seen the very end of the video. The laptop usually fails sometime before it with me continuously adding to its load. I know it off by heart though. She simply says, "Thomas, I'm not coming home. I know what you've done." The only other sounds out of her are muffled sniffs and tears. Then she begins to lean

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forward as if to turn off the camera. Thank God that the video grinds to a halt before she does. Right now she's right here, perfectly still on my screen. But if I were to see her switch that damned thing off then she could be lost to me forever. And that void inside me could spread all the way out to my skin.

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Where she's gone I can only speculate. Nothing is missing from our bedroom. There are no naked clothes hangers. No missing suitcases. All her effects are present and accounted for. She's made a phone call to someone close, I guess, and just gone. Gone where clothes, toothbrushes, hairbrushes, shoes, socks, underwear can all can be supplied. There's no indication that she prepared a thing. She just left. Getting out that instant must have been more important than anything she could take with her.

I don't go into our bedroom anymore because of how eerily undisturbed it is. My gut says there should be some physical evidence of her departure, but there's none. Being in that room I almost feel as if she hasn't left at all, and it makes that snap back to reality all the more painful. My belongings are all in there too, hanging side by side with hers like a photograph. I haven't been changing regularly. I'll wear underwear, a dressing gown, and old t-shirt, and sometimes a thick pair of socks on cold days. What I've worn and taken off sits on the lounge floor with the wet towels. In the bedroom my work clothes, my casual clothes and my Sunday church suit are all frozen in the same moment of departure as hers.

It has crossed my mind to try and find her, but I've made no attempt. She's probably with family, or with someone from church, and I don't have words enough to explain to everyone I might have to talk with to get to her. To people who would certainly have heard it all from her first. I don't have the first idea what it is I'd say if I got to her either. There's an apology inside me, swelling in my mouth, but it's so big I can't chop it down into words that I could speak out loud. Like a vital part of me I can't lose, like a body part I'm trying to cough up. It's an apology you have to live. You have to go completely to pieces and leave the apology like a ghost in your stead.

Her parents live nearby, about a forty-minute drive. She's probably there. She would sleep there occasionally so they'd have all she'd need to run away from her husband under the roof already.

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Her friends from church, too. How many of them have spare beds and clothes that could fit her? Still, having a theory on where she is brings me no closer to trying to contact her. And even if I had no clue where she was I wouldn't look for her. Being worthy of the goal is half the quest.

They say that when true love comes along you will know it. It will feel like nothing you've ever felt before. And they're right. It's a sensation of lightness you can never describe. You feel this bond, light as a hair and tied tight around your body. Yet the feeling is liberating, like the tense ropes between the hot air balloon and its basket as every sandbag is discarded at once. But that feeling of love dying, the hangover from the instant where you realize that she has gone for good, that too is like nothing you've ever felt before. That love turns into a destructive energy, and there's only you left to destroy. It is a physical force that cannot be deflected or avoided. And when all that turns on you, you in your guilt and your shame and your sea of regret, you can't fight it off no matter what. It gets right up behind your eyes. I've cried every day since Gloria left. It feels like my body trying to flush out this feeling but it never succeeds. I weep with such convulsions, sobs that literally strain the muscles in my neck, and for a few minutes later I feel relieved, but it is fleeting. Like a man overboard with the swell pushing him back tantalizingly close to the boat but always pulling him away before he can reach his rescue. Eventually it may take me under but there's nothing I can do. A tear duct in my left eye has started to continually seep like a runny nose whether I'm actually crying or not. I wake up in the afternoon with that strange liquid caked and dried on the side of my face. It makes me feel like I'm falling apart. Like the plug has been pulled and I'm slowly draining away to nothing.

In the lounge there was our wedding photo but that's gone. It's the only item in the house that isn't as it should be, and I'm glad for it. At least now this room feels altered, violated. Not like the museum displays that the rest of the rooms have become. I can sleep here with some degree of comfort. The wall the photo hung upon looks naked and defiled without it. There's a rectangle of new wallpaper the size and shape of the missing frame, its beige colouring the same as the day the picture was hung, while all around it is faded. I think how odd it is that the wallpaper is wearing down

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right before my eyes. Doing it so slowly that I'd never notice if it weren't for the wedding photo shielding a small patch from the light and the dust, preserving a tiny piece of it, not much larger than the screen of my laptop. The contrast is startling. It's only been two years since that photograph was hung. I wonder what else has faded, eroded or worn down in that time that I haven't noticed.

Gloria probably took that photograph with her, I think. And although it helps me to not have it around I doubt she did it out of thought for my well being. It's probably face down somewhere out of sight now, or slashed up out of anger. I can imagine the glass punched out and the frame broken in two with both hands bringing it down hard across the thigh. I can see the photo paper ripped and twisted as it and the snapped frame and stuffed into a garden incinerator and set alight. I can smell the plastic-like stink of the varied chemicals from the developed photograph and the smoke of the modest wooden frame as it burns. I can imagine it coldly discarded in a public rubbish bin without the energy invested to even destroy it. It makes sense. Gloria knows me, knows how I react to the written word. She knows although there is a marriage license which I could dig up if I so wished, it's that photo that makes the memory of that day, that event, real for me. It is the visual proof. Her in her white dress, her veil pulled back over her head, standing next to me. Me in my hired suit, us both clasping at each other's newly decorated hands. We're standing before a bank of flowers, the leaves of the plants so vividly green that I can feel them on the back of my eyes now even without the photo here to gaze at. The documents may have made it official in the eyes of the law but it was that photo, taken just minutes after saying "I do", that made our union a reality to me. Now it's gone, taken, and the message couldn't be clearer.

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My work has been very understanding considering the pitiful amount of information I've given them. I called in sick on the first day. "Family crisis," no questions asked. Lord only knows what I would have said if they'd pried me for details. Ten working days I've missed so far, by my calculations. That's easily covered by my sick leave. I've been hoarding leave. I've hardly ever had a day off sick before. I've been saving up my holidays too. There was going to be something special I'd need them for. I guess this is it. I

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haven't called back since that first brief conversation. In fact, the phone has been completely silent the entire time. In a day or two my supervisor will process my resignation letter that I emailed in yesterday, then I might hear something. I decided to quit my job very early on. I don't want the pressure of needing to return to work on top of everything else right now. I decided from the outset that I was going to take as much time as I needed, and now that two weeks have passed and I see no end in sight it seems only fair to resign. I sat at my laptop for hours trying to write the letter but it was even harder than usual to accurately put my thoughts down in writing. I eventually found the saved copy of a letter I'd written years ago when quitting my previous job. I changed the names and dates and sent that off. I don't imagine I'll hear much back. I'm not very talkative at work, nor particularly well liked, so I doubt my colleagues take much interest in my private life. When and if word gets around that I've left my job after taking two weeks off for a family emergency I imagine people will want to know as little as possible about it. The world is full enough of other people's problems as it is.

Money won't be an issue once the pay stops coming in. My leave balance will cover the amount of notice I am required to give, and the remainder will be paid out to me. It will be a substantial amount. My overheads are almost non-existent. I eat from the well-stocked freezer, taking bread out to toast by the slice, plus whatever I find in the fridge or the pantry. I shouldn't have to leave the house to shop for another couple of weeks at least. The mortgage is paid automatically from the joint bank account that Gloria hasn't touched since she disappeared. There are savings too. Thousands of dollars we managed to set aside. We were trying for a baby.

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At night the feeling shifts again. Now it's my skin, my outside that protests her absence. I ache for her touch, for us to lay together naked, fitting like pieces of a puzzle. Falling asleep on the couch in the lounge I try to arrange my arms in a way so that she could slip between them and lie down next to me if she were to suddenly appear at home.

I dream of her constantly. Strong dreams, full of her flesh and body. Sexual dreams with her loving smile on her face below

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mine. As I feel myself waking I try desperately to remain asleep and in the dream, not to return to the stark reality of my cold lounge. In my dreams we are naked before a bank of flowers, the leaves of the plants so vividly green and healthy.

Wide awake afterwards and the chill of the empty house creeps in under my blankets so I can't get back to sleep. I'm still aroused from the dream and half-heartedly jerking off, mainly to try and make it go away. My face is wet from the tear duct that won't close and the combined sensation is off putting. I try to keep my mind a blank as I come. It doesn't feel right to think of Gloria, or anyone, that way any more. I clean up using the sheet I'm sleeping under and try to arrange the damp stain to one side. Yeah, it may be a sin, but who's counting anymore?

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Two

Five days ago I heard the shuddering and unmistakable thud of a sparrow flying into the plate glass of the lounge window. Being such tiny and fragile creatures they don't have to be going very fast to do terrible damage to themselves. There's a tree they like to congregate in nearby, and their excited aeronautical dances cause them to flit around its branches with amazing speed and grace. Countless times I've stood at the window and watched a male with his dark-feathered head chase a female around the tree like they're flirtatious children.

When I was very young my house had a large ranch sliding door that led from the dining room out onto the deck, and on the other wall of the room was a big window that looked out into the trees. The little green waxeyes that would turn up in the garden each year would crowd the birdfeeder we'd set up in the front lawn. We'd leave old bread or specially bought seeds out for them and they'd swarm around in such numbers that it was hard to believe. They were beautiful birds, like jade-green little robins with cute white rings around their eyes, making them look like buttons on a teddy bear. The cunning cats would lie in the bushes nearby, always on the lookout for an easy catch, but they seemed to be overwhelmed by the birds' numbers and hardly ever made a kill.

When the bread was divided up amongst the squabbling bunch and each had had its fill they'd fly off to the top branches of the tall trees out the back of the house to be further away from the ever-present feline threat. That's when you'd maybe hear the dull crack of a waxeye's body against the glass, it having seen the daylight on either side of our dining room and deciding to fly right through. I'd wonder if the poor bird had simply failed to see the glass at all, or if there had been a moment of terror right at the end as it finally saw the tell-tale sheen of a window with its reflection shooting forward to meet it head on, unable to stop or turn. I hoped they never saw it coming. I'd slide the door open and study their cute, dead, rounded faces for signs of distress but to me they always

looked peaceful. I would pick their bodies up occasionally, cupped gently in my two hands, and turn their heads to face mine. These were among my first ever experiences with death and holding this death in my hands felt alien and strangely light. I couldn't fully comprehend it. The bird was whole and unchanged, but a minute ago it had been flying and the next second it was dead, as if striking the window had hit a switch that had turned it off. The very same switch that in me would be turned off if I were to be hit by a car or if I fell from a tall building. Or if the house were to come crashing down on me in an earthquake during the night. The same switch that winds down and turns off in old people. This is what I believed as the actual physical cause of death in the birds was beyond me. That the impact with the glass had cracked the brittle avian skull, shoving bone back into the brain, was not yet apparent to me. The brain itself being pushed forward to meet the impact and crushing its gooey self under its own momentum was not within my sphere of imagination. The multitude of broken bones and internal ruptures that truly caused the bird's demise lay hidden beneath the beautiful and unmarked layers of green feathers in the palm of my hand.

Walking home from school one day I saw a bunch of my classmates huddled around something on the pavement. It was a dead waxeye, lying peacefully there on the concrete like they would on my deck. I guess it hit an overhead wire, or a car. It looked young. The boys were kicking it about between them. One braved picking it up and tossing it at another kid to spook him. It missed, and the crowd gathered around where it fell. I walked up to the edge of the group and saw how the bird's wings weren't lying properly by its side. The bird no longer looked simply asleep, it looked a little beat up. The kids kept kicking it about and the wings got worse, the feathers more ruffled and the naked legs made odd angles. I could hear the occasional light snap as the bones in its extremities gave way from rolling along the asphalt and the scuffing impact from the children's shoes. There were a couple of girls looking on and the aim of the boys' game was obviously to try and gross them out with what they'd found. The bird would be kicked towards where the girls were standing and you could hear the tiny beak clatter along like the plastic tips of an undone shoelace. The girls of course shrieked, but never showed any intention of leaving. Finally one of the bigger boys made like he was going to kick the

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bird so hard that it could come off his toes and right into the girls' faces. But instead of brining his foot back and swinging it through in a kick, he brought his foot up and then down in a stomp with all his might. There was a crunch like potato chips in your mouth, which I assumed was the ribcage failing, and the girls screamed. The big boy grinned and lifted his other foot off the ground. Now his entire weight was on the bird, and a series of crackles emanated from under his shoe. The ribs again, the fragile skull caught up against the concrete. There was a pop when the animal's skin broke. When the boy lifted his foot the ground under the bird was wet. Tiny tubes, the miniature and perfectly formed innards, were visible protruding from the skin of the belly. "That's its guts!" shouted the boy towards the trembling girls, and they took off running without another word. I stopped picking up and cradling the waxeyes that hit our dining room windows after that. In my hands that death now felt heavy and damp.

I'm wondering about that sparrow I heard hit the lounge window five days ago. From the sounds of things it was large, no chance of it being a juvenile, but it's hard to tell. Its body is probably still lying nearby. Cats won't pay it much attention unless it didn't die right away and flapped its broken wings around in distress on the ground. Then one of the nearby hunters might have become interested enough to carry it away and finish it off, but I would have probably heard that from inside. No, that bird is for the scavengers to pull apart now. In a week or so it'll be nothing but a raised stain. Maybe with a beak and some feathers that haven't blown away yet. Little bones scattered off in illogical directions like someone's gone over the corpse with a stiff broom. It's not uncommon for these birds to try to fly into the lounge from time to time so I'm familiar with coming across their varyingly decomposed bodies in the garden or on the path outside. They get scared by something while dancing around that tree of theirs and fly away to safety, and with the curtains open I bet the lounge looks like a big cavern to them. Without those curtains there they never see that deadly invisible barrier. I still hope that they don't see it coming.

But that bird flew into the lounge window with enough force to kill itself instantly five days ago, and my curtains have been closed for fourteen.

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A handful of times now I've ordered pizza for delivery online. When they are delivered I open the door only as much as I have to and I only say as many words as I have to. They have been the only times I've opened the front door or talked to another human being in two weeks. I'm a little embarrassed about getting people to bring me food, but I'm sure that they've seen worse than me. There seem to be dozens of pizza delivery joints around this area of town. There could be hundreds of sad souls like me, locked away in their homes, not caring for money any more and following the path of least resistance to nourishment, their pathetic dollars keeping the pizza industry afloat. How would you know that they were there unless you delivered food to them yourself?

Two days ago I was lying on my couch-bed mid afternoon with the TV tuned to a documentary channel. A wildlife program on birds had finished and a piece on tsunamis was now on. The gist of this program was that tsunamis caused by a landslide into the sea or a cliff collapse will displace much more water than tsunamis caused by earthquake. When the waves reach a coast they will form walls of water many times more powerful. There is a volcanic island in the Canaries that is unstable, and if slipped into the sea would cause a ripple on the earth that could race across the Atlantic and obliterate the east coast of America. This has some geologists quite worried. I tried to put myself in the position of a man on the waterfront, staring out to sea, as such a wave sped towards me. There'd be no chance of escape in the face of such a destructive force. Would I even try to run anyway? Surely I'd make some reaction, futile as it may be. Scream, cover my head with my hands, find cover behind a wall. But in my imagination of myself on the shore I made no such movement. I just stared at the wave in peaceful wonder, just as I'd watch the birds outside in the tree. My arms stayed relaxed and my hands in my pants pockets all the time up until I could smell the sea spray off the giant wave itself. The documentary cut to commercial before the wave could hit me.

The ad break was about halfway through when I heard a knock at the front door that I wasn't expecting. Part of my mind immediately thought of pizza, and I got a little hungry like one of Pavlov's dogs. But the rest of me tensed up in apprehension. Quickly I reached for the remote control and muted the TV. The door opens out from the kitchen, two rooms away, but I didn't want

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to take any chances. Gloria wouldn't knock, and I don't want to see anyone else.

I waited, hardly breathing. Hiding out in my own house brought about a belittling sensation. The knocking came again. It wasn't a heavy knock at least. My most paranoid fantasy of rough debt collectors turning up because of some unpaid bill, still sitting in the letterbox that I was neglecting, was unlikely. I still didn't move. There wasn't a light on in the house and with the TV silenced I was sure I could convince the caller that no one was home. Even if they were brazen enough to walk around the house peering into the ground-level windows there would be no seeing me through the lounge curtains.

Third knock. There was no way I was going to open that door. Like the gradual smell that had built up in the lounge I had failed to monitor the decline in my appearance. Aside from having worn the same clothes for countless days straight I was developing itchy red boils on my body from not washing enough. My fledgling beard was patchy at best and hid tiny pimples in its midst. The hair on my head was squashed down from all its time on the pillow that it looked like I'd been wearing a wet hat. Running my tongue over my teeth made me want to vomit. I could only imagine the state of my breath right then. This unexpected caller had suddenly shifted my perspective on myself and I was instantly ashamed. I hadn't let myself go this far in my entire life.

I waited five minutes after that third knock even though I was sure that it would be the caller's last attempt. I just needed to be sure. When no more came after five minutes I felt safe in turning the sound back on the TV, but I turned it down all the same. After all that silence the program seemed to shout out louder than before, like a hostage that had been gagged. The documentary had moved on by now and I missed hearing the name of that deadly island in the Canaries.

The next day, yesterday, I was watching the very same documentary at around about the same time of day. This channel has always had a habit of repeating features over and over but to have it run consecutive days in the same time slot struck me as strange. Lacking the will to surf around the channels for a better option I watched it again to see if I could get back into my imagination of the tsunami. I had flashes in my mind of standing on

the shore again and watching the wall of water grow bigger and bigger, but it felt more like I was remembering yesterday's imagination rather than imagining it all anew. It ended the same abrupt way and the wave never struck my body, although in reality I felt my skin go cold and the hairs on my chest stand up in anticipation of the impact. I felt a little disappointed.

Thinking about a tsunami that could devastate the east coast of America I found myself thinking about the little switch inside that turns your life off. I hadn't thought about death in that simple way since the days of the waxeyes on the deck, but when faced with the idea of millions of people on the shore like in my imagination, and each one of them not standing a chance at surviving, how else were you supposed to think? Could you really imagine the individual, internal destruction of organs and vessels as the bodies are slammed about? Can you imagine two lungs for every human, each flooded with salty ocean water? Could you even begin to contemplate the physicality of the tsunami without going completely mad? No, it is much better when faced with such a tragedy to think in a child's terms. The water came in and it turned off their switches. As long as you don't have to see it yourself, that sort of explanation will do. You revert to a childlike state, devoid of empathy. The questions "how?" and "why?" have to go out the window. Words like "where", "when" and "what" take its place. Where did the wave hit? When did it hit? What is the name of that island that killed everyone?

The documentary cut to a commercial in the same place as yesterday and right then there was a knock at door again. When I first perceived the rapping against the wood out in the kitchen I didn't flinch as it seemed like still part of yesterday's program, but when I realized that it meant that someone was outside my house again I shot bolt upright and scrambled for the TV remote. I had kept it closer to me since yesterday's shock and I muted the TV as quickly as possible.

What followed next was just the same as the previous day. Three attempts at the door, all while I sat as quiet as I could, silently refusing to get up and answer. It was the same style of knock as yesterday, sounding as if it were from the same hand. It sounded like a smallish hand, only about the size of a grown sparrow. As

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before, after the third attempt the caller gave up, but I kept my silence until I could be sure that they were gone.

I'm trying to guess who would have come by the house twice in two days to try and find me. It could be someone for Gloria who hasn't heard that she's left. Not that I've told anyone, I just assume that once she talks to her friends it'll get around soon enough. It was possibly some busybody from church. I guess I've missed it two weeks in a row now. That will raise questions. Whatever. If the caller is someone who doesn't know why I'm locked away in my own house like a prisoner then I don't want to be the one to tell them. If it's someone who does know, then I don't want to face them.

I turned the volume back up on the set and found I'd missed that island's name again.

As the afternoon hours wear on I forget about the strange knocks and focus on my laptop screen again. Gloria's there as always and her face still breaks my heart. I start the video playing. It always sounds as if it starts right after a huge sob of hers, and the same urge that makes us heave and sob and hold our faces in our hands is instantly installed in me. I can't stand to see her cry any more than I can stand needles digging through my skin to reach a splinter, but I just know somewhere in the back of my head that I have to do it. I start the video over and over, each time a new one beginning, and she cries out "Thomas, I'm not coming home. I know what you've done," her words all mangled, echoed and distorted by the laptop, unable to cope. I can hear the words as clear as day though, no matter which way the laptop grinds them down to a stop. By now they are written all across my mind.

Three

Today I woke up with a headache. I tried staying on the couch, perfectly still, and gave my eyes a rest from the TV but the pain wouldn't quit. Around two pm I get up and start looking for painkillers. While I'm searching through kitchen cupboards I start to realize just how much I don't know about how the contents of this house are organized. I'm finding condiments, cleaning products and whole kitchen instruments that I had no idea we even owned. The painkillers are still nowhere to be found. Gloria would always do the shopping during the day while I was at work. She'd bring the groceries back home and put them away as per her usual system. I never intervened, and if there was ever something I needed that wasn't immediately apparent in the fridge or the pantry then I'd often have to ask her to fetch it for me. She was a perfect homemaker and I didn't mess with her system. Not having her here, and the build-up of dust, rubbish, laundry, the vegetables spoiling in the refrigerator and those damned missing painkillers all just accentuates the fact that I am missing my better half.

My head is pounding as I move about and I'm getting frustrated. Everywhere in the kitchen searched I move into the bathroom and find painkillers in the vanity there, right behind my stainless steel shaver. I decide to bring the whole box of twenty tablets with me back out to the lounge where they'll always be close at hand. I pop two into the back of my throat, dry, and swallow quickly before they start to break apart in the saliva to avoid that awful, sharp powdery taste. It occurs to me that I haven't been keeping my fluids up. I haven't been keeping anything up, but not drinking enough liquid could be the root of this headache problem. I shuffle back out to the kitchen for a glass of water. I'm starting to get sweat rash between my thighs and buttocks and even walking the short distance between the two rooms is a painful chore. I fill a tall glass with water from the tap and gulp it all down, then refill it and do the same again. It's cold against my teeth and sends a shiver down my back. The feeling when the water hits my stomach is

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queer, like I've taken the water into my lungs. My head is still pounding, and the chill in my teeth is helping nothing, but this might make things a little better in time. I should really be drinking more water.

Back on my couch bed I'm still shivering from the water and piling on the blankets doesn't seem to help. The cold is inside me. That water feels like it's lowered my body temperature a degree or two. The bedding keeps out the cold of the room but does nothing for the cold that's already here. The tiny fan heater in the centre of the room is silent. Its thermostat would have kicked it into life if it were really as cold as I'm feeling it is. I spend an hour or so like this, my original headache abating but the discomfort of the cold taking its place. I pass a little time reading the directions on the package that the painkillers came in. Paracetamol, 500g. I can take two tablets every four to six hours, it says, as long as I take no more than eight tablets per day. Taking more can overload your system, I guess, disrupt the delicate chemical balance that keeps your body going. Years ago a girl in my high school class attempted suicide by taking heaps of these tablets. They pumped her stomach and she lived. They said she hadn't taken enough to do herself in and decided it was a call for help, not a serious attempt on her life. At worse all she could have done was cause a little kidney damage as her system struggled to expunge the huge quantities of foreign molecule. I wondered at the time how many tablets she was out by. Would another few dollars' worth have done it? If she hadn't been discovered in time would the medicine have taken its course anyway? How much of this stuff did one really have to pump into their body before their system became overloaded and failed, crashing like a computer trying to manage huge quantities of toxic data? Am I holding enough in my hand right now?

I'm getting goose pimples from the chill. I get the idea of making myself a cup of tea to warm me up. Back in the kitchen I take the jug from the bench top and fill it with the cold water from the tap and switch it on to boil. I find the tea bags on a shelf in the pantry after a quick search. I had a general idea where they'd be after spotting them while looking for the painkillers earlier. There are two varieties there, English breakfast and earl gray. One of them I like and one of them I don't. Gloria knows which is which but I have no idea. I haven't made my own cup of tea in years. I try

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sniffing their containers and they smell awfully alike to me, but I chose the earl gray. I watch the jug as the water comes to a boil. It looks like it's shivering in the terrible heat and it makes a tremendous noise. The window above it is collecting condensation at an amazing rate. It clouds the view of the front path and the letterbox and gate to the street. I hope no one is spying in, this is the longest time I've spent standing in the kitchen and someone could get a good look at me in my dishevelled and embarrassing state. I fetch a mug as the jug clicks off and pour a cup full of steaming water into it. I dunk the earl gray teabag in it until the colour looks about right then fish it out and throw it into the sink. I take a sip and it's way too hot so I pour a little out and top it up with a dash of cold from the tap. I've made it a little too weak, I decide, and I picked the wrong variety. English breakfast must be the stuff that Gloria buys especially for me, and the earl gray she drinks herself. Thankfully I don't take milk or sugar, I wouldn't know where to start with those.

I take the cup of tea back to the lounge and sip from it while watching the tube. The hot tea inside me feels stranger than the cold water before it. They don't seem to mix but instead dance around each other, neither one blending its heat or cool with the other, rather forming a ying and yang of distinctive hot and cold parts in my gut. I get used to the unfamiliar earl gray blend pretty quickly. It reminds me of the sweet smell of unlit tobacco and I wistfully wonder how a cigarette would go down with it. I haven't smoked in years and wasn't particularly serious about it when I did. Quitting wasn't hard for me like it was for some. I could come and go as I pleased, a few smokes here and a few smokes there, depending on whom I was with and what I was doing. It was always strange to me, that a cigarette could relax you so well even though everything about it reminded you of death and its gradual advance. And how smokers could keep smoking, knowing this, even when they were getting unwell. Perhaps that's the trick. You'd see women on TV smoking through their tracheotomies, knowing that what they are doing is killing them, but happily continuing. At school we were told that smoking was akin to slowly committing suicide. I wonder how much nicotine you'd have to take in one go to kill yourself outright. I wonder if it could be done.

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It's not like pills of paracetamol that you can force down your throat as rapidly as you please.

* * *

Mid afternoon rolls around and I'm beginning to feel better. My headache has dulled and only seems to be there when I think about it. And although parts of my skin feel hot, red and raw from the boils and the rashes, my temperature inside feels normal now. Documentaries on TV again, this time about World War Two. Grainy black and white battlefield footage, cold steel machines raining fire down upon the fields of Europe. There are aerial shots of cities, their streets and waterways splaying out seemingly at random, looking like the walls of gray cells under a microscope or a stoned spider's web. Sheets of bombs whistle away from the camera and detonate across the town. I find myself thinking about the people those bombs are landing on, and thinking about them in the same childlike way that I thought about the people in the path of a tsunami. Can someone imagine the violent fire and terrifying hot air as the explosions rip through buildings and bodies alike en masse, or is it better approached as a statistic? Occasionally the camera will show that very death on the screen and you're forced to confront it in all its amputated and cauterized horror. In that frame death is no concept or construct. Death is ashes in the fireplace, hopeless and useless. You see the bones in the human wreckage as you see the bones in your own hand. The wide shots of sanitized white crosses on the neatly manicured lawns of military cemeteries don't show that side. They are like marker stones or etches in a prison cell wall. Like the permanent shadows left by victims in the centre of Hiroshima when the bomb went off and vaporized them then and there, as if they'd been sent straight to heaven without the need for a messy and biological death.

Commercials cut into the program. They are loud, cheerful and colourful after the solemn gray of an old war. I have to turn my face away from the screen, then eventually I get up off the couch and walk through the dining room to the kitchen, trying to be as economical with my movement as possible to avoid the horrible chaffing feeling of the sweat rash that I still haven't washed. I'm going to make another cup of tea, just to drink for comfort this time, I don't feel like I need it for my headache or to warm me up. Making the tea had been more relaxing than the act of drinking it,

I'd found. Putting two things together, the water and the tea bag, had made me feel good. I enjoyed the idea that I was creating something, even as insignificant as a cup of tea. While on TV explosions tore cities down, and the house was totally empty aside from its noise, in the kitchen I was quietly putting one stone on top of another by boiling the water and making my own tea.

As the jug comes to the boil I stick my nose in both the earl gray and the English breakfast packages and take deep breaths while leaning against the pantry door. I think about going back to my usual blend but in the end decide on earl gray again. Doing something just a little different from normal is a good feeling, and silly as it may sound, by drinking her tea I felt just a little closer to Gloria. The smell of that tea in the room, even though you could barely sense it, was more of a real reminder of her than the video on the laptop, no matter how many times I played it. The video will always have her in the computer, but the scent of the tea was like she was actually in the house again.

Then there's a familiar knock at the door, the door to outside right there in the kitchen with me. I'm startled by its proximity and noise and look up to see the door rocking before me. How stupid of me, I think. I should have seen this coming. It's around the same time in the afternoon as the previous two days. I should have anticipated this like I anticipated the three knocks each time, but instead I've gone and stuck myself in the front room. I'm in the kitchen, the one room with no curtains or blinds drawn! Had the caller simply glanced aside while walking up the path to the door then they would surely have seen me, leaning up against the cupboards sniffing tea like an idiot. They probably did. My cover's blown now for sure, I can't pretend not to be home if I've been spotted. The knock comes again, and there's a briskness, a feeling of certainty to it. I've been seen, I think. The jug is near boiling point now and it's making a rattle. It's coating the window with steam again, telegraphing my position. My heart is right up in my mouth now so bad I can feel it beating in my fingers and behind my eyes. I can hear it rushing blood around in my ears.

The third set of knocks comes, followed by a voice. Simply, "Hello?" It's a woman's voice, light yet earthy. It matches the knock. This is different from the other times, I think. She didn't speak the other times. She knows I'm home. The jug is reaching

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climax, clattering on the spot and I bet she can hear it. Still, after this she will leave, I think to myself. I'm wrong. There's a fourth knock, and then a fifth. I'm sweating and I can feel it on my brow and under my arms. I can't remember ever being this nervous and it makes me ashamed all the more. I am standing in my kitchen, wearing boxer shorts, a t-shirt and a sleeping gown. There is no way that I'm opening that door. The jug clicks off and if I can hear her voice then she can hear that too. "Hello?" comes again. I'm monitoring my breathing, taking it in large and slow through my mouth, and staring straight ahead at the door when I notice the handle slowly rotating. There's a second of panic as I race through my memory trying to remember if the door is locked. Surely I would have spun the latch closed after the last pizza was delivered, or would I have simply slammed the door and gotten out of the kitchen as soon as possible?

A moment later the door swings inwards, confirming my fears. It opens slowly and cautiously and I suddenly spring forward like a trap. Before I can reach the door it opens enough for me to see the woman's shoulder in red coat, then the black of her top as her hand on the door handle pushes it open. Her face is visible for a split second and my eyes meet hers. They are pale blue. Her blonde hair goes behind her shoulders, so blonde it is almost without colour at all, but against her fair skin it looks natural. Her eyes are wide with surprise and her mouth is an O ringed with red lipstick, a simple primary red just like her coat. It's the most colour I've seen outside of the TV screen in two weeks.

I charge my body into the door, leading with my shoulder, slamming it shut with a bang. I hear a secondary noise as the closing door throws the woman back and I lean all of my weight against the wood while my hands search for the lock and turn it. Even with the bolt slid shut I don't take my body away from the door. I don't trust it. I can hear a strange noise from outside. A human noise. It takes a moment to catch enough of the sound to work it out but I realize with a start that it's the woman crying. Perhaps the door hit her face as it shut, or cracked against her arm, giving her that shock of pain that makes the tears come no matter what. I feel a little terrible for it but she shouldn't have been barging in like that anyway. The sound gets closer and I hear it for what it really is; laughter. She's laughing, giggling more like it, and

my remorse for hurting her is just suddenly all the more embarrassment.

“Hello, sir?” she says, and I don’t have to see her face to know that it’s being said through a smile. I must look more pathetic than even I thought. I can hear the air she’s breathing in short and sharp takes. She’s trying to hold her laughter back. “Sir, could you open the door please?”

No chance, I think.

“I’d like to talk to you.”

I’m trying to place this woman. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before. She’s no one from church, and she’s certainly not a member of Gloria’s family. A friend of hers perhaps, but not one I’ve ever met. I search my mind for any description Gloria might have given me of her friends that I don’t know, ladies she would have coffee with during the day or people from the neighbourhood that I never crossed paths with but she had certainly never described a woman like this. Even her style of dress was more professional and cosmopolitan than anyone Gloria knew would wear.

“Sir, can I come in?”

Got it, I think. I clear my throat. “Are you a lawyer?” I ask. My voice is weak from under use and sounds strange to me.

There’s a pause. “Am I a what?” comes her eventual puzzled response.

“A lawyer,” I raise my voice. “Are you a lawyer?” I’ve been stuck in the moment of my wife leaving me for two weeks and the topic of divorce hasn’t crossed my mind until right now. I guess I didn’t think Gloria would do it. This shouldn’t be a shock, I tell myself, but it is. Is it too soon? That’s not up to me, I guess.

“No,” says the woman through the door. She sounds surprised by the question, it’s stopped her giggling in its tracks. “I’m not a lawyer.”

She’s waiting for me to say something, I think, but my mind is a blank. Standing in one spot for this long, panicked and sweaty with only a thin door between a female and me, I’m suddenly very aware of my body odour.

“Anyway, sir,” she starts up again, “if you have a minute I’d like to talk to you.”

I’ve got nothing but minutes but I can’t find an answer. I stay silent while she waits for me to respond. Dressed as I am and

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looking like I do I find being called “sir” a little odd. I can hear the war documentary two rooms away come back from commercial. I have my eyes closed now, and in my mind is this woman’s face through the crack in the door. I can’t imagine what a woman like that would be at my house for anymore. She had a pretty face but not in a TV kind of way. Now that I brought it up my thoughts are full of divorce proceedings, the inevitable documents, debates and courtroom plays that could be before me. I should have thought about these things before, but I didn’t. The ideas force me to accept that at some point I’m going to have to leave this world of mine, holed up in the house with my life on pause, and confront the outside world looking respectable and speaking my mind without breaking down. I doubt that a man in a dressing gown who sleeps the days away on his couch can orchestrate a divorce in his favour. But whatever, I’m not ready to cross that bridge yet and anyway, this woman isn’t here about that. I double-check the lock with my hand.

“Hello, sir?” She pipes up again, but I’m gone. I hope she can hear the sound of my bare feet walking away from the door.

Four

Hours after I'm sure she's gone I still go nowhere near the kitchen. My cover blown, I'm watching TV at any volume I like, but no matter how loud it is I can't concentrate. The sun has gone down but I haven't eaten since the morning and my guts are all to hell.

The wedding photograph missing from the wall was all I needed to know my marriage was over, but now that the thought of divorce is in my mind it won't leave. I can't imagine Gloria taking such a step so soon though.

Our wedding was a very traditional affair, in a church with a minister and all the works. We'd been engaged only three months and my family thought I was mad, but Gloria's parents couldn't have been happier. Hardly any of my family came. My parents were there, of course, although they didn't have much to say. None of my family from out of town made the effort though, which was unlike them. As an only child I didn't have a brother for a best man, and all my close friends from school had moved away. I had my friend Jeff instead. We'd shared a flat while we were studying at university and calling him to ask him to be my best man was the first time we'd spoken in a couple of years.

Gloria's father had paid for the service and no expense had been spared. Apparently the swiftness of our engagement wasn't going to be reflected in the ceremony itself. We had it all, like a pair of royals. It felt much too grown up and I was nervous as hell. I rented a suit and bought the rings, and that was all I paid for.

I stood at the head of the aisle as Gloria's father led her towards me. The groom side of the church looked empty compared to the guests on the bride's side. It was enough to make you lean your head to try and balance it. It was the second time I had stood there that day. Having use of the church from morning to night there had been a ceremony earlier to christen me. I had never been christened as a child and it was a condition of marrying Gloria that I was formerly brought into her church. I stood almost a head taller than the elderly minister and he didn't know quite what to do with

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me. He could hardly cradle me in his arms. I had to bend forward almost double for him to dribble that holy water on the crown of my head. It was more like getting your hair washed at the salon than a holy experience. The minister shook my hand afterwards, something I guessed he didn't get to do with the babies, and said, "Congrats, kid. You're an Anglican." Gloria's mother hugged me and her dad patted me on the back. They both looked really happy. My parents didn't come.

The ceremony was really heavy with the religious overtones. The minister who'd just christened me that morning said a lot about our union under God while marrying us. I was only new to this sort of speak and can't remember a lot of what he said. I do remember him reading from the bible in his big voice, full with authority.

"From the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

I don't think anyone on my side of the church had set foot inside a house of God before. They certainly hadn't heard words spoken like this either.

"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife has." The minister was skilled and practiced at filling the hall with his words. They would echo off every polished surface, as if searching for a way straight into your heart. "The unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband."

The vows all were by the book. To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, till death do you part and so on. The same ones that everyone's heard a thousand times before on TV and in the movies. The idea of writing our own vows never came up between Gloria and me, so in turn I never brought it up. It was to be a traditional wedding in every sense. She wore white.

The reception was held at a bowling club a few streets away. After Gloria and I had taken to the floor for our dance to

some old tune that she had chosen, the minister found me making myself scarce at the back of the hall. “Hi there, son,” he chirped as he sat down next to me.

“Hi father,” I said. I wasn’t sure how I should be addressing him yet, but by the colour of his cheeks and the short glass of straight whiskey he slid in front of him I could tell formalities weren’t going to be an issue. He made a show of settling into his chair and taking a big breath as if to signify the dividing point between being at work and being at ease. We both sat wordlessly and looked out onto the dance floor. Gloria and her father were dancing together to another tune I didn’t recognize. Other than that the floor was empty. Instead pockets of guests congregated in little cliques around the tables by the walls.

“That was a nice ceremony you gave,” I said to break the ice.

“Oh, forget about it, Tom,” he said. “It’s you and Gloria who made this day special.” He took a gulp from his glass and cast his eyes towards the dance floor. “Don’t she look lovely?”

“Yeah, she does.”

“Hmmm. Where you taking her on your honeymoon, eh?”

“Oh, we’re not having one,” I said. I was getting a little tired of explaining this to people who asked but the old man was sincere. “We’re going to save the money instead. We’re looking for a house. Gloria’s folks said they’d help us out but we want to do it ourselves as much as we can.”

The minister was obviously impressed with my answer.

“How old are you, Tom?”

“I’m twenty-nine.”

“Hell,” sighed the minister. “I’ve married folk more’n twice your age who don’t have it figured out well as you.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’ve got it that figured out, father.”

“Quit it with the father crap,” smiled the minister, holding up his nearly empty glass for me to see. “I’m what you’d call off duty right now.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Call me George,” beamed the old man with his friendly wrinkled face. “I’m guessing we’ll be seeing a bit of each other what with you part of the herd now.” He laughed so I smiled.

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“Anyhow,” he continued, “it’s good to see a young couple like you taking that road.”

“That road?” I asked.

“You know! Getting a house, making it a home! Too many couples these days wind up getting married like it’s for the sheer heck of it. They get a little bit of paper saying they’re married and that’s it. Nothing changes about their lives. Don’t you think getting married should change you, Tom?”

“Well, sure,” I offered.

“Sure it should! You know what? I married a couple last year, a little older than yourselves they were, and from what I hear they still ain’t living together!” Imagine that! They have separate apartments in roughly the same area of town, and they eat dinner at each other’s places and sleep over like bloody teenagers. That’s not a bloody marriage, is it now?”

“That is strange,” I said, thinking it’s what he wants to hear out of me.

Father George chuckled. “It got me thinking now, is not living together after you’re married worse than living together before you’re married? Ha! What a fine mess.” He drained the last of his whiskey through a smile.

“Can I get you another?” I asked.

“Oh sure!” he said enthusiastically. “Whiskey thanks. Double, straight, no ice. They’ve only got the one brand so you can’t stuff it up,” he laughed. “I’ll have to have a word to young Gloria’s old man about that! It’s a crying shame.”

I got up and made my way to the bar, smiling happily back at people who smiled at me. I couldn’t recognize half the faces I saw. There were a lot of members of the church congregation there that I’d never been introduced to. Behind the bar was a young guy, probably teenage, probably not old enough to drink himself, wearing a white shirt and a black waistcoat. I got George’s whiskey and a beer for me then walked back, placing the glass in front of George before sitting down myself.

“Beer?” asked George in mock surprise. “I’d have thought you’d be getting stuck into the bubbles!”

“Ah, no. This’ll do me.”

“That’s a lad.”

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We sat and watched the dance floor again. Gloria smiled to me as her dance with her father came to an end. I waved to her, smiling back. She looked so beautiful right then. Hundreds of years of tradition have gone into the wedding ceremony, and they've honed down that special something about the dress, the headgear, the whole ensemble. In its component parts the wedding dress is meaningless, almost ridiculous in places. But when assembled somehow the effect is dazzling. You look at the woman you've already chosen to spend the rest of your life with in her wedding dress and she's never looked so good as right then and there. I guess that's why you're not supposed to see her in it before the day. It negates that crucial part of the spell, the big payoff.

Gloria and some of her friends were huddled together talking away so I decided to stay put with George for the time being.

"So, where you looking for a place?" he asks after a while.

"Oh, somewhere nearby. Not too sure exactly," I reply.

"It's a good area for folks like you," says George. "It's not so up market that you can't get anything for your money, but it's nice. There are nice homes around here."

"Sure are."

"What sort of size you looking for?"

"Preferably three bedrooms. Maybe two, but we'd rather go for three."

George mulls this over. "Yeah, you can get pretty good houses that size around here for good money. You could always get yourself a two bedroom joint then add to it, you know? Renovate, when the time comes. Probably work out cheaper. You much with carpentry, home improvement and the such?"

"Not really, sorry."

"Ah, they don't teach you kids that sort of stuff these days, do they? It's all computers and that, right?"

"Yeah, mainly."

"Is that your job then? Working with computers?"

"Yeah, pretty much," I nod.

"Crazy things. They tried to give me a computer for church work, they did. Said it'd help me out writing newsletters and that. I don't touch the thing. It's gathering dust in the basement! I've got myself an old typewriter and Henry down at the library lets me use their photocopier for free as long as I stock up the paper.

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That's my newsletter done! I just don't see the point. Now I know what you're going to say, because they all say it, they do. But let me just tell you this. They got it all wrong with your lot. It's not your fault, personally, I know. But they spent all their time and God knows how much money on teaching you how to use those machines, telling you they were all you'd ever need to get a wonderful job in the future and if you didn't know how to use one you might as well grow hair all over and climb back up the bloody trees! But they were bloody wrong, weren't they?"

He paused there for effect, and to sip his drink. I was starting to suspect that he'd had quite a lot of that whiskey before we started talking.

"They've got all you folks, all wise with computers. But computers, they make the paper jobs easier, and so you need less people, right? So there's all these people and all they know is computers and because of the computers there aren't enough jobs to go around! It's crazy! Then, what do you know? There are no more bloody carpenters in the world! And all those kids who people called dumb and mad for not learning computers through and through, and actually went and learnt a trade, those kids are earning over a hundred grand a year! Ha! And they're getting away with building these crappy houses on the cheap coz there's no one else to build them! Don't you think that's backwards, eh? You can work one of those damned complicated computers, but a guy who swings a hammer all day outside is earning more than you. Much more, probably!"

I shrug. "Yeah, I guess."

George shakes his head slowly, smiling. "No it ain't," he chuckles. "There'll always be carpenters, boy. No matter what we do, no matter what. That's why they got it so wrong with your lot, forcing that computer nonsense down your throats. Who gives a good goddamn about computers, or cars, or whatever? As long as there are human beings on this planet then there'll be people who need houses to live in, chairs to sit on and coffins to be buried in. Ain't no computer making them that I know of, now is there, son?"

"No, you're right," I conceded.

"When God put Jesus among us, he did not make him the son of a computer programmer or nothing. Remember that."

I nodded.

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“Hell, hiring a guy to ad a bedroom to a two bedroom place for you would still be cheaper than buying a three bedroom house, probably,” said George, swinging back from his tangent. That rant of his had completely blindsided me and I found it hard to snap back to normal conversation as fast as he did. “I mean, it’s just you and Gloria, right? You don’t need all those bedrooms right away, do you?”

“No, you’re right.”

George nodded and sipped his whiskey. The level in his glass was going down mighty fast. “So, is Gloria working or going to get a job to help with all this?” he asked.

“No, we’re just going to try and get by on my salary.”

“That’s the way,” smiled George. “You bringing in the bread, her tending to the house. Gosh, did I say how refreshing it is to see a young couple taking this path?”

I smiled. “Yeah.”

George smiled too and leant in close towards me. “Now, I wouldn’t usually ask this, but with all the talk about not having a honeymoon and buying houses and how many bedrooms you’re needing, well I guess I’ll just go ahead. You guys got plans to start a family? I mean, yeah, you just got married so it’s not like you haven’t thought about this. But what I mean is, are you going to start soon?”

I tried not to blush but it wasn’t working. “Um. No immediate plans, father.”

“That’s okay, that’s okay. You don’t need to tell me. But you know, you can. If you like. You don’t have to, but I’m here, you know? I’m your minister now, after all”

“That’s okay,” I said

“What I mean is,” said George, pulling himself closer and staring into my eyes, “is Gloria pregnant right now?” The joviality of his voice from before had all but vanished as he said it and I suddenly felt on trial.

“No,” I stammered out. “Nothing like that.”

George leaned back and the smile returned to his craggy face. “That’s a boy! I knew you were a good sort. Sorry to put you on the spot like that, but I’m your minister now after all.”

“That’s okay, father.”

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“Please, call me George! And I’m sorry for laying into you like that, son. This is all social after all. I’m not in my official capacity anymore today. A christening and a wedding all before lunch? Shoot, I’m done being a minister for today! But you know, I try to look out for my congregation at all times, you know?” he said, looking out to the dance floor where countless members of the church were dancing or drinking or talking excitedly with one another.

“Good turn out today, isn’t it,” I said, trying to change the subject.

George took another of his deep, ceremonious breaths. “Yep, sure is,” he said, then took a drink. “But you know what? I don’t see too many of your flock here.”

He was right too. That lopsided view of the guests in the church divided by bride and groom was still fresh in my mind. My parents were sitting with Gloria’s parents across the hall, although they didn’t look to be talking very much. I was pretty sure that Jeff had left soon after the speeches without saying goodbye. Aside from that, anyone else here for me who had been at the ceremony didn’t seem to have made it to the reception. “Yeah, a bunch couldn’t make it,” I lied.

“That a fact?”

“Yeah,” I said nonchalantly before taking a big pull on my bottle of beer. I had been neglecting it and it was starting to go warm in my clutch. I thought about setting it down on the table, but holding it gave me something to do with my hands. This was another situation where I could have done with a cigarette. Having a beer and a smoke was something that just went together when I was younger.

“That’s a pity,” said George. “The wedding ceremony isn’t just about you two kids, you know. It’s a chance for the families to meet. But shoot, look at your folks over there.” He pointed to the table where my parents and Gloria’s were sitting in stony silence. “Have they met before?”

“Once, briefly.”

“Hell, they ought to be chatting away, getting to know one another. You introduce them properly or what? They’re going to be some baby’s grandparents some day, the lot of them. They’re kin now. What, they don’t get along?”

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“Well, they don’t have much in common, I guess.”

“Ah, that’s crap. I’m sure they do.”

“I’m not so sure. In fact, to be honest with you father, I don’t think they like them.”

“Who doesn’t like who?”

“I don’t think my parents like Gloria’s parents. In fact I know it. I don’t think they approve of Gloria and I know that they don’t approve of this marriage.” It felt strange to let that all out to this drunk old minister but it was going to come out at some point anyway. I might as well pick the time and place before it got too late and happened by itself.

“Why ever would that be?” exclaimed George. “I’ve known Gloria’s folks all their lives and they’re great people!”

“I know they are.”

“What the hell’s the matter then?” asked George to the world at large. He was getting flustered and I felt bad for bringing it up. “They earn a good living. They’re fine people, in church every Sunday.”

I cut him off there. “I think that’s the problem, sir.”

“What damn problem?”

“Church, father.”

“Church?”

“Yeah. My parents don’t belong to a church. None of my family does, that I know of.”

“Are your parents married, boy?”

I gulped. “No, they’re not.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” said George to the air in front of his face. “Were they ever?”

“No.”

“And they had you without being married?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Just me.”

“And they’re not together anymore?”

“No, they’re still together. Still a couple, sir.”

“And they never married?”

“No. I don’t think that matters to them though. I don’t think it means a thing to them.”

“Well, shit,” said George disbelievingly. “Do Gloria’s folks know that?”

“No. I haven’t even told Gloria.”

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“That’s probably smart, boy. Goddamn. Sorry, I know they’re your parents and all but I just can’t stand it myself. I take it they’re atheists then.”

“I don’t know for sure. It’s never really been talked about.”

“But they never took you to church as a kid or talked about God with you, did they?”

“Not church, no. I’ve been told about God and Jesus and everything but nothing in depth, you know?”

“Christmas and Easter stories is all, am I right?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Damn. All respect and all, but it’s people like them that are going to keep me baptizing grown men like you. And tell me, Thomas. Do you believe in God?”

“I think so.”

“You think so?”

“I mean, I am pretty sure.”

“And what do your parents think about that?”

“We haven’t talked about that either.”

“And your parents are objecting to you marrying a religious girl?”

“My whole family does. My parents just showed up because it would be more embarrassing not to. All my cousins and aunts and uncles, they all turned down the invite. I think my folks encouraged them to.”

“Well, I’ll be damned! Imagine that! Not long ago it would have been our lot objecting to our Gloria marrying a barstard atheist!” George laughed. It was good to see him swing back into good spirits. “Doesn’t that seem backwards to you? That it’s the secular bunch all getting in a tizzy that one of their own is marrying someone with Jesus in her heart? Ha! That used to be our job!”

“I know,” I said, chancing a smile along with the cackling old man.

“Oh, it’s a beautiful thing really, isn’t it? I mean, it must be tough for you. What on earth are your parents going to do when you and Gloria get that house and have that family?”

“I don’t think they believe that it will last that long. I think they’ll wait to one side for this to all fall apart and for me to come crawling back to them.”

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“Ha! I’m getting pretty sick of what your parents don’t believe in,” joked the old minister. “You on the other hand, you’ve made the right choice. You look at Gloria now, look at her! You feel that inside you when you look at her? That’s love, that is.

“I know.”

“Good! Good, you’re in love. Now that feeling, where does it come from?”

“Well, from Gloria,” I offered.

“No, you dunce! If it came from a person then you’d be feeling it every time you looked at anyone. That feeling, it comes from God. That love you feel for your new wife is directly from Him! He’s brought you two together and given you that wonderful feeling right there in your guts every time you even think about her so you know that it’s Him doing it! It’s His way, it’s His choice, and it’s all part of his plan for you. God has joined you and Gloria together. That stuff we did back there with the vows and the rings is all just formality after the fact. That feeling you’ve got, that’s God in your heart. And if your parents aren’t about to understand that then that is their loss, am I right?”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Well you remember that, son. You’re pretty green around the ears but I take it you’ll be joining us on Sundays from now on, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, you and me will have to make a little time, just one on one. We’ll go over the stuff you should have learnt as a kid. As long as you remember where that feeling’s coming from you’re on the right track, but there’s all kinds of things you should know as well. But you’re a good sort, son. You’ve got a lot figured out for yourself already, I can tell. The bible’s going to be like an old friend to you, whether you’ve ever read it or not.”

“I haven’t,” I said.

“Didn’t think so,” smiled the minister while rising from his seat. “Look, I’ve taken up too much of your time already. This is your wedding day! Now go out there and be with your wife. And don’t worry about your olds. They’ll come around when they see what a life you lead. I know you’ve got it in you, Tom.”

The next day we heard about how Father George had tried to drive himself home that afternoon and wrapped his 1989 Falcon

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around a power pole. Electricity was cut to a handful of suburban blocks for the evening while emergency services tried to separate the mangled wreckage of the car from the thin, immovable concrete post. Once the danger from the overhead lines was dealt with it still took most of the night to clean up the scene. He must have been going a hell of a clip. You could find shards of glass from his windshield fifty meters down the road for weeks afterwards. It was reported that he died instantly, but how would they know? I'd often think about his cold damaged body in an autopsy room someplace as doctors cut into him, hoping to find some sign that he was knocked out cold by the impact. The steering column having pushed his nose swiftly back into his brain, or just giving him a merciful final blow to the forehead like a fisherman does to his catch. Perhaps they would find a clean break in the spinal cord between the vertebrae of his neck. They'd want to find anything to say that it wasn't the gruesome lacerations from the window glass, or the steel of the chassis digging through his flesh, or the crumpling of the front end, crushing his legs to a pulp and leaving him to slowly bleed out that did him in. Would the news ever report that a local minister who had perished in an accident hadn't died quickly? They certainly didn't mention the whiskey.

His funeral was three days later and Gloria and I sat up close in the very same room we'd just been married in, with many of the same people in the pews behind us. That was my second ever time in a church. Gloria's father spoke, breaking down often as he recounted all the wonderful things that Father George had done for people in the congregation. He asked us not to grieve, but to rejoice for all the good that George had brought into the world when he lived. I didn't really know how to do either. Gloria sobbed too and I held her hands tightly like we'd done for the wedding photo. The next Sunday there was no service, but the next week a new minister took up residence. He was younger than George had been and had no idea how new to the fold I was. I was treated like another member of the church and assumed to be on an equal footing with all the other men my age there. I didn't have the courage to ask this new father about the things that I supposedly should have learnt as a child that George was going to teach me, but I picked up bits as time went by. I'd read Gloria's bible sometimes, and while I found some comfort in it, it did not feel like the old friend that George said it

would be. Instead it reminded me more of George himself than anything else. With every story I read I'd try to apply what it told me to a bloody car accident, or a whiskey fuelled rant. Still, I felt in my heart that love that he described and a lot of things made sense to me because of it. And like any sort of animal dropped into a herd I soon learnt the rules.

This is why I can't imagine Gloria wanting to file for divorce, despite thinking that strange woman today could have been a lawyer. Nor can I imagine her parents advocating such a step. No matter how much I've shamed her, she is one of George's flock and this marriage is his marriage too. It makes me feel all the worse, now that I think about it, because she's backed into a corner. If divorce is to come, it's a long way off yet. Not that I feel any better about that. I still know that I've lost her for good.

And this feeling that's in me now, has God put that there too? Why? To let me know I was wrong? As if I don't know that myself! What feeling has he put in Gloria? Oh, I hope it's nothing like mine. I can't stand to think of her, as wretched as I am. There's nothing fair in this world if she feels like I do right now.

Five

About two months ago I heard from Jeff again for the first time since my wedding. He had mailed me a wedding invitation of his own. I didn't recognize the bride's name but I didn't really expect to. It had been almost two years since we had last spoken and God knows what had happened in his life since then. It looked like his best friend from childhood was going to be his best man, and the rest of the groom's party was made up of his close friends and his two brothers. That was fair enough, I guessed. It was nice to get another person's wedding invitation and see that other people's lives were predictably turning just as mine and Gloria's had. I wrote back a brief letter saying that as the date of the wedding fell on a Sunday we would be unable to attend, as Gloria and I had not missed a Sunday at church since the death of Father George. But I wished them all the very best and had Gloria pick up some vouchers from a house wares store to send with the letter as a wedding gift. Had I really tried I guess we could have taken the day away from church but it was a strange time in our marriage and I didn't want to risk making any waves by breaking from routine. Jeff had only given me one month's notice after all. Also, I had learnt from my own that I didn't particularly like weddings.

A few days later I got a phone call at home. "Hello, Tom?" said the man at the other end when I picked up.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"This is Jeff, man, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm okay, I guess," I answered, still a little surprised that Jeff was calling me. "How are you? Congratulations, by the way."

"Thanks, Tom, thanks. So, you sure you can't make it?"

I looked across the lounge to Gloria. This was well before the room had become my hovel. It was lovingly cared for, dusted every week and without a speck of dirt or grime to be seen anywhere. The wedding photo hung on the wall and the wooden surfaces of the furniture were all either polished to a shine or had a

lacy white cloth over them. The place smelled like a home should. Gloria was reading in an armchair with the sun coming through the large window and bathing her in a golden light that made the stray hairs on her head glow like a halo. "I'm sure," I told Jeff.

"That's too bad. But hey, will you be free that Friday night?"

"The Friday right before your wedding?"

"Yeah, that's the one. We're having my stag do that night at a bar in town. Would you be keen?"

"Um, I'm not sure."

"Not sure? Come on, man! You didn't even have a stag night yourself! You may as well come along to mine," said Jeff and suddenly I felt twenty-three years old again.

The party was two weeks later. The bar was an Irish joint downtown. I had no trouble finding it as I'd lived nearby when I was younger in a little one-bedroom apartment. I hadn't been into that part of the city since though and it felt strange returning, especially during the night. It was dark and wet, having rained that evening, and the black concrete shone and reflected every light off its imperfect surfaces. It looked familiar yet completely new at the same time, like the negative of a photograph. I had been living in the suburbs since Gloria and I had bought the house and found almost no reason to leave. The closed-in feeling on downtown was now strange to me, and the big gray buildings that lined the streets felt like walls in a maze a mile high. I took a bus into the city centre and walked the handful of blocks to the bar. I felt like a stowaway, completely out of place, returning from my suburban exile without a word of permission from anyone. It felt strange to be here without Gloria too.

The bar was warm and colourful compared to outside and it's well lit interior shined through the windows and out into the dark night like a lighthouse. Jeff shook my hand and bought me a handle of beer when I arrived. He introduced me to his friends. I knew some of them already from the time Jeff and I had lived at the same place and people he knew were always dropping by. I found I had even less to say to them now than I did back then, and I sat at the edge of the group and listened to them talk amongst themselves. I laughed along with their jokes and reflected that this was the sort of place that I used to come to all the time, but whatever I came for

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back then wasn't there now. When Jeff noticed that I'd drained my beer he went and fetched me another one, smiling all the time. "There you go, champ!" he said. "Man, you used to really be able to chop these back! Ha!" He was obviously in very high spirits and I was happy enough just to see him like that.

Eventually with all the chair swapping that was going on, with people getting up to go to the bar or the bathroom or outside for smokes, Jeff and I ended up sitting next to each other for a while. He sat down next to me and made sure I was all right for a drink. I could smell the booze on his breath and see the bloodshot eyes not focusing properly on my face. "So, Tom," he slurred through his big, smiling mouth. "Tell me what I've gotten myself in for."

"Um, you mean marriage?" I asked timidly. It was the first time someone had addressed me directly that night about anything other than if I needed a drink. I suddenly felt on the spot and part of the scene rather than an outside observer. I was aware of the bar's bright overhead lights on my skin for the first time. In my mind I was still outside on the wet concrete, looking in.

"Yeah!" replied Jeff enthusiastically. "What's it like, man?"

I fidgeted with my beer. "It's wonderful."

Jeff smiled at me. "Good to hear it's working out for you. Gives me hope at least!"

"I'm glad." I took a swig of beer. "There's nothing more holy than the union between a man and a woman under god."

Jeff's drunken eyes swung back into focus. "What?"

"Oh, you know," I said, shifting uneasily in my chair. "The joining into one flesh and, you know." My voice trailed off into nothing. I was trying to remember what Father George had said to me on my wedding day that had put me so at ease, but the beer had clouded my recollection already and I couldn't find his voice or his certainty within me anywhere. My words came out like flimsy Chinese whispers.

Jeff was looking at me in surprise, but giving me time to finish all the same. When he realized I was done he finally spoke. "Wow. You really believe that, then?"

I nodded.

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“Okay,” said Jeff, then gave a non-committal, “that’s cool.” A few minutes passed in silence before he asked if I was all right for a beer again.

Before I could answer him one of Jeff’s friends came back from the bar, hooting and hollering and carrying a tray crammed with shot glasses. He was a tall guy with blonde hair and looked younger than either Jeff or me. “Okay guys! Listen up!” he bellowed and set the tray down on our table. “The day after tomorrow our Jeff is getting hitched to the lovely Rachael!” There were cheers and yells at this point but the tall blonde guy hushed them. “Now, now! Save that feeling, dudes! Now, we’ve all heard Jeff’s drunken ramblings about how much he loves her, and his even drunker ramblings about how great she is in the sack!” The table broke into laughter and Jeff’s face went red and he hid his eyes in mock embarrassment. “So, all in all I think our Jeff’s made a fine decision!” People began to applaud at this before the blonde guy jumped back with, “because it could have been that Danielle slut!” and everyone laughed again, even Jeff although he wouldn’t look up. “So everyone, grab a shot, and let us toast this wonderful guy, Jeff!”

People reached into the middle of the table and grabbed at the shot glasses. I held back but one was passed to me anyway. I sniffed it and it smelt almost industrial, like something found in the engine of a strange vehicle. “Three! Two! One!” yelled the blonde guy and everyone took the drink. As their hands went up to their mouths I felt mine do the same, as if I wasn’t moving it myself but the group was moving it for me. The liquid stung against my tongue and made me salivate as it washed over the back of my throat and down into my stomach. Someone asked the blonde guy what it was they’d just been given and he grinned, saying it was white rum. “One-fifty-one proof!”

The empty shot glasses clattered back onto the table as people were done with them. I stood up and Jeff looked up at me in concern. “Just going for some water. Need a chaser.”

“Man, you really have changed,” said Jeff.

I managed to get to the bar fairly easily. This place couldn’t be too popular on Friday nights as there was no queue to speak of. I was feeling the rum burn in my stomach and knew that it was only a matter of time before it hit my bloodstream like a rocket.

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There was one girl behind the bar but everyone else seemed to have been served already and were just standing around. “Just a water please,” I said once she leaned over to me.

“Two bucks,” she said.

“For water?”

“Yep.”

“Whatever,” I resigned. It wasn’t like I was going to go without. I got my wallet out. “And another beer too, please.”

“What are you having?”

“I don’t know. That guy whose party it is over there has been getting them for me. Whatever that is.”

“Sure,” said the bargirl and ran a handle off from the taps. “Six fifty.”

I paid and downed the water in one. It was mostly ice anyway. I could still feel the rum but it wasn’t all I could feel anymore. The cold beer helped too. I decided to stay at the bar a second and watched Jeff’s party from a distance. The blonde guy hadn’t turned his voice back down from the toast he’d given and was raving on about something or another to a bunch of the drinkers at the table.

“Rowdy bunch, aren’t they?” said a voice from behind me.

I turned around to look at the woman next to me at the bar who had just spoken. She stood almost a foot shorter than me and had red hair in a fringe cut. Strikingly red hair, it was obviously dyed. She wore big, trendy dark glasses that hid her most of her face. “Yeah, they are,” I said, and then, “Sorry.”

“Oh, are you with them?” she asked. She was drinking a cocktail in a tall glass. I couldn’t place it by sight. She hardly bothered to take the two straws out of her mouth to talk.

“Yeah, I am. Kind of.”

“No need to apologize,” she said while watching the party on the other side of the bar. “It’s pretty funny to watch.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I hear her take a big sip on her drink. “Let me guess, a bachelor party?”

“That’s right.”

“Who’s the one getting hitched? You?”

“No, no.” I point Jeff out to her.

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“I can’t see there. Here, just a minute.” She passed her cocktail to me and I instinctively grabbed it with my free hand. Then using both her palms on the bar she vaulted her delicate frame up, almost to my height, then craned her neck around the other patrons and looked in the direction I had pointed. I was aware of how skimpy her outfit was and how much of her flesh I could see. Her back, her legs, her arms were all bare. The rest was covered in thin black garments. A holterneck top and short skirt. I was a lot more comfortable when she let herself back down onto her bar stool. “Yeah, I think I saw him,” she said. “The thin guy sitting down with his tie undone?”

“That’s him.”

“Idiot,” she smiled and took back her drink.

“Why do you say that?”

She sighed. “Getting married. It’s stupid. A guy like that, what’s his fiancé like?”

“I haven’t met her, actually,” I admitted.

“Well, you don’t need to. A guy like that only marries one type, and that’s the type that forces him to do it. He looks like he’s got some money. You can bet he’s been putting it around, fucking all sorts of girls.” She spoke so softly, like pouring a thick liquid over a polished stone, so that not even her curse words stood out. “But there’ll be one girl, one who convinces him that she’s better than the rest. And she’ll say she has to have this, and she has to have that. And he has to stop seeing his other girls. They’ll have a splendid wedding, I’m sure. And they’ll decide not to have children for a few years while they concentrate on their careers or some shit. Oh, one day he might realize that she never wanted to get married in the first place. She just wanted him to buy her an expensive ring and let her buy an expensive dress. But usually she’ll figure it out for herself first, and then she’s out of there. She’ll get the house and he’ll get the car. Everyone knows that dance.”

I couldn’t tell because of her dark glasses, but I don’t think that she was even looking at me as she spoke. I could only stand there and listen. She looked younger than me and she seemed to be at the bar alone.

“Sorry,” she said after a while. “I shouldn’t go off on you like that. You’re here for your friend.”

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“That’s ok,” I said, and took my cue to leave. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Who was that you were talking to?” asked Jeff when I sat back down with the group.

“Oh, you saw that? I don’t know, to be honest.”

“That chick looks like a freak, man!” said the blonde guy, butting in. “Look at that! No one has their hair like that!”

“She’s pretty hot, dude,” said one of his friends.

“Yeah man, in a freaky-cool way,” said the blonde guy excitedly. “You sure you don’t know her, man?”

“I don’t,” I said.

“You see that skirt before? Are you sure she’s not the, uh, the hired help?”

“Ha!” laughed the blonde guy. “I wish! But old man Jeffery told us we weren’t allowed to get a stripper.”

“Oh, man!”

“Hey, come on,” said Jeff, laughing along. “We couldn’t do that. This is a public bar!”

“But we are going to hit a strip club later, aren’t we Jeff?” pried the blonde guy.

“Okay, okay!” said Jeff holding up his hands in surrender.

“Yeah, that’s probably going to happen, isn’t it?” They all fell about laughing.

“Shit, at this rate it is!” giggled the blonde guy. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where’s he going?” asked Jeff as we watched him go. He wandered up to the bar and we saw him say something to the bargirl, then her reach down and pull out another tray. “Oh, holy shit!” laughed Jeff when she saw her start to line up shot glasses on it. “Can we handle this shit again?”

“Jeff, I think I’m going to go home,” I said. The words just came out of my mouth with almost no premeditation.

“Bullshit, Tom!” replied Jeff happily. “If anyone can do this then you can!”

“But Jeff, Gloria will be waiting up for me and I hardly know anyone here.” I hardly know you, Jeff, I thought to myself.

“No!” laughed Jeff with mock authority. The shots were laid out on the table before us. “You stay here and you do this!”

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This time they all counted down from three together, and once again I felt myself go along with the pack and down the shot. It was the same over proof gut rot as before, but inoculated against the shock of the alcohol this one felt strangely good. It was warming and it spread all the way out to your fingers and toes in a warm shiver.

“See! You’re smiling!” said Jeff happily, and despite everything I was.

I managed to go without a water chaser that time, but soon afterwards the blonde guy fetched a third round. “Should I be paying for some of these?” Jeff asked the guys at the table.

“Nah, he’s happy to get them. Just look at him.”

The third shot went down almost as well as the second, but my body protested. I got up to go to the bar for some water again and Jeff shot me a jokingly disapproving stare before cracking up laughing at me. I was laughing at me too. As far as I could tell I was the only person who needed to gulp down water afterwards and I felt like a funny old man

The place was getting a little more crowded by now, and I had to wait a little while to get served. Once I reached the bar I found myself right next to the same girl as before. “This is for you,” she said and slid a tall glass of water towards me.

“Thanks,” I said, a little stunned. “How did you know what I was going to order?”

“Are you kidding? You’ve just had three shots of one-fifty-one proof junk in half an hour. If you were going to come up and buy anything else you weren’t going to be served. Besides, you took that second shot so well, what without having a chaser and all. I knew you’d be gagging for it this time around.”

“You’ve been watching?”

“Like I said, you guys are funny to watch. Macho drinking is pointless without someone watching anyway, isn’t it?”

I drank my water. It had two black bendy straws in it like her cocktail and I sucked it down fast, making a slurping gargling sound when I ran out. “Thanks for that,” I said.

“No problem,” she replied, and smiled coquettishly. I still couldn’t see her eyes behind those big black glasses but I could imagine them smiling too. “You must be wasted,” she laughed at me.

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I checked myself. “Not really,” I said. “Still, those shots might not have caught up with me yet.”

“You want another drink?” she asked, almost like a dare.

“Well,” I coughed, trying to find my manners. It was starting to feel too bright in the bar and I found myself wanting a big pair of black glasses as well. “It’s my turn to buy you one, isn’t it?”

“Ha! I only spent two bucks on that water, and besides, they won’t serve you. I was serious before. They’re cutting off your whole party. For an hour or so at least, maybe not all the night, but long enough to get you guys to quiet down a bit, or fuck off to another bar. Take this,” she said and passed me her cocktail like before. This was a fresh one and looked like she hadn’t sipped from it yet. “That’s yours,” she hissed in a whisper, “now hide it under the bar!”

I did as I was told and held the glass down in front of the bar while the girl ordered another drink for herself and had it made up. I stood next to her, trying to look nonchalant, and looked the other way. When it was made she tugged on my sleeve and I looked back. She was smiling a mischievous smile now. “You can’t let them see you drink that now,” she whispered. “You’ll get us both in trouble.”

“I guess.”

“You want to take these outside and have a smoke?”

I thought about it. “Yeah, sure.”

There was a door out the back into an alleyway where you could take your drinks and have a cigarette. Once out the door the girl grabbed my hand and pulled me to the right. “We not allowed to take our drinks this far from the bar,” I reminded her.

“You’re not supposed to have a drink at all,” she reminded me. “It’s too windy there.” I didn’t feel any wind, but I wasn’t dressed like she was. She lead me around the back of the bar’s dumpster. The alleyway ends there and there’s a sheltered spot in the corner that the dumpster makes with the wall where the evening’s rain hadn’t penetrated. We both leant up against the dry bit of the wall and she took two cigarettes out of her little black shoulder bag and handed one to me. I heard her strike a match and the lower part of her face was suddenly illuminated by the flame, her fringe and glasses forming dark and severe shadows. She lit her smoke and cupped her hands around the match and brought it

towards me and I lit mine with it too. It was my first cigarette in God knows how long and it went right to my head. I sipped from the strange cocktail the girl had given me between drags and felt the smoke, the rum, the beer and whatever else was in the glass right then all clouding up my mind. It was a good feeling and somewhat liberating. I concentrated on the burning cherry at the end of my cigarette and observed how it left streaks of orange in the air when I moved it about.

“Hey, buddy?” said the girl after a few drags on her smoke.

“Yeah?”

“You mind changing places? That wind is still getting at me around the edge of this dumpster.”

“Sure thing.” I stepped forward and she took my place closer to the corner. When I settled back I felt we were closer and our shoulders were touching. Out in the cold of the night it felt good to be leaning against something other than brick and concrete. I couldn’t feel the wind she talked about but I could see the sheen of the rain-wet alley, and the sight alone made me feel colder. I flicked the ash off the end of my smoke and it landed somewhere damp with a hiss.

“Hey, buddy?” came her voice again after a time.

“What?”

“Do you mind if I stand up next to you? You know? Closer? Just that it’s real cold. I mean, you can see what I’m wearing, can’t you? I know it’s my own damned fault for dressing this way on a night like this but just while we’re out here, do you think I could, I don’t know, maybe hold you?”

“Um, I don’t know. Sure, I guess,” I said. I was concentrating more on the fluffy feeling in my head than the girl. I hadn’t been drunk in a long time and it suddenly occurred to me that that’s what I am. I could feel the blood in my body protest as I breathe in my smoke, but still my body relaxed more and more with every drag. The girl turned to face me and hold me from my side, fitting her head under my right shoulder. She put her arms around my front and back and I noticed that she’d put her drink down somewhere. Her cigarette was nowhere to be seen. This was a good feeling, I remember thinking to myself.

Even when her hand crept down my front and rested between my legs I didn’t stir and I didn’t protest. I just stood there

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with that big dumb, drunk grin on my face. The camera footage from across the alley shows it well. It's a low quality recording, in grainy black and white like you'd expect in a World War Two documentary, but you can see my face. Her hand finds its way into my fly and starts massaging me through my underwear, and I still don't make a move to stop her. Here whoever edited this video has cropped the image, done away with the irrelevant surroundings, and zoomed in right on her hand in my pants. You can see the erection forming through the fabric and her fingers reacting, finding their way around it and holding it, then pulling back and going over the elastic band of my boxer shorts to caress it, skin on skin. She works the boxers down over my penis and it flips out into the cold night air. I'm still wearing that horrible smile as she undoes my belt and pulls my pants down around my thighs. Then she moves around so that she's facing away from the camera, and drops to one knee in front of me, and takes my erect penis in her mouth. Her head is still for a moment while she concentrates on working her tongue over it, then she starts rocking backwards and forwards. The video pulls back on the zoom, and what does it show me doing? Stroking her fucking hair, that's what. I've got my cock in this strange woman's mouth, her sunglasses and dramatic fringe are pressing against the sensitive part of skin under the navel every time she takes it in further, sending me shivers up my back. And on the screen I'm stroking her hair in grainy black and white with a drunkards grin.

Six

The Sunday that Jeff got married I sat in church with my wife and sweated a cold, dead sweat. Nothing the minister said found its way into my ears. My mind was full of the video I had been emailed. The morning before I had been groggy with a hangover, an unusual feeling for me now that I had become the model, churchgoing suburban husband. I could picture the shots of rum, and a credit card receipt from a taxi was in my pants pocket, but other than that there was a lot I couldn't remember. I couldn't remember getting home, and I couldn't remember getting into bed. When I woke the sun was already high in the sky and Gloria was not lying next to me.

I found her in the dining room with a cup of instant coffee. "The jug's just boiled if you want some," she smiled in a pissed-off way. "And I bet you do."

I wiped my eyes and walked barefoot into the kitchen, first taking a big drink of water from the tap and then beginning to make myself a cup of instant. I spooned in twice my usual amount. "What time is it?" I asked.

"Just gone past two," said Gloria from the next room.

"Sorry if I disturbed you coming home last night," I said.

"You really don't remember, do you?" she asked while walking into the kitchen to join me. She was wearing a white blouse and her long brown hair had been left down and hung in loose spirals. She sounded disapproving, but still amused.

"What?"

"You came in last night some time past midnight, crying drunk! I mean," and she paused to laugh, "you were actually sobbing and talking gibberish. I do hope you had a nice time, baby, but it sounds like you went just a teensy bit overboard, doesn't it?"

I was confused, not so much by what she was telling me, but how she was telling me it. I was sure that I would have made her mad and upset the chilly and delicate balance that we had been maintaining. But she was acting just the opposite, as if by me stepping outside my usual routine I had further endeared myself to

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her. Of course she was making a play of being upset with me, but beneath that somewhere in her voice was something that I hadn't heard there in a long time. Something I don't think I even knew was missing. If this was a permanent or fleeting change I didn't know, but I was happy in my seedy hangover right then all the same. "I'm sorry, darling," I said.

"You don't remember much, do you?"

"No, I guess not."

"You silly man," she said, sliding her arms beneath mine and hugging me from behind as I finished pouring the hot water into my mug. We stood there looking out the window at the little concrete path that led to the gate. The small stretch of lawn out there was a deep green and hardly ever saw the sun. The flowers there grow tall and crane towards the daylight. On the windowsill in the foreground were a handful of tiny potted plants that Gloria would tend to, and which would be dead within two weeks of then from neglect. "There's hope for you yet, my little sinner," she said quietly into my shoulder.

Later in the day, after Gloria had fetched me some painkillers and I thought my eyes could focus on the screen without agitating my headache, I booted up the laptop and checked my email. Right then every bit of colour got sucked out of the day. From an unknown address on an anonymous web based service came this video. I recognized my own face in and suddenly the black satin sheet that covered my memory of the previous night was ripped away. Everything fell back into order and I forgot to breathe as the flashes of the girl, her glasses, her hair, her cocktail the dumpster and the cigarette arranged themselves between my memory of the rum and what the video on my screen was showing me. It played once through and as my own memory caught up with it I could sense what would be coming next. The video ended showing me, sitting up against the dumpster after it was all over, passed out in a boozy sleep, with the burnt out butt of a cigarette still in my mouth. The girl had disappeared seconds after I had come, back to the bar or out the alley and into the night. The camera didn't follow her and there was no audio, not that it looked as if we spoke at all, so I don't know.

Had I woken up myself, or had Jeff and his friends found me? Had I remembered right then what I had done? Was that what

I was trying to admit to Gloria in my incoherent state, or did I make my way home blissfully unaware? How had I let myself get so far out of control, so far off this path that I had set for myself? As the video ended my wife was in the laundry, doing my washing. The wife I had been baptized for, read the bible for. The wife I threw my previous life away for and was now rebuilding for, with God in my life. My own parents aren't talking to me because of this marriage, but I set myself this path deliberately and of my own free will regardless! I promised to follow the rules, hers and His. And now in one night I have undercut everything that we have been building together, a marriage together, a union under God. A divine and sacred example of his love on earth between Gloria and me, so that we might be blessed with a child of our own. How could he react to me, the drunkard, wandering right into the gates of Gomorrah? I tried my best to deny it to myself, but there it was before me. The visual proof.

The rest of the day I acted up my hangover and lay alone, unsleeping in the bedroom with the curtains pulled. Being reminded of what I had done had shocked me so thoroughly that it was hours before I began to question why. Why had I been filmed, and why had I been emailed the footage? The word came to mind with such a blunt force that I almost said it out loud. Blackmail. I did a quick sum and worked out what was in the savings account, what I could draw on credit, what I could ask for from work. But how would I pay without Gloria noticing? She'd have to notice, no other way around it. So what will she hate more, a bankrupt and stealing husband, or a....

I couldn't say the word to myself, even in my thoughts. An adulterous husband. Adulterous. Adulterous. What would she hate more, a bankrupt and stealing husband or an adulterous one? There. No, let's rephrase that. Which commandment is my wife going to prefer that I break? What about her parents? Do I now stand to be excommunicated from yet another family?

And who stands to gain? Who would go to this trouble over me? Was it a set up? The girl hardly seemed real, her appearance and dress more like something out of a fantasy. She came to me without a fraction of suggestion. Was she paid? Did I really get that drunk off three shots and a handful of beers, or was there something else thrown in there? Is this Jeff's idea of a joke? I

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sure as hell can't rule it out. And his stupid, shouting blonde friend forcing shots down everyone's throats, what about him? Was this all pre-planned? Were they just waiting for me to walk into that bar so they could ruin my fucking life?

I started to reel my thoughts in at this point when I realized that I was trying to portion the blame. I had let it happen. Whether by chance or by conspiracy, a situation had developed out there in that alleyway that was mine to stop, and I had failed. What was done was done, and as how I reacted to the next set of challenges that would determine the amount of damage done. Presumably if it were a prank it would end right there, but I didn't expect this. Too much had gone into this set-up for it to be a simple prank. The hidden camera, the girl, the drinks. There had to be a return made on the investment. But there was no text in the email that delivered the video. No demands had been made outright. They must want me to sweat, really stew in my mistake and get desperate. Soon I should expect the demands. Then I have to decide what to do.

Then the thought hit me, what if it's neither a prank nor blackmail, but something more sinister. What if it was all just a vice trap to humiliate me in front of my wife, and nothing more? Why not? There were enough shifty eyes and sideways glances in the congregation already, and more than a few souls who would happily declare themselves the Moral Police. I had always known that I was still an outsider to them. Would they put these sorts of tests in front of me to prove my worth? Could I really have failed the first one and confirmed their suspicions just like that? So now what? Do they let Gloria in on the secret right away? Obviously not, I've been emailed this the very next day. Is this a grace period for me to admit what I've done to my wife and spare her the pain of seeing the video for herself? If so, how long do I have?

These are the thoughts that were racing through my pounding head while I feigned sleep, but all the while there was something developing. Not so much a thought as a feeling, and not so much in my head as in my entire body. The thoughts that I was trying to deal with were like mere ships upon this feeling's rising ocean. Like a tide coming in that has never come before, it rose up and, taking control of me drowned every thought out of my mind save one; my marriage was over.

The details done away with and this stark, simple truth revealed I felt I could almost relax. I began to release my grip on the threads and factors of my predicament and let go of the images I had been carrying around in the back of my eyes since seeing the video. I realized it didn't matter what I did. It didn't matter what I thought. I closed my eyes and started taking deep breaths. I felt the peace of staring down from the edge of a tall bridge or building, content in the wisdom that I had shifted my centre of gravity too far out already and that flailing my arms for a railing or something to hang on to was a fruitless endeavour. I was going to hit the ground anyway, so I might as well not worry about clutching the air on the way down. As the wind blew I fell faster and faster, and I organized myself into a determined headfirst dive. With my arms straight against my body I fell like a wingless airplane, my head arched up and my eyes pried open despite the upward rush of cold dry air hitting them. I stared straight down as the ground came straight up, the shining concrete of the wet city showing my blurry reflection in it like a bird's in a window pane. I watched it speed towards me until I could see the whites of my own eyes.

Waking with a start I sat bolt upright. Gloria was asleep next to me and the bedside clock said five am. The sheet beneath me was wet with sweat and it chilled immediately. I got up and paced around the house. I took the opportunity while Gloria was still sleeping to watch the video one more time. That was a mistake. Whatever calm I had convinced myself into the night before was swept away and replaced with the terrifying bundle of fears from before. A ball of string with forty ends sticking out, knotted beyond all hope. My resignation and decision to face the consequences was replaced by unmitigated cowardice. The angry response I started writing to the sender of the email was cut short and eventually aborted. I found that had nothing to say to them. It was their move. It was always going to be their move.

Sitting in church later that Sunday morning with Gloria by my side and in that panicked sweat I seriously considered running. It seemed the only course of action that was left to me, other than to give myself up to the mercy of others like an anchorless ship in a storm. The waiting was already killing me. I thought of Jeff getting married as I sat in that church. What was going on there? Were he and his drunken pals trading stories about me, about what

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they'd done? Was there someone in this very church, watching the beads of sweat on my forehead? Knowingly watching me crack under the strain. I couldn't look the minister in the eye as he gave his sermon. I couldn't listen to him either. I felt like my very being there made the place unclean. I felt like I'd scraped the muck in on my shoes. I was a sinner in God's house. I sat low in my seat. I stood stooped down and sang the hymns under my breath. If someone looked at me and seen the terror on my face then it might have confirmed everything right there before everyone. Would the earth have opened up and swallowed me right there and then? Would I have burst into flame under the gaze of the flock? I felt among the lions in a never-ending night. My secret felt like a smear of ash on my forehead, giving me away to the world.

Gloria continued her light-hearted banter throughout the day over my hangover and copious sleeping the day before, and I reacted as best I could. As far as I know she didn't spot anything too different about my actions, and she didn't seem to have been let in on the secret herself. Had she heard she would have left then and there, no doubt about it. Gloria took this seriously. The bible said that marriage was a sacred commitment between a man and a woman, the manifestation of God's love on Earth, and so ours was to be. We married two years ago. I was twenty-nine and she was twenty-seven. I was her first time. Since then, oral sex hadn't even come up in conversation. Any sex act that wasn't about procreation was simply off limits, I had come to learn this and we both knew and accepted this without having to talk about it. That's not to say that she didn't let herself go and really enjoy the act. We would make love three, four, five times a night and hold each other until dawn, too exhausted yet too wide awake and excited to go to sleep. I'd take days off from work and we would lie together all day, talking together. About the future, about us. About children. We'd hold each other and make slow, sweet love, both of us thinking, "This will be the time." We were trying for a baby. Gloria was no idiot, and certainly no prude, but I knew that the concept of a blowjob from an unknown woman behind the trash of a downtown bar was not just against her beliefs, it was outside of her understanding. To tell her what I had done would be as if I had stood in front of her and unzipped my skin, stepping out of it as some horrid and unknown demon.

The next day was Monday. I sat at work in a daze. There was still no word from any would-be blackmailers. Still no sign that Gloria knew. No sign from anywhere, anything. I almost prayed for something to happen, good or bad, to unhinge the uncertainty that was my mind. I thought more about running. Gloria in the kitchen with her angelic brown hair and white blouse in the afternoon sun, hugging me from behind, saying, “There’s hope for you yet, my little sinner,” in that melt-your-heart way of hers. If only she knew. I was beyond hope. Resignation crept back into my mind. Where could I run? I have no friends that would take me in. My parents would probably see me, if I grovelled. If I told them every little thing that I wasn’t going to tell my wife, and let them hear it, “You were right, it didn’t work out.”

I left work at the usual time and headed for home. I couldn’t make a decision and I felt habit take over, lead me along the familiar path. I felt the twinge in my muscles and the thought would flash to turn, to sprint, but immediately a cold rush would follow and I’d snap back onto course like a trained animal. I watched a couple of the other side of the road while I waited to cross. The man had a large pack on his back, the woman did not. He was using his cell phone. “Just tell me who you’re messaging?” cried the woman. The man made no response, but turned his back and walked a short distance away. The woman followed, maintaining the same length of separation. She held out her arms in a wordless plea. The man looked at her. He had been crying. She was still sniffing and her voice would waver with emotion. “Tell me where you’re going!” There was still no response from the man. It was raining lightly and her light gray sweatshirt was getting dark spots on it. He began to walk, and she followed, always twenty or so paces behind. He would stop every so often and turn to look back. She would stop too, sometimes saying something, sometimes not. He was going to leave her, but she wasn’t going to be left by any more than ten meters. There was genuine fear in her voice when she cried out to him, and no matter why the man might be leaving I couldn’t help but feel for her. When I drove down the same road a moment later they were both sitting in the doorways of adjacent buildings with their heads in their hands. A taxi passed my car going the other way a little while later and its light was off. The rain was getting heavy by then.

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My drive home was automatic, my mind preoccupied with thoughts of Gloria and the video. She wouldn't find the video on the laptop, that much I was certain of, and no one would try to email a copy to her. She never used computers when it could be avoided, and any electronic communication in the house ran the risk of me intercepting it. Whoever was behind this would anticipate that, I thought. So if someone were to try and get that video to her, or even tell her what was on it, they'd have to do it physically, either by mail or by person. Gloria's at home during the day, and I am at work. If blackmail is the game then they'll have to be planning to reveal the information to her while I am out. I start to frantically figure a way out of this mess. I could ignore any demands for money and then take the next week or so off work and stay at home, I think. I'd explain it to Gloria that I felt like spending some time with her alone. That would probably fly, given the recent thaw in our relationship. That way I'd be likely to intercept the drop, however it may come. I could avoid losing our savings and avoid hurting Gloria. I was almost smiling from ear to ear as I drove. But soon the flaws in my plan came to mind. The video is digital, it can be copied, moved about, emailed around the world. It will exist for as long as whoever has it wants it to, it will not simply go away if I stop it getting to Gloria once. They could try again and again and again and at some point they'd succeed. And there's no guarantee that I'll get any warning or any demand. There are no guarantees at all. And besides, did I really want to sweep this under the rug? I have to ask myself, Can I live with this? Can I go on like nothing has happened and never let Gloria in? Can I truly be repentant while lying to my wife's face? And can I ever be redeemed in the eyes of our Lord? My mind turns into a storm cloud and every worry merges into a whirling mess like blood going down a drain but never running dry.

When I got home Gloria was gone. I knew it the second I stepped through the door, but I still checked every room. Slowly I moved around the house. I didn't call her name. I scanned with my eyes, for the visual proof. Everything else was as it should have been, but she was not there. My mind went suddenly blank like a fuse had been tripped. There were no thoughts, only emotions brewing inside me. A feeling so primal that even my brain couldn't make sense of it, language couldn't touch it. I checked our

bedroom, the spare room, the room for the baby. Finally in the lounge, with its missing photograph, the feeling forced me to the ground and I wept. Every tangled thought of blackmail and betrayal that I had been carrying around crept out in those tears. I cried without hope of consolation. I cried out every thought of running. I cried out the image of the woman on the street with her expression of loss and yearning while her man walked away. I swept out of my mind the words of the commandments, leaving a blank tablet with my reflection in its polished surface. I washed out of my consciousness the wasteful orgasm in the alleyway. I drained everything from my being and left it on the lounge floor and lay there, as helpless as a fish pulled from the ocean. Everything was gone. I was falling headfirst again, but there was no ground below me. Even after I pulled myself together and began watching the video that I had found Gloria had emailed me, I couldn't cry any more that day. From then on the tear duct in my left eye has never closed.

That good feeling in your gut when you look at your wife in her wedding dress is what God's put there to let you know that the love you feel is his love. What this feeling is though, I don't want to know.

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Seven

It's been fifteen days now since I came home to the eerily empty house and hid away inside. I'm stirring in my sleep, not quite awake yet but no longer asleep, when I hear what must be four or five sparrows fly into the window of the lounge. My eyes shoot open, and just then I hear another set of birds hit. They must be swarming in like lemmings! Another impact like that volley and I'm not sure that the glass will hold. I'm sitting up on the couch bed, anticipating the feathers and the blood and shattered beaks coming through the pane when I realize that it's not birds, it's someone knocking on the window. The TV has been left on while I've been asleep, as usual. It must have been detectable from beyond those thick curtains after all.

In my morning grogginess I get up and shuffle to the curtain and open it an inch to peer through. There she is, the same woman knocking from yesterday. So she's not bothering with the door today? Not waiting until mid afternoon? She's standing there in the same outfit as the day before, and her hair is bright blonde in what I guess must be the ten am sun. Our eyes meet immediately, her pale blue eyes. It's the first time I've looked out this window in a long time and my eye wanders, looking for the corpse of the bird that I did hear hit the other day. She watches me silently through the glass while I look about for the wet clump of feathers. There's obviously no getting rid of this woman so I may as well take my time, do things at my own pace and make sure that I'm at least comfortable. Things are going to have to follow some sort of order, even if I'm making that order up on the spot. Eventually I see what looks like a mound of lifeless feathers just off the path behind her, under a bush where it should decompose largely undisturbed by the elements. I look back to her, and she's still looking at me. Not so much staring, more of a plaintive gaze. "What do you want?" I mouth through the window. She won't hear me, I know that, but she seems to follow my lips.

“Talk,” she mouths back. I watch her perfectly made-up lips with their bright red lipstick for the words. “Just to talk. That’s all.”

I furrow my brow at her to show I’m not sure, but I don’t close the curtains and I don’t leave the window. “Please?” she says silently. I start to think about the last time that I actually talked with someone other than my own thoughts. Other than pizza delivery men and this woman yesterday while trying to get her to leave I haven’t spoken a word to another human being in fifteen days. That can’t be healthy, I think. I’ve woken up feeling relatively calm, but still, there’s no telling what lies beneath. Talking could be bad, could be embarrassing. It could be all too much, I just don’t know. I’ve gone from being a hermit to being under siege, and obviously something has got to give, but will it be me? I look at her standing outside, inches in front of me but for the glass, standing outside my house for the fourth day in a row, it would seem.

“Come around to the front,” I mouth, pointing in the direction of the kitchen.

I try to wipe my left eye dry while walking to the door. It’s about the only part of my appearance that I can do anything about right now. I pull the dressing gown around me like a second skin before flicking the lock and opening the front door. There the woman stands. The red of her jacket is almost too much for my waking eyes. We stand there staring at each other for a moment. Me, the dishevelled and unkempt man with almost two week’s growth of beard, crusty eyes and patches of infected skin from neglect, wearing what now basically amount to rags. She, in that smart red jacket and stylish black pants and top with a neat leather shoulder bag. Her face is perfectly made up with just enough foundation and her hair is straight and cared for. We couldn’t look less alike.

Nothing is said while we take each other in. Eventually she speaks in that earthy yet delicate voice. “May I come in?”

“If I say no, you’ll just come back tomorrow, won’t you?”

“I’m afraid so,” she answers, and she sounds genuinely sorry. I don’t say anything, I just walk back from the open door. I hear her follow me inside and close it behind her. I decide against leading her into the lounge, instead I sit down in one of the eternally vacant dining room chairs. She does likewise, taking a seat across

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the table from me. She puts her bag on the floor and her hands in front of her on the surface of the table and looks right at me. I'm conscious of my awful appearance but have given up caring. I guess I'm looking at her in a defensive snarl, like an abandoned dog that's gone feral when it's finally met by rescuers. I try to soften my expression but I'm just too tense. I try to breathe deeply but it feels like there's no time.

"My name's Angela Turnbull" says the woman eventually. I keep my gaze up and say nothing. "And yours?"

"Thomas Grace."

"Thomas, hi," she says with pre-programmed sincerity. "I was wondering if you'd like to talk a little about God."

"Are you from the church?" I ask, right off the bat.

"In a sense, yes, but..."

"No, I mean, are you from my church?"

"Oh, you attend church?" She sounds surprised, and looking at me why wouldn't she be? "The one down the street?"

"No, that's the union church. Mine's the Anglican one a few streets over."

"I see," she says, her pretty face devoid of any expression.

"So you're not from them?" I ask.

"No, I represent a more, shall we say, fringe movement."

I don't know which is worse. I had assumed that she'd have been sent by the congregation to berate me about Gloria, or if they didn't know already then to question as to why we hadn't been attending. But this woman says she's nothing to do with them. "So you're a doorknocker?"

"Yes, that's essentially right," she answers.

"Doorknockers aren't usually this persistent."

"We do things differently"

"Four days you've been trying to get hold of me."

"Like I said, we do things a little differently."

"Mormon?" I guess

"No," she answers

"Witness?"

"No. Sir, you're not going to have heard of us."

"Do you have a name?"

"No."

"No name?" I ask in disbelief.

“That’s right. We only want to share ideas, not to become a brand. We believe that people can sometimes get away with saying that they’re part of something once it becomes a brand, but they don’t understand any of the ideas involved.” I nod to let her know that I’m keeping up. “Let me give you an example,” she continues. “A lot of people can say that they are Christians, in fact a lot of people do say that, and they haven’t gotten the first idea of who Jesus Christ was or what he did. But because there is this word, this brand, called Christianity, people can get away with saying that they belong. Do you follow what I’m saying?”

“I think so,” I say.

“And these people, if the brand didn’t exist, they’d have to explain themselves differently. They would have to say what they believe, rather than what they are. Wouldn’t you agree that this would be a better system?”

“I guess so,” I offer.

“I can see you’re not convinced,” she smiles. “That’s ok. Let me put it to you like this. Do you know what the fundamental differences between Anglicanism and, say Presbyterianism are?”

“The fundamental differences?” I parrot back to her.

“Yes.”

I think for a minute. “No, I don’t know,” I say.

“So how do you know that you’re an Anglican? Your personal beliefs could be closer to Presbyterianism and you don’t know it. Likewise most Presbyterians won’t be able to tell me off the top of the heads what sets them apart from you Anglicans. But still we have two separate churches merely a handful of streets apart. Each with its own distinct building, minister and congregation, and they hold worship at the same time every week, but have nothing to do with each other. Doesn’t that seem strange?”

“Well, yes,” I concede, “but there are differences. And those must matter to some people, or else there wouldn’t be these two churches. Right?”

“Yes, you are right,” she says. “But only up to a point.

You see, there have been countless schisms of the Christian church, resulting in countless denominations. It’s not just the Anglicans and the Presbyterians. The Methodists, the Seven Day Adventists, the Brethren, and of course the Catholics. The list goes on. The schisms have been necessary because of the point that I brought up

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first. Each of these names resembles a bundle of ideas, of beliefs and philosophies, organized in a certain way. Certain emphasis is placed in different places under some names than under others, and importance is assigned in different ways. But once named, these bundles become set in stone and inflexible. You end up with a homogenous philosophy within the followers, which is expected to remain static and true to the brand. This inflexibility is how religion gets hijacked as a means of political control, rather than spiritual guidance. To introduce new ideas, or revise the current beliefs held by all, you have to leave the church. You have to step outside of the brand. The same is true if you wish to step outside the sphere of political authority that church wields. In the case of your Anglicanism, both instances are true. Henry the eighth wanted English churches to step out from underneath the governance of overseas figures. Also the establishment's existing views on marriage and divorce hardly suited his situation, nor evidently his personal philosophy. But as is sadly typical of reformists he set up a new system in its place, Anglicanism, with himself at the head of a new nationalized church. Once again, the religion was a brand and a governing tool."

Her voice was strangely hypnotic, and she demonstrated these abstract concepts with her hands over the dusty dining room table. My eyes followed them and I began to feel like I understood her. "So you're saying that giving a belief system a name is to turn it into a tool of political control?"

"Yes, but I would go even further. I would say that giving a belief system a name is to destroy it. Any philosophy that cannot react to and absorb new ideas is essentially dead, after all. Consider Galileo and the church."

"Okay," I say

"The church said that the sun orbited the earth, yet Galileo easily demonstrated that this was false. Because he wouldn't go back on his conclusions he was placed under house arrest for the rest of his life. Doesn't that sound a bit strange to you?"

"Well, with the gift of hindsight you can fault the church for any number of things," I say noncommittally.

"Hindsight or no, don't you see that through the dogma and doctrine even what was demonstrated to be true was called heresy and ignored?"

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“I guess.”

“And when you have a belief system that refuses to acknowledge fundamental truisms then you no longer have a functioning system,” she says with a flourish.

I mull this over for a couple of seconds. “And your group not having a name helps this?” I ask, the sceptic in me rising to some invisible bait.

“Well, yes. And there really isn’t a group either. More like a network. We have no form, no structure. Just an exchange of ideas.”

“So why go door knocking?”

“Well,” she says, looking away for a moment. “I’ve found that there are a lot of people who have attached a religious brand to themselves and then stopped thinking about it. As if being part of this herd will get you into heaven, like a package bus deal. More often than not I come across people who belong to a church because that’s what their parents go to. People are basing their beliefs on these pre-packaged brands because of other people, not themselves.”

This strikes a fairly deep chord and I hope she doesn’t notice my nervous gulp.

“So what I do is try to get to know people, get them to tell me what they believe. Generally I find people who are walled in by dogma which has close to nothing to do with their personal beliefs, and they’re leading miserable lives as a result.”

“I see,” is all I manage out of my tightening throat.

“Door knocking isn’t something the group really does, though. Like I said, there really is no group to speak of, and certainly no doctrines that get us out in the street to try and spread our message. This is a personal undertaking, something I do all on my own. So you needn’t worry about getting overloaded with brochures and pamphlets, or me trying to recruit you into some strange sect or anything.”

She smiles at me, which does nothing for my nerves.

“You’ve been trying to get hold of me for four days, for this? To talk about religion?”

“Well, yes,” she says as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Why go to all that effort?”

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“I drive by here a lot, and I’ve noticed your curtains. They’ve been closed for a long time.”

I nod.

She takes a breath. “You’re miserable, Thomas.”

“What business is that of yours?” I spit back.

“None, I know. It’s rude of me to be here, but I honestly think I can help.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s what I do.”

All I can do is stare at her. I can feel my lips tremble and there’s that ball of emotion, a physical presence, in the back of my throat. If I move my tongue to speak it’ll shoot right up and out my eyes. I try to get my breathing under control. Sure, I’m miserable, I think, but what business is it of yours? Having this pointed out to me by another person, not just as a stray thought that floats through my head, makes my misery more real. It gives it a chair at the table. It splays it out on the autopsy table for me to observe in detail. I’m not ready to hear it, but when would I be?

“I don’t want to go any further now,” she says after a time. “But if I could I would like to come back tomorrow, and maybe we could talk then?”

I’m thinking of the meal that Gloria and I last ate at this table. It was Sunday night while I fought with the urge to confess to what had happened at Jeff’s. We ate a simple pasta dish that Gloria liked to cook on Sundays. During the weekend she’d spend as little time cooking as possible, and spend that time with me instead. During the week while I would be at work she would afford those extra hours of preparation and cooking. I’d hardly ever see what she did with her days about the house, but how everything falls apart without her here, I think. How I fall apart. That Sunday dinner, I tried my best to savour every morsel. I chewed every mouthful for so long that it lost its flavour. I was too stressed to taste anything, yet I shovelled the food into my mouth out of the fear of what may come out of my mouth if left redundant. The table hasn’t been used since then, and there’s a fine layer of dust that would never have built up had Gloria been here. I can see wet patches before me as my tears start to come, hitting the dust like rain hits the sand.

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“I can let myself out,” says Angela. She obviously doesn’t expect me to respond. She stands up. “I will visit tomorrow,” she says.

I don’t look up. I’m ashamed of my unwashed, unshaven, tearstained face. I lower it down to the dusty tabletop. The tabletop where Gloria’s dead skin dust and fingerprints still intermingle with mine. I hear Angela open the front door then shut it behind her. I can imagine her in her black skirt and red jacket walking down the path to the front gate. I imagine Gloria doing the same on the day that she left. Did she look back? Did she run, or did she just walk away? Was she crying, or was her head held up? Was she alone?

I cry silently at the table for about an hour. I only move out of a desire to see Gloria’s face. I play the video, filling the screen with her moving faces until they all freeze. I lie on the couch bed and drift into a restless sleep where I dream of hundreds of priests who’ve just been told that the earth orbits the moon. They are drinking, shooting poison into their veins and jumping headfirst from the bell towers against a primary-red sky. God’s lifeless body has been found at the bottom of the sea, being nibbled at by crabs and fishes, and the faithful march steadily into the ocean. Gravity has been disproved, and the holy men cling to the pulpits to stop being sucked into space, while everything else in creation shoots from the ground in a vertical wind up into the endless sky. Father George is at the gates but won’t get let in to heaven until he fixes the taillight on his 1989 Ford Falcon.

We’ve all had the blindfold removed and are charging into each other with our razors out. The priests scream as they hit the ground, but it’s no scream of pain or anguish. It is a defiant scream. It is a challenge. It is a call to harvest, for the Lord to snap our necks and bring us all home. We don’t know what we’re doing down here. We’ve carved your name a hundred different ways all around our bodies and you still haven’t claimed us.

Eight

I wake up breathing like a hunted animal. I've sweated in my sleep again and the bedding on the couch bed is clammy already. There's light coming through the crack in the lounge curtain but not much. By what's showing on the muted TV I guess it's not much past ten am. It's all talk shows and infomercials.

Normally I wouldn't bother getting off the couch this early, but I decide that today I should shower. I'll be having a visitor later it seems, whether I like it or not, and I may as well be slightly presentable. Not that I believe Angela wouldn't come around even if I stank like a garbage tip. I just want to be a little less pathetic today. To maybe be able to look people in the eye today.

The damp towels on the floor I kick into a corner and bundle up in my arms. Under my nose they smell vaguely of sprouts. I dump them in a basket in the laundry so they'll be out of sight. The pizza boxes I collect the same way and leave them by the back door. I haven't actually accomplished much, but I've moved things closer to where they should be, and that's something. The lounge doesn't seem half as bad without them over the floor. The used glasses and side plates I gather up from the coffee table and pile up in the kitchen. My bedding I decide to leave in the room, but I toss it behind the couch to keep up appearances. I straighten up the papers and magazines around the room and things start to look almost good.

In the bathroom I find an unused towel and run the shower. I strip off naked while waiting for the water to heat up and observe my body in the mirror. I've lost weight. There's not as much between my ribs and the air anymore. My skin has gone to hell as well. The boils on the parts of my body that are still fleshy have not abated. White dots surrounded by expansive red marks that are sore to the touch. I think about trying to pop them like pimples but after a couple of tries I find they are too big, too deep and too painful to mess with. In the shower I pay particular attention to cleaning these, as well as in between my thighs and buttocks where sweat rash often

develops. Under my arms I wash, and with a flannel I wash my face as best I can.

I still smell afterwards but at least things have been moved in the right direction. I look at my hairy face in the mirror while trying off and think about shaving, but I remember last time and the look of the razor with the thin blood on it, mixed into the soap. I think I'm making enough of an effort as it is without going that far.

I throw on some fresh boxer shorts and a t-shirt from the master bedroom. I spend as little time as possible getting them, and then wrap the old dressing gown around me. I boil the jug in the kitchen and make some earl gray tea to have with my breakfast toast. In the kitchen the sun is shining through the window and I don't seem to mind it on me. I've been avoiding it for so long that its heat feels strange. It's not the ambient heat of a fan heater in the corner of a room. It is direct and personal.

I eat my breakfast there, standing up in the kitchen, and put the dishes with the lot I'd just brought in from the lounge. There aren't many clean plates or cups left, I think. I wander back to my couch and let the sound up on the TV. I look at the still screen of the laptop but decide against it. Too early in the day, and there'll be someone over soon. Got to keep it together.

After a couple of programs that don't engage me I get up and go to the master bedroom again and get a pair of pants. I try not to look at the room while I'm in it, but just keep focused and get what I came for. They're tan chinos, and putting them on over my boxers after all this time feels strange, like stepping into a suit of heavy armour. If I'm going to have a visitor though, I can hardly clean up the house but neglect to put any pants on.

About noon I'm starting to get hungry when I hear the door knock. Again, I immediately think of pizza, but realize soon enough that it's Angela. Part of me had expected her not to show up. Part of me had hoped for it. I can't have made a dazzling impression yesterday. She stands in the doorway in the same outfit as the day before, the familiar red jacket and black skirt. But the top looks different. Still black, but something has changed.

"Hello," she smiles, and seems genuinely glad to see me. I guess when someone's trying to help you then the sight of you showered and wearing pants must be encouraging.

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I'm not so relaxed. "Come in," I say, and lead her through the kitchen and into the dining room. She takes the same seat as yesterday and I take mine. My tears have dried in the night but you can still see where they've fallen. Little texture changes give them away, like places where the wind has danced along a beach.

"So," she says, as if she is unsure how to start.

"So," I parrot. "You've come to save me."

"No, Thomas, I just want to help in any way I can. That's all. You don't need to be so defensive."

I just stare at her.

"You look better today," she says.

"Thanks."

"Do you feel better?"

I decide against mentioning the sweat rash. "Sure."

She tucks her golden hair behind one ear. "That's good.

That's really good."

"I guess."

"The place smells a little better too," she grins.

"I wouldn't notice," I say. "I'm too acclimatized."

"It does.

"Cleanliness is next to godliness," I say, expecting to preempt her.

To my surprise she answers, "If it's alright, I don't want to talk about God today."

"I thought that's why you came."

"It is, up to a point."

"Then why suddenly change your mind?"

"I want to talk about you first, Thomas," she says. "We can't very well talk about God until we know more about you, wouldn't you agree?"

"I guess," I shrug.

"Remember what we talked about yesterday. If I just launch into a preaching session then I'd just be playing the salesman. If I know more about you first, maybe later we can arrive at some more meaningful conclusions."

"Yeah," I mutter.

"If you would rather, I could rattle off my personal beliefs now to you. It would only take about half an hour and then we'd be done. Would you prefer that?"

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“No, that’s alright,” I say with my head down, trying not to raise her ire any further. “That sounds sensible. It just took me by surprise is all.”

“That’s okay.”

“Just one thing,” I add.

“Yes?”

“You talk like this is going to be a long thing. I mean, more than today. I wasn’t expecting that.”

She pauses for a minute and I can see that she is taking her time forming a response. “Yes, there will be more that just today. Today I start to get to know you. That may continue tomorrow as well. I will take as long as I think needs to be taken. Only once I truly understand you will we start to discuss matters of faith and God. This will also take as long as is necessary. Who knows, maybe by tomorrow we’ll be all done, but honestly Thomas, do you think that a quick remedy will help you?”

I shake my head in resignation.

“So please, I want you to think of my visits as rehabilitation. Do not expect it to be finished until you are ready for it to be finished.”

I nod to show her that I’m still listening. That lump is back in my throat but there have been no tears yet. The way this woman looks at me when she talks, I bet she can see it. I bet she can count each tear before it draws, even if I hold it all inside. I take deep breaths to stay in control. I look up and she’s standing.

“How do you take your tea?” she asks.

Angela brings back two cups from the kitchen a little while later. Mine a black earl gray. I don’t know what blend she used hers is black as well. “I tried for milk. It was pretty bad,” she jests.

“Haven’t shopped in two weeks,” I answer.

“No kidding? That milk was foul. I tipped it out for you. It looked terrible.”

“Thanks.”

“There’s probably a lot in that fridge that has gone bad.”

“Probably all of it.”

“Probably.” She sips her black tea and I feel a strange déjà vu. Drinking tea with a woman at my dining room table. “So anyway Thomas,” she says, “you know all about what I do. What do you do for a job?”

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“I work for the hospital.”

“The one up by your church?” she asks.

“No, at the public hospital downtown.”

“Oh,” she takes another sip. “What do you do there?”

“I.T.” I say. “I’m part of the team that manages the patient database.”

“So what’s involved with that?”

“All sorts,” I explain. “When new patients are admitted to the hospital their details are entered into the database. Their name, age, date of birth, address, along with other information like what medications they take and other risk factors. Then there’s why they’re in the hospital, and a history is kept of all their diagnoses and test results. Notes on any procedures they undergo are kept too in electronic form for other parts of the hospital to reference.”

“Sounds interesting,” says Angela.

“Not really. It is pretty mundane.”

“But there’ll always be new patients coming in, and old ones checking out too, I guess,” she says.

“Yeah, but that’s routine. The records of dead patients are kept just the same, in case that information is needed in the future.”

“Why’s that?”

“Family studies, I guess. Sometimes there’ll be data on a patient that didn’t affect them when they were alive, but something genetic could come up later in one of their kids, and the old information on family members could help with that diagnosis.”

“That makes sense,” she says. “And you’re adding new patients all the time as well?”

“Yeah, sometimes hundreds a day.”

“And all their information is stored indefinitely?”

“That’s right.”

“So you have a rapidly growing database, it sounds.”

“You’re right,” I say. “In fact, that’s one of the few challenges my job has. The database is growing faster than our infrastructure can deal with it. We back up all of our data daily too, so that’s the whole database existing in two separate places. Then there’s a network to get information between the two that needs constant upgrading as well.”

“Wow.” She’s faking her interest, but still doing a good job getting me to open up a little.

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“Not only that, there’s the front end to it. The user interface that the hospital staff use to enter information or look up results on. That all has to be maintained.”

“Maintained?” she asks.

“Basically, I mean replaced. The huge amounts of data we’re dealing with now would be unmanageable if we still used the same computers that we did five years ago. And we’re only just keeping up. The staff are constantly complaining about the system.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, because as the database grows in size then the computers that search that database have more to wade through. You get slowdown.” Gloria’s face on the laptop screen flashes into my head. I shake it off and continue. “The system can’t operate at the speed you need it to because of all the data it has to deal with. Mostly it’s just an annoyance, but when the database threatens to get bigger than our storage and backup devices then we’ve got serious problems.”

“Like what?”

“Like what?” I muse. “Well, we might have to skip backup cycles that we’re obligated to carry out due to standardization. Hypothetically though, the worst thing that could happen would be the destabilizing of the entire hospital computer system.”

“Oh my.”

“Yeah, that’s really unlikely though, and there are paper records. They’re not as well cross-referenced as they are electronically but they would do in a pinch. We’ve had outages before, of course, every system does. But it’s never been at any critical time. You never know with what goes on in those walls when it’s going to be your system that turns the tide in a life or death situation. You never know.”

Angela stares into her tea while absorbing what I’ve said. “Doesn’t that give you some sort of satisfaction?”

“Which bit?”

“That by holding up the computer system you’re stopping that from happening?”

“Well, I guess. It’s satisfying but only because it hasn’t fucked up. Most of the time I’m stressed out by it more.”

“But would you say you like your work?”

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“Not really. As you might have guessed, I haven’t been there for a while either,” I answer.

“I had thought that might be the case,” she says matter-of-factly.

“I emailed my resignation in the other day, but I’ve never checked to see if I got a response. I don’t really care.”

“How are you going for money?”

“Oh, there’s savings and probably a final pay somewhere in the works. As you can see I haven’t been spending much. The utilities are debited from the account automatically. No one’s phoned me to say they haven’t been paid, so I’m not worried yet.”

“Is that maintainable?”

“No, I guess not. But it’s what I want to do right now. When I can’t do it any more I will find a way out.”

“Can’t argue with you there,” she says before taking a big sip of tea. “Do you have friends and family around who can help you out if you need it?”

“Not really,” I say.

“Did you grow up around here?”

“No,” I say. “I was brought up further north in a small town a few hours’ drive away. I moved to the city to study and never left.”

“And how old are you?”

I take a moment to calculate. “I’m thirty one.”

“So you’ve been in this town about, what? Twelve years?” she asks.

“About that.” Thirteen, I think to myself.

“And you have no friends to call to help you out if you need it?” she asks with genuine concern.

I feel myself blush. “I have friends,” I say, staring at the wall and avoiding eye contact. “I have friends and I belong to a church, of course. I’ve worked at the same place for years. But you asked if I had anyone I could call to help me. No, I don’t. There’s not anyone who I would let see me like this, for starters.”

“I understand.”

“But I don’t need anyone’s help!” I say, as if I haven’t heard her.

Angela waits until I’m finished. “Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you why you thought I was a lawyer the other day?”

I stay silent and stare at the wall.

“Thomas?” I don’t respond. “You have a wife, don’t you? Thomas, I can see where the ring should be on your finger. This house is too nice to be a bachelor’s pad. Thomas?”

“What?” I mutter between gritted teeth.

“Has your wife left you, Thomas?” she asks softly, like calling a scared pet out from under the furniture.

“Yes,” I hiss.

“And you thought I was here to issue you with divorce papers, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you expect her to send a lawyer?” she asks. “You sounded surprised when you said it.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Do you expect her to come back?”

“No.”

“Do you know where she’s gone?”

“No.”

Angela sighs. She knows that she’s getting nowhere with me like this. I can’t look at her but I can feel her look at me. I can feel her eyes searching her answers out in me. I hear her rustling and see that she’s digging through a plastic bag that she brought with her. She holds out a sandwich to me across the table, it’s plastic wrapped and looks like it’s been bought ready made. “Let’s stop for a while,” she says. The sandwich looks fresh and has lettuce and tomato in it. “I doubt you’ve been eating enough of this sort of stuff.”

Later, after the sandwich has been eaten and I’ve gone to the bathroom while Angela made some fresh tea, we sit back down at the table again. I’m still chasing bits of the filling around my mouth with my tongue. Tomato seeds and bits of grated carrot, more vegetables than I’ve had in the past two weeks combined, I think to myself.

“Did your work ever clash with the church?” asks Angela out of nowhere.

This takes me by surprise. “What do you mean?”

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Angela takes her time answering, as if she's making sure she never makes a wrong step. "I mean like a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses working with blood transfusion. Do you see? Did anything you had to do ever clash with Anglicanism?"

"I never worked on the clinical side," I say.

"I know, but you made certain things possible, or at least belonged to a system that made certain things possible. I don't imagine there'd be much to talk of, but I'm curious all the same."

I think for a minute. "Day ward," I say.

"Pardon?"

"The abortion clinic," I say. "Not that my department had anything to do with them. We managed the patient's electronic files and that was it, just like the rest of the hospital. But often there'd be religious protesters outside the gates when I came to work. They'd hold placards with foetuses on them. You know the chants, surely. Abortion equals murder, being yelled through a megaphone. Sometimes the protesters would be from my church. I'd have to cross their picket line like scab labour at a strike. It didn't feel good. I felt their eyes in church sometimes."

"You can hardly take that sort of blame," says Angela.

"I know, I know. But I was part of the system that they were protesting, just like you said. We made things possible."

"Do you have an opinion on it, other than the church's stand?"

"It's hard," I say. Searching for my own voice I begin cautiously. "Obviously I hate the idea of ending a life. But can you really say that something is wrong all the time, every time? These girls can't be taking this step lightly. I can't help but thinking that sometimes if you didn't allow it to happen then these girls would go on to have babies that they can't support, and you end up with two ruined lives." Angela nods to show she's listening but offers no view of her own. "But you have to ask yourself, is that worth killing for? And if you decide yes, then where do you draw the line?"

"I see where you're coming from," says Angela putting down her tea. "But how do you know that abortion is the same as killing?"

"If it weren't done then a baby would be born, and live," I answer, slightly unsure of myself.

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“Well, if you wear a condom during sex then no baby gets born,” she says. “If you don’t have sex every minute of every day, no baby gets born.”

“That’s fairly indirect, though,” I respond shakily.

“Abortion is a conscious intervention.”

“Yes, but nowadays what isn’t?” asks Angela. “With genetic and embryonic technology we are not too far away from where a human being could be created from the DNA in any cell in the body. Every time a person washes their hands or brushes their teeth they will be washing away the essential building blocks of life. Viable cells that could give life will go down the drain. That’s the definition of abortion, plain and simple. Should we equate this with killing?”

I am stumped. “I’m sorry, Angela. That sort of ethical dilemma is way above me.”

She picks up her cup and takes a sip. “It’s above everyone,” she says. “The original question is above everyone too, no matter what they claim to know. All I can say is that abortion is a terrible thing that sometimes has to happen to prevent a more terrible thing from occurring.”

I clear my throat. “That’s what I was trying to say.”

Nine

“Tell me about the place you grew up,” Angela says.

I draw my legs up towards me on the couch. We’ve moved from the formal setting of the dining room into the more relaxed lounge. I’m sitting where I’ve been sleeping and Angela sits in Gloria’s favourite chair. “Like I said, it was just up north. We lived in a house outside of a small town, and aside from school I hardly ever left the property.”

“Brothers and sister?”

“None,” I answer. “I was an only child.”

“Was that lonely for you?”

“A little, I guess. I don’t know it any other way, so I can’t compare. I mean, when I was real young I’d see kids my age at school who had siblings, and I knew what that meant. But I guess I never saw what that relationship between them really was. I didn’t understand what it was to eat with and exist with a brother or sister for your whole childhood. I didn’t know it, so I couldn’t miss it, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” says Angela. In the dim of the lounge she looks a little different. I haven’t pulled open the curtains yet, and I half expected her golden hair to light the room itself. “So if you stayed at home all the time and had no siblings how did you pass the time?”

“As a teenager I hated it. I got everything in order as soon as I could to move out and come to the city.”

“Sure, but earlier than that. When you were a little kid, what did you do?”

I take a minute to think. Childhood is like a fading dream to me. It’s like a twisted drunken memory, where only flashes of pain and colour stand out. I can’t arrange them against a timeline. I feel sad that a third of my life is beyond coherent recollection. “I thought a lot,” I answer her.

“About what, in particular?”

“Everything,” I answer. “But I was big on imagination. With that much flat green land around I could pretend basically

anything. I'd spend a lot of time outside. There were lines of trees that I would pretend were castle walls. That was the good thing about being away the city for a boy, I think, not that I know any different. But without all the buildings around I could pretend that it was any time I liked. Any time in history has had flat green land."

"I guess you're right. And that made sense to you then?"

"Yeah. It did. I would have been about five or six. I would stand in my castle and watch an army advance towards the walls. I would send my defending army out to meet them, then stand there and direct the battle like a general. I don't know if what I was doing was play. I would sit still in the trees and watch the fields below. Watch a battle that wasn't there."

"You didn't get out there and swing a sword around yourself?"

"Oh, occasionally I'd find a good stick that I could make look like a sword in my mind, but that was just for play. And more often than not I'd just carry the sword with me. It was more of a symbol than a toy. It would be at my side as I directed my troops from the keep." I let out a sigh. "I could pass whole days away like that, just sitting in the trees and watching my soldiers fight."

"How interesting," says Angela.

"Yeah," I say, nodding to myself. "There'd be times when the battle was so important, on weekends mainly, that I'd come in to the house for dinner as late as possible. Then the next day I would go back to the castle and the battle would resume from the same place it had left off."

"What else would you imagine?"

I pause for thought. "Sometimes, out in the fields, I would try to talk to God."

"Were you bought up Anglican, then?"

"Oh, hell no," I say. "My parents are the most secular people you're ever likely to meet. They're not even married. If anything they discouraged religion. But still, out there in the empty green fields you do start to want someone to talk to. Just like I knew about brothers and sisters and some people had them and I didn't, I knew of God. I knew he was supposed to be invisible and up in heaven and everywhere all at once. I only had the answers to the questions a six year old is likely to ask, you understand?"

"Sure," she says.

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“So with no one else to talk to, I’d try to talk to him. But I’d talk out loud, and talk like I was talking to my grandfather, because that’s how I imagined Him, like an old man. So I didn’t talk about anything religious. I talked about what I had done that day at school, or how the imaginary battle was going. Like a kid my age would talk to anybody.”

“That makes sense,” says Angela. “I haven’t heard anything like it before, but it makes sense. Kids think about things very differently. Being alone on such a big piece of land would have shaped your thoughts too. You filled it with your soldiers, and as an imaginary friend you chose God, am I right?”

“Yeah, I guess you are.”

“Did you grow up with pets,” Angela asks.

“Yeah, I did. There wasn’t much in the way of livestock. My parent’s weren’t farmers. They were living out there for the lifestyle. But we had cats from time to time.”

“Did you get a sort of companionship from them?”

I have to chuckle. “I think that was my mother’s idea in getting them, but once we would get a new cat and bring it home it would never live up to her expectations. She wanted a house cat, an animal to sit on her lap and care for. But all that space in the fields did something to the cats’ heads even more than it did to mine. With all that territory up for grabs, they became real cats. All of them went a bit feral and they almost completely ignored the house. There was enough for a cat to live off if it had the brains to hunt it. Birds and field mice were all over the place, and the occasional young rabbit. It must have been heaven for them. They’d start wandering and eventually not come back. They’d get spooked of people again and it wouldn’t be fair on the poor creatures to try and get them back.”

“So you never had a bond with any of them?”

“Oh no, there was never enough time before they shot off. We’d see them around. They’d come into the house’s garden and watch the waxeyes in the birdfeeder. We’d see their dark shapes hiding under the rose bushes and dad would try to remember their markings to see which cats were still around. There were about five all together. The only thing that seemed to get them was the road to the south. Two of them were hit by cars and died there. A third disappeared and they never found a body. Two of the cats were still

being spotted around and about from time to time last time when I left home. The oldest must have been around fourteen by then. My parents hadn't bothered to put out food for them in years, and we'd completely forgotten their names."

"So the deaths of those cats didn't affect you too badly, I guess," she says.

"No, I guess not," I say. "I remember a girl in my class, around about the time I was nine. Her guinea pig had died and she took three days off school. When she came back she still cried at the drop of a hat, and was fragile for months afterwards. Us boys would tease her about it because it was guaranteed to get a reaction. I went along with it too because I didn't understand what she was feeling, never really having had a pet that I saw as a friend. We all got in a lot of trouble for it and had to write letters of apology to her. I remember struggling to write the letter and thinking to myself, what is the big deal? When our cats died they weren't even our cats anymore. I didn't feel any loss, in fact I was fascinated by it."

"Fascinated by their death?" says Angela, as if she's mulling the idea around in her head.

"Well, yeah. For a boy death is a strange concept. At school we would play games with toy guns, or bent branches, or even just our hands, pretending to be guns. We were forever shooting each other and yelling, bang! We'd argue about who shot who first, and if you were shot you had to lie down and were out of the game. You were dead. God knows where we got these ideas. We knew that everybody dies when they get too old or too hurt but that was just too abstract a thought to actually believe. Playing dead, you always got back up.

"But with the cats it was different. My father would bury them, and I'd hang around watching what he did. The first one was hit clean off the road and found off to the side. It was all in one piece and looked just like a sleeping version of itself, but with cuts and scrapes and blood from its nose. Dad wrapped it in an old tea towel and it was stiff and cold, then put it in a hole he'd dug out by the trees. He shovelled the ground back over the bundle and when the hole was all filled in he patted it down until the earth was firm. I thought, how's the cat going to get back up now?"

"You didn't accept the finality of death?" asks Angela.

"I was six," I respond.

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“Oh, I understand. I didn’t expect you to have, sorry.”

“I started to after that though,” I say.

“Because the cat couldn’t get back up?”

“Yeah, that was part of it. The cat was buried near where I would play, and I would often think that over there in the ground was that cat. I would dare myself to walk over its grave sometimes, just because the whole thing felt so wholly unreal. Eventually I stopped thinking of it as a cat, but as where a cat used to be, and I came to understand death a little better.” Angela nods at this and I continue. “Another thing was the waxeyes that would live around the trees on our property.” Angela gives me a look like she doesn’t understand so I explain for her, “They’re these tiny green birds with white rings around their eyes. They look like robins aside from the colouring. Cute little birds.”

“Right. The cats would catch these birds?”

“Not much that I saw actually. The birds hung out near the house and there would be so many of them that the cats wouldn’t know what to do. They’d find that safety in numbers and just take over the garden. With that many little eyes in the trees the cats didn’t stand a chance. Well, I imagine that they knocked a couple off here and there, but I don’t remember ever seeing it. No, what got me was the way they’d look after flying into the planes of glass in the dining room’s windows. They’d try to fly through the two gaps in the wall, but hit the glass instead. But they’d still look like sleeping versions of their living selves afterwards. I started thinking about them as little toys that had been switched off. Like there was a switch inside that flicked off when they hit the window and that made them dead. The same would be true for the cat that was hit by the car. I thought about this switch and how it can only be switched once. You couldn’t undo it and turn the animal back on again. That’s how I began to envision death.”

“Did you talk with your parents about death?”

“A little. They said things like it being like going to sleep forever. I’d ask what forever was. A very long time was all they could say. I couldn’t grasp the concept of forever and so I couldn’t grasp death. I even asked them about the switch inside that turns you off.”

“What did they say about that?”

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“They said I was sort of right. I guess that was a good enough answer to give to a child. I knew from being told that I should be careful crossing the road and when I was swimming and not get too high up in the trees so I wouldn’t fall too far. I assumed that this was to keep my life switch safe.”

“That’s not a bad working theory for a child,” remarks Angela.

“No, I guess not. It kept me out of danger.”

“What did you think would happen if your switch got turned off?”

“I’d go to sleep and not wake up. That’s what I’d been told, but I found it hard to imagine. I would think sometimes that being dead and buried in the ground wouldn’t be so bad if I was still able to think and dream.”

“And command armies from your castle top?”

“Exactly,” I say.

“You didn’t think about heaven?” she asks me.

“No,” I say. “Not yet, at least. I’d heard talk about heaven of course, but as a child I just couldn’t make it fit with what I thought. That came much later.”

“How long did you stick with your theory about the switch?”

“Not long, a year or so. It’s hard to tell now how much time passed between memories as a kid. Once a boy at school popped open the corpse of a waxeye and I saw its insides I didn’t know what to think. The second cat to die happened soon after. This one didn’t get knocked clear of the road and it looked like at least a few cars had run over it by the time we found it. It didn’t look whole anymore. There was a depression in its middle where the tires had gone over it, and dragged out a pink and orange streak of mashed up flesh in the direction the car had been going. The back legs and tail were clearly identifiable, as were the shoulders and the head, but the middle was just gore. Its eyes were open too. I remember that. So was its mouth. Dad didn’t like me hanging around that time. He dug a small grave right by the side of the road and shovelled the remains straight off the asphalt and into the hole in two goes. He got a bucket and filled it with warm water and splashed the road trying to wash the mess off but we had to wait until the next big rain for it to be completely gone.”

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“So seeing gruesome deaths made you abandon your switch theory?” she asks.

“Right. It made me question it to the point where I couldn’t be sure any more. I knew that the cat was dead, and that it was the car that killed it. What I couldn’t decide was whether a switch would turn the cat off once it got hurt too bad, or if it was the hurting that meant it died, and there was no switch. That cat was half gone, squashed and cut in half. It was not getting up even if the switch could be flicked back, you know?”

“That would have been a horrible sight for a child to see.”

“Yes, but it made me think that this cat was no more or less dead than the previous cat, so what made it more horrible? I couldn’t answer that to myself then. Seeing the insides of the cat on the road, and the bird that the boy had stomped on, I saw things I could never have imagined. It made me think of that first cat that looked like it had just fallen asleep, or the waxeyes on the deck after hitting the window. Had something equally horrible happened to them, but happened deep inside those insides that I couldn’t understand? Was it this that killed them?”

“Just quickly,” she says. “Did you have many stuffed toys as a young kid?”

“Yeah, plenty. And up to a certain age you still expect those real cats to be just full of stuffing don’t you?”

“That’s what I was getting at, yes.”

“You’re right. But seeing them as meat and bone and blood didn’t just shock me about the cats, it shocked me about myself. I was getting older and more adventurous and I’d end up with cuts and bruises. We had blackberry growing in the ignored corners of the property, and the skin on my legs in shorts would get ripped to ribbons on its thorns while running through it. Seeing just a fraction of what you were made of under your skin came as a start. Around that time I fell out of my tree and broke my arm. I saw my x-rays in the hospital, and there were my two forearm bones just like in a real skeleton. I don’t want to make it sound like it was a surprise to find that I had a skeleton. I knew well enough what one was, but it was still a shock to see it.”

“Excuse me just a minute,” Angela says. She gets up and I assume it’s to go to the bathroom. That’s another room that’s not really fit for visitors right now. I watch her go out the door and

focus for just a second on the angle her waist makes against her bottom from behind as she walks, but quickly force myself to look away. Boys will certainly be boys, I think to myself remembering the seriousness of my predicament. Some time later I hear her in the kitchen boiling the jug. She brings in my third cup of tea and a mug for herself. When she sits back down I'm ready to talk again without being prompted.

"It was when I was ten that I truly realized that I was going to die some day, and knew what it meant," I say. I can feel my voice go into a tremble again.

"When you were ten?"

"That's right," I say, trying to steel myself.

She sips at her tea but it's too hot just yet. "How did that happen?"

"It was when my parents and I were away on holiday. We were staying in a motel somewhere new and strange. I was reading things for school about events in the past, things that had happened decades before I was born. I was reading late at night because I was really interested in it, and it suddenly struck me to wonder where I had been while these events had taken place."

"Events before you were born?"

"Yeah. Just recent events to begin with, then I got thinking about old wars. Then older things like the times of knights and castles that I would imagine being in. Then things like the Roman empire, which I had heard a little about by then, and the Egyptians before them. I even got as far as thinking about the dinosaurs, every boy's favourite subject. They must have existed an unimaginable stretch of time before any of the rest, I thought. But I had not been there for any of it.

"I had only been alive since a certain day ten years earlier, so where was I before that? I came around to accepting that I had no memory of the times before my birth because I had simply not existed. This was elementary but it made my head spin and my blood run cold. I couldn't truly imagine never having had existed at all up until a point, then suddenly being here. This thought kept me up well after I had put the books away. Once I finally got a grip on what it meant to not exist the thought of death stole into my head and I realized for the first time that I was thinking of the very same thing."

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“You mean, that you’re as dead before you’re born as you are after you die?” asks Angela.

“That’s it,” I nod. “That just as there is a point where you begin to exist, there is a point where you cease. You don’t need to be a dead body to be dead. Dead is dead. There simply is no you anymore, like there was no you before. If you go dig up that cat by the trees you won’t find a cat, you’ll only find the broken skeleton where a cat used to be. It was just after working this out that I truly realized that there was also no getting out of it. The fact that everybody dies some day was purely academic to me up until then. One day I will not exist, just as I have not existed before, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“How did you react to having that feeling?”

“I didn’t sleep that night at all. This was a feeling of utter hopelessness and futility. The next day I napped a little, and when I woke up it was still with me with, that inescapable fact burrowed deep into my brain.”

Angela sips on her drink and puts it down on the coffee table between us. “You know,” she says, “I’ve always considered the moment where you realize your own mortality as being the absolute end of childhood. Up until then anything is possible, but when you put those pieces together you suddenly end up with this weight attached to your life. You start to see things in a more serious light. Would you agree?”

“I don’t know, it was so long ago,” I say. “But yeah, that sounds a lot like what happened to me.”

She gives me a look of condolence. “I would say that everybody comes to this conclusion, Tom, one way or another. After all, what other conclusion is there? Whether or not you believe in an afterlife is irrelevant. Realizing that you are going to die and that no one can tell you what is going to happen is probably the scariest thing most people have to deal with. And everyone who lives long enough to contemplate it has to deal with it.” I nod in agreement. “I think that’s why the teenage years are so rough. Not just the physical havoc that goes on, and the strange social dynamics that develop, but that it all happens against the psychological backdrop of a mind that’s still only just coming to terms with its own mortality. The timing couldn’t be less fair, in my opinion,” she says, smiling sweetly in sympathy with the misery of the world.

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I'm still not all together after dredging my memories and I feel that she can sense my unease. I feel she can sense everything about me. That lump of emotion gathering in my throat, the tear duct that won't close twitching away. I feel her beside me on the roadside as the cat goes piece by piece onto the shovel and down the hole. I feel her putting the history books away and pulling a blanket over a petrified ten year old me. I feel her standing with me in the dining room of the old house, us waving our hands in front of the window frantically as the waxeyes approach. I feel like saying, even though this is hard for me, it's good to be talking to someone about this. But I reckon she already knows.

“Thomas,” she says after a long silence in our conversation. “I think that's all for today.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Would it be alright for me to come again tomorrow?” she asks. Then before I can answer she smiles and says, “I'll bring lunch again.”

I manage to smile back as she stands to leave. “That would be great,” I say.

Ten

Immediately after Angela has left the house I am on a high. How often do I think about death like this? Never. Death crosses my mind every day in some way, but when was the last time I went to the root of what death meant to me? I can't remember. I feel a mix of terrified and elated, like being in two places at once on the same roller coaster. Like someone with arachnophobia letting a tarantula walk across their hand.

As the hours wear on following her departure, the elation starts to subside. As I should have feared, I had the high of opening up, now I face the comedown. Like I've had three shots of rum. I have the TV on for company and I'm back under the bedding on the couch bed. The TV is showing the evening news. War in the Middle East, shots of missile banks firing rocket upon rocket, dozens per minute, speeding to deliver someone a violent and anonymous death. The same personal and curious oblivion that I recognized as a child is also the biggest bargaining chip in the world.

I sit and stare at the TV, but I'm not really paying much attention. I've had two weeks of screen gazing and I'm starting to get a little passed it. Instead I am thinking of my talk with Angela, I'm try to run it through my mind in its entirety in an attempt to reclaim the feeling it gave me when it happened for real. There are bits I can't remember and bits that start to walk away on me, where my thoughts go off on tangents that the original conversation hadn't touched. I find it hard to tell which thoughts I did say from the ones I didn't. After a while of talking to Angela I felt that I was talking directly from my memories. I wasn't conscious of the words I was saying until they were said. There was something about her nature that drew it out of me and allowed me to lay myself bare before her. I try to recall a conversation like it, but I have to concede that I'd never had one. Sure, there have been a multitude of deep and meaningful, heart to heart discussions on any given subject with people in the past, but this afternoon with Angela was different.

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Like instead of trying to engage my thoughts and pull them out of me she'd simply reached into my head and pushed a button, getting instant and pure playback of any memory she decided to hear about. Maybe I've just never talked to a really skilled listener before.

I hear my stomach before I feel it. Hunger. That sandwich that she had bought for me has raised the bar, I think to myself. My poor body will not like going back to buttered toast after that. I think about ordering pizza while taking a long piss in the bathroom. Three cups of tea was a lot to drink today. At least there's no headache.

I settle for toast. If Angela is bringing lunch again tomorrow then I can get by on a couple of boring slices for dinner tonight. I wonder what tomorrow's conversation will be about. I wonder where she's going with all this talk. Yesterday when I let her in for the first time she said she wanted to talk about God, but today she says she wants to start by not talking about God at all. Strange, but I think I understand. She can't start to get her own ideas into my head until she knows the lie of the land. I'm still wary of how things will go when it's her time to talk and my turn to listen, but I have to admit that today's chat really put me at ease, for a while.

While watching the tube I almost expect to be able to see her in her red jacket out of the corner of my eye where she had been sitting. Gloria's favourite chair, I shouldn't have let her sit there. I try to picture my wife in the seat but the image of Angela keeps butting in. I pull up other memories of Gloria, her joking with me the morning of my hangover before I remembered my betrayal, but in her place is Angela. I am far too susceptible and I was always bad with faces, but I'd like to think that my wife's face is rooted deep in my mind.

The house creaks under a gust of cold wind from outside and suddenly I need to see my wife's face. I pull the laptop up and the video is there ready to go. I open it and it begins to play. Her sobbing face instantly refreshes my memory. But it's not enough. It never is. I open more, again and again. Dozens of faces on the screen now, I need as much of her as the computer can bear. The glitches in the sound and the picture start to multiply. I'm hitting the buttons to open new videos so quickly that I'm practically

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holding them down. The computer beeps a warning and I take my hands off them. The faces begin to jerk and screech to a halt.

One day I will die and I will cease to exist. This short time I have is all I have, and right now I exist in sadness. Which is worse?

The laptop's screen freezes solid and once again the machine won't respond to anything I do. At least I'm trying something.

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I wake the next morning and feel just like I did that morning when I was ten years old. My mind feels like a storm cloud of old memories and new fears, and I can't wait for Angela to arrive so I can start to form them into sentences and get them out of me. I pass on breakfast, but I decide to shower again today. The effect is an improvement on yesterday. I notice my boils, although they haven't gotten smaller, haven't gotten any worse. There was no sweat rash yesterday either. I check my armpits for odour and it's still there, but it's nothing like it was. I guess when you fall into a hole this deep you don't leap out in just one jump. I run my fingers through my wet hair and notice that I am overdue a haircut. I smooth it down with my wet hands and try to make it look less shaggy. It kind of works, but when it dries who knows what it will do? I decide to wear the same pair of pants again today rather than fetching more from the bedroom.

It's ten am and I realize that I've woken earlier in the morning than I have in a long time. Perhaps it's the anticipation of Angela's visit. That's all it could really be. Sure, I did go to sleep a lot earlier last night as well, but that was because of how drained I felt after our discussion. Whatever it is, it is surely down to her. Entropy is decreasing, and me being fated to rot away in this house for evermore is growing less and less likely. The shifting of my sleeping patterns and the increasing cleanliness of the house and of me signals that a change is occurring. A change that is out of my hands, and yet I believe that I am ready for it.

When she arrives she lets herself in. It's close to midday and I've been sitting in front of the TV to pass the rest of the morning away. "Hi," she calls out as she closes the front door."

"In here," I call back, trying to disguise the anticipation in my voice.

She walks into the room and I am surprised to see that the red jacket from the past couple of days has gone, replaced with a light blue one of a similar cut. The rest of her outfit is black, but she wears pants today, not a skirt. She smiles a greeting and gravitates towards the seat she had yesterday, Gloria's favourite chair. But to say something now would be silly. Her cheeks look a little flushed. Perhaps it's her makeup or perhaps her normal tone is now in contrast with the blue coat. Perhaps she walked here, or came from the gym, or had sex recently. She has a face and figure that makes it all too easy to imagine her between the sheets somewhere. "How are you today, Thomas?" she asks while sitting herself down.

"I'm fine," I say as an automatic response. It's certainly not genuine but I know that if she wants real answers from me then she will get around to asking for them. "And you?"

"Fine, good. Thanks."

"Hey, do you want a cup of tea?" I ask, remembering how it worked yesterday.

"Yeah, that would be great. Look in your fridge. I slipped some milk in there on my way in just now. Could you make mine with that?"

I leave Angela in her seat and go to the kitchen, fill the jug and set it to boil. I look out the window there and see that it's a nice day outside. Maybe soon I'll open the curtains in the lounge, I think to myself. I can't see the sparrows' tree from this room, and I think I miss it. I go to the pantry and take an earl gray bag for myself. I can tell from the small amount of them left compared to the other day that earl gray is what Angela drinks as well. We chopped through them yesterday. If today is anything like it then I'll have to switch back to English breakfast before too long, or leave the house for more.

I walk carefully back into the lounge with the tea, Angela's made with the milk that I found in the fridge. I tread carefully to avoid spilling the hot drinks on my bare feet. "Thanks," she says when I hand her mug to her, and then I sit back on my couch. She takes a sip, the milk must make hers cold enough to drink right away. "Do you remember where we got to at the end of our talk yesterday?" she asks me after she's gulped down her mouthful.

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“Yeah. I talked about the first time I understood death, and you mentioned how you believe that reaching that is what marks the end of childhood,” I reply.

“That’s right,” she says. “And I’d like to continue from there, if that’s okay.”

“Sure, whatever.”

“So you’re ten years old and just come to some sort of terms with death. I imagine if you’d had someone close to you die before this point, you’d have mentioned it to me, right?”

“Right. There had been no one yet.”

“Had you seen a dead body? Aside from the birds and the cats, I mean. A dead human body?”

“Not at that age,” I reply. “It was when my grandfather died, and we saw him at the funeral home.”

“When was that?”

“I was thirteen. He was the first person who I knew to die.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t honestly know. He had the usual health complaints for someone his age, I guess, but there was nothing specific. Just one day he didn’t wake up. My grandmother tried to wake him for close to an hour, so I’m told. It was really sad.”

“I bet it was,” she says. “Were you close to your grandfather?”

I think of how to say it. “Yes and no,” I eventually reply. “What I mean is, I knew kids whose grandparents lived with them, and were part of their daily life. That wasn’t the case with me. We’d see each set of grandparents maybe once or twice a year because they lived a few hours away by car. I loved them, there is no question about that, but I don’t know how to answer your question. I couldn’t have been closer to my granddad, and I often wish that I had more time with him.”

“So how did your family tell you about his death?” asks Angela.

“Very matter-of-factly,” I say. “Like I said, they had never tried to impress a religious view on me before and they didn’t right then either. They didn’t say, now your grandfather is in heaven, or, no need to cry he’ll always be there, watching over you. Dad got the phone call, it was his father, and I heard him start to cry. Before

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he got of the phone my mother found me and let me know the news. She just told me he was dead and let me draw my own conclusions.”

“Would you rather that they had sugar coated it a little for you?”

“I have thought about this before, actually. And honestly, no, I’m glad they didn’t. We drove the five hours to their house once we got the call. When we arrived you could hear my grandmother wailing from outside.” I remember that sound and try to explain it to Angela, but give up. It was a noise of such utter grief that I can’t put it into words. It occurs to me that it probably sounded like I do some nights. “At that moment when everyone was hugging and crying, if someone had said something like, it’s alright, he’s in heaven now, I think I would have been really angry. It would have seemed like a cheap move. Like a convenient way to not deal with the actual truth of the event, and by treat it so lightly as to undermine everyone else’s real and profound grief.”

“But as an Anglican now, surely you believe that it was alright, and that he did go to heaven, right?”

This gives me pause. “Well, with the gift of hindsight, I guess you’re right. But I can’t retroactively apply my beliefs. If I could then there’d be none of the negative memories that we’ve talked about at all.”

“I guess you’re right,” says Angela.

“Still,” I continue, “had I believed now what I believed then, I still wouldn’t have said that it was okay because he’d gone to heaven, especially not around my folks. That’s my truth, it is certainly not theirs, and colouring the situation my way might not leave them enough room to grieve in their own way.”

“I understand,” says Angela smoothly. She always understands, I think to myself. “But I don’t want to get hung up on what you believe now. Like you said, we can’t apply what is true to you now to what happened to you then. Now, you said you saw his body. Was that then, in the house?”

“No, he had been moved before we arrived. We saw him two days later in the funeral directors chapel. He was in a coffin with the top half open. I did a double take. I’d never seen my grandfather in a suit, and I’d never seen him without his big bifocal glasses. Lying down he looked a lot taller too. His face looked gaunt and his nose looked much more prominent than the cheerfully

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round old man's nose I remembered him having. Although he was dead, he looked at least ten years younger. I don't know how they do it, the morticians. I mean, there was no obvious layer of foundation giving away that he'd been made up. But it just didn't look like him at all. It was like he was wearing a perfectly invisible mask that altered what you saw just enough to make him unrecognizable."

Angela nods. "Aside from his appearance, what did you feel when you looked at him?"

"That it wasn't him, that this body had nothing to do with him. He was gone and this body was no more my granddad than the car he drove. This was just the place where he had used to be. I had the same feeling returning to the house. Walking into a room and expecting him to be in it, looking at a face and expecting to see him in it, but finding both empty. They were the same feeling."

"So you didn't see your grandfather's body as being your grandfather?"

"No. I saw his shell. He was cremated the next day, which only added to that feeling. We scattered his ashes near the river, and the gray human dust hit the river sand and disappeared."

"You were thirteen then, right?"

"Yeah."

"Did you have any beliefs then about what had happened to the rest of your grandfather? The part that wasn't there when you looked at his shell?" she asks.

"Nothing you'd call a belief at that point. I was embarrassed of my younger self for chatting away to God in the field, but I couldn't rule out his existence. I guess I'd been dealing with this thought of death for about three years and I was only just starting to think about these sorts of things."

"Did you try and search out answers from established religion?"

"I did try reading things like the Bible, but it went right over my head. The parents of some friends of mine had some books on spirituality on their bookshelves and I'd sometimes find a way to flick through them without being asked too many questions about what I was doing. I got the idea of reincarnation into my head and carried that around for the longest time. It wasn't a prescribed ideology that I picked up, like the Buddhist view of reincarnation,

but more an ad hoc one, mashed together from the little that I'd read. I found myself trying to justify reincarnation with atheism by way of a subatomic particle that we supposedly carry around inside us. When we die we release this particle into the ground, where it finds its way up through the roots of plants and back into the food chain until it finds a new host. I was just new to high school at this point too, and had some very simplistic views on the world. That idea didn't last long. I'd mix other bits of bad science and consider ideas about afterlives that were more complex physical dimensions than a spiritual plane. There was also the idea that when you die you just stepped out of your body and wandered around without it, otherwise unchanged."

"So you didn't find any existing spiritual philosophy that fit your view?"

"No, nothing satisfied me. You must be aware of just how uncool the topic of religion was with the kids that age as well. People who were openly Christian, or part of an organized religion were openly bullied."

"Why do you think that was?"

"I know why I bullied them," I say bluntly. "Because at that age we were sure that no one had ever felt like this before. If the generations before us had even had a slither of this feeling, then things would have been a lot different today. That's what we thought. At least that's what I believed, and what we talked about. We sort of decided that we were going to have to figure it all out for ourselves from scratch. Subscribing to a pre-existing belief system just seemed like a giant copout, like a waste of your mind. There were some people I knew who would latch on to things like Wicca and more obscure, semi-occult pagan beliefs. But you never knew with them if it was a legitimate thing or if it was just a practice in social defiance."

"You mean they were subscribing to a pre-existing belief, but only doing so because it was an unacceptable one to the mainstream?"

"Exactly. That's what I thought at the time. I guess they thought that by being open about their abnormal choices that they were forcing people to re-examine their own. I didn't take that road myself though."

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Angela takes a moment to think. “What did you think would be different?”

“What?”

“What did you think would be different if the generations before you had felt the same way that you felt?”

I sigh. “I don’t honestly know anymore. I don’t think it’s imaginable, truly. I know I just felt like I was already over ten percent through with my life, and all I could see from there to the end was a life of constriction. You were told day to day that the world was your oyster and that millions of options and opportunities awaited you. But all they looked to me was the same thing in different disguises. Namely, you work for fifty years, then you retire and finally get some time to yourself, then you die. No ifs, no buts. If a careers councillor had brought up the idea of not going to university, not getting a job and leading a normal life, but instead running away into the hills to live off nuts and berries, I think I would have seriously considered it. It would have been the only alternative mentioned, but nobody ever brought it up.”

“You’d just ceased being a child, and the real world was starting to bite,” ads Angela.

“Right. And that’s what we couldn’t understand. Why did the real world have to be like this? It all seemed so contrived and orchestrated, like we were being led from the cradle to the grave in a predetermined fashion. I believed that if the people who had set this system up had understood the finality of death the way that I did then we’d never have such a boring and mandatory existence laid out for us.”

“So you accepted the finality of death at that point?”

“Yeah.”

“You weren’t toying with those ideas of an afterlife or reincarnation?”

“No, they didn’t last for long. I realized that I didn’t believe any of them. I was just trying to prove, hope against hope, that there was something after death. I kept my mind open to new ideas, but I had an operation when I was sixteen that changed my perspective.”

“What happened?”

“My appendix ruptured and I had to have an operation under general anaesthetic. I remember going under and then it’s just

blank, no dreams, no sense of time or anything. I was alive, of course, but I was essentially switched off. It wasn't a state of sleep where your mind is active. It was absolute nothingness. When I came to I realized the time I'd lost and I felt almost back from the dead. Like the idea I talked about yesterday, about that feeling when I realized that I hadn't existed for all the time in creation up until my birth. I felt that the time under the anaesthetic came close to being the same thing. It was the closest I've ever been to death, and it was blank."

"Being under isn't the same thing as being dead, Thomas," Angela says.

"I know, but it made my mind shift gears all the same. All the little theories that I had held onto out of fear were swept out. I was back to that feeling I had at ten. Death is death, and that is it. And that got me really depressed."

"I can imagine."

She's trying to console me but I've built up too much of a head of steam for that now. "I don't know if you can, honestly. I can see my entire life ahead of me, and I believe that when I die that is it. No second chances, no dress rehearsals. And it's going to be a life of drudgery, and it's going to be predictable, and it's going to be boring. I feel like a domesticated animal, a cow, being led through the milking shed and into the slaughterhouse. No one ever mentions the idea of running to the hills, because you can't. Those are someone's hills, someone's property most likely, and they'll haul your ass out of there. Out of anywhere you try to flee to. By the time you're an adult you're either playing by their rules or you're in jail. If you behaved you've got a desk job, if not you're getting minimum wage serving everyone else.

"That's your lot until you die, and when you die not a damned thing you've ever done will matter. Not one. You won't take a single thing with you, not even a memory. This is a shadow that is cast over every movement you make, every second of every day. Nothing you do is going to matter. All that matters is what is right here and right now. And what you're going to do is get a job and work your ass to the bone for a roof over your head and three meals a day? For the things that other animals pick up off the ground? Does that not seem fucked? You're going to waste your life! And then you will die. And the only thing that will ever make

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that thought less terrifying than it is right now is that one day you might get so old and broken or sick and in pain that death is a sunnier option than to go on living another day! Well, does that give you comfort? Fuck no!

“So why bother? If you can’t live on your own terms and you’re just going to be ash one day anyway, why live by the rules? Why not murder? Rape? Gratify every desire and whim until they hunt you down! Then choose your own way out. Why not? Do people not see the only options left available? No one gets out alive. No one! Because there is nowhere to go!”

Angela’s face shows no reaction. I’m almost standing by the end of my rant and my eyes are wild and my voice got so loud there that it could have taken the roof off. I’m breathing short and heavy. “Thomas,” she eventually says in her ever-cool voice. “Do you still think that way? I mean, now as an Anglican...?”

I cut her off. “I don’t have a fucking clue what I think.”

Eleven

Angela suggests that we break for lunch. I'm sort of hungry but I doubt that she is. This is her giving me a chance to calm down. I feel a little embarrassed for letting myself get all emotional like that.

"Did you see what else I'd put in the fridge?" she asks as she gets up from her chair.

"No, I didn't pay attention."

She smiles and walks out of the room. For a woman who has just heard me rant and cuss about life and death she carries herself with amazing poise and grace. She must be used to hearing this sort of talk, I think. That thought makes me wonder, how many times has she heard this spiel? I know I've never talked this way with anyone before. Do other people think and feel the same way as I do? We walk about and we talk to each other's faces about the sport and the weather, and we act like we've got it all sorted out. Is everyone carrying the same hopeless doubts and fears on their shoulders as I am?

Not that it matters. Why break the habit of chatting about idle subjects? Death isn't something that we can get together, discuss and solve.

When Angela returns she's carrying two salads in the clear plastic bowls that they were sold in. She's picked these up at some delicatessen, I think to myself, even though she took enough time in the kitchen to put them together herself if she'd had the ingredients. I guess she's been standing out there, waiting for enough time to pass between the last words I said and the next question she wants to ask.

"Caesar salad," she says, handing one of the bowls to me with a fork in it. "I guess you haven't been eating too many vegetables lately."

"You'd be right," I say.

"You need to keep your vitamins up. You'll get sick otherwise."

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I nod while shovelling the greenery into my mouth. Its crisp texture is odd to me after two weeks eating almost nothing but pizza and toast. We sit in silence for a few minutes while eating. “Shall I turn the TV on?” I ask. She simply shakes her head.

Once I’ve finished everything in my bowl she sets hers down too. Her salad is only half eaten but she seems keen to proceed with our talk. “How was that?” she asks.

“Really nice, actually.”

“It’ll do you good too. There’s an extra one of those for you in the fridge too. If you get hungry later on I want you to eat that, instead of eating junk.”

“Thanks,” I say, and I mean it.

She smoothes down the fabric of her pants with her hands then holds her hands together on her lap. “I want to keep going, if that’s okay, Thomas.”

“Sure.”

“But I want to sidetrack for a moment. I want to know about your teenage years. You can’t have spent the entire time thinking about death, right?”

“No, I guess not.”

“So tell me about what else was going on. Where you involved in sports at all?”

“No,” I answer. “That wasn’t my sort of thing. In fact, being part of the social outcast scene, and proud of it, my friends and I were at direct odds with the sport-playing bunch. Even if I’d had the slightest interest in playing something, I’d never fit into that culture.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’d be hard to explain now, but back then it was just how it was,” I say. “I can’t even think of an answer to that. It was just as it was. The jocks didn’t like us, and we didn’t like them. It was pack mentality, it didn’t have to be based in logic.”

“If they were the jocks, then what were you?”

“If I had to classify myself into one of those pigeon holes, then I guess I made a pretty good nerd. Looking back that’s probably just what I was around thirteen and onwards. I mean, I didn’t have the high pants and the thick glasses or any of the stereotypical appearance, but my interests around that time was what you’d call very nerdy.”

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“Interests, like computers?”

“Very much so.”

“In what way were you interested by them?”

“Oh, in every way possible,” I smile. “I could get pretty excited by them, back then. This was the time when computers were just getting into schools, and my family bought one for the home too. I took to them pretty well. Most of my spare time was spent on one computer or another.”

“Why did you take to them in such a big way, do you know?” asks Angela.

“They were a pretty interesting subject. Bear in mind that back then us kids had the idea that when we were the age that I am now that everything would be different. We had it in our heads, from books and movies and whatever, that we were in for a fully electronic future, with computers at the core of our day-to-day lives. Now, to a point this has come true, but it has come nowhere near to what we dreamed would be possible.”

“Like what?”

“Like personal robots, flying cars, living in domes on the moon. That sounds like nonsense now but back then we believed it was what we were in for. Every year new models of computers were coming out that superseded the previous ones, and not by just a little either. The technology seemed to be moving in leaps and bounds, everything seemed possible, and at the time I couldn’t understand why anyone wouldn’t have a major interest in this. It felt like we were on the curve of some historically important revolution.”

“I guess I understand that,” says Angela, “but I have to admit that I was one of those people who took next to no interest in computers around that time of my life.”

“I noticed that it was a fairly male-dominated hobby,” I smile. “May I ask how old you are?”

“Sure, I’m twenty eight,” she replies.

“That makes sense. That’s only three years behind me. A lot of things had changed with computers in three years, but it was always a fairly geeky subject back then. Did you have a computer in the home?”

“Let’s keep the questions about you for now,” she says. “I want to know what you spent so much time on these computers

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doing. Being excited about their future doesn't mean you have to be glued to them for hours on end."

"No, you're right, you don't. I played a lot of games on them. That would have taken up the majority of my time."

"So you were using these video games as a form of escapism?" she asks.

"Sure, you could say that."

"Were there games where you were directing a medieval army to defend a castle?"

I smile. "I see where you're going, and yes, you're right. There wasn't a game that accurately recreated my imagined battles as a child back then, but there were simulations that did a pretty good job. Also there were adventure games, role playing quests, you name it."

"Sports games?"

"Sure! I loved sports video games."

"Yet you weren't into sports in reality?"

"That's right. In reality I was a mildly unfit teenager with no skill to speak of. In a video game, I was a world class soccer striker."

"So by playing these games you were entering a world better than your own?"

I think for a minute. "Sort of, but it wasn't the pure escapism that you're making it out to be. I saw these games as a way to achieve things that I could imagine but in the real world could never actually do. Like commanding an army from the top of my castle, sure."

"And as the computers got more advanced you could indulge your imagination in better ways?"

"Yes! That was what was exciting and kept me hooked," I answer.

"Do you think that the time and energy you put into these machines took away from your social life as a teenager?"

"I guess it would look that way," I say. "But I think people confuse the symptom and the cause. I spent a lot of time on the computers because I wasn't very social, not the other way around. Had I not been so socially awkward then maybe I would have spent less time on those games."

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“So your interest in computers didn’t come before you became a sort of social outcast?”

“No,” I laugh, “I was way beyond help well before I officially became a nerd. There were nerds before there were PCs, after all.”

“Being an only child I think you probably missed out on some important lessons and life experiences on getting on with people,” Angela says.

“You’re probably right.”

“So you think that not fitting into the social dynamic turned you on to computers in the first place?”

“I guess that could have been a factor, yes.”

“Did you have girlfriends in high school?”

“No, not until university.”

“Did you feel that computers were something logical that you could control, whereas girls and the like were beyond your comprehension back then?”

“I guess, now that you bring it up. I hadn’t thought about it like that before so you could just be putting thoughts into my head, but it makes sense. I’d pick a world of fantasy that only I controlled over dealing with unpredictable relationships. But that certainly wouldn’t be the only reason.”

“Did you ever wish that your real life was more like one of these games?”

“Of course, I would think that all the time. But on the other hand, in real life I was coming to the realization that life was going to be a complete let down. Like I said earlier, all I saw in front of me was a life of boundaries, societal, moral and mortal. These games, every one of them, shattered those. I could lead armies to slaughter, wreck utter destruction upon my enemies. I could make bold immoral decisions, play god with other’s lives and take risks with my own life in the games that I could never do in reality. Because death wasn’t final in those games, it was only a penalty.”

Angela looks at her hands while taking this all in. Eventually she asks me, “Did you see the advancing technology as a promise of a better world?”

“Sure I did.”

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“Did you ever see technology as being able to conquer death?”

This questions takes me by surprise and stops my mind dead. I only manage to stammer, “yes.”

“Because I have heard the theories of bionic implants, that once inside your bodies monitor and repair the damage done by age and disease.”

I nod. “Me too.”

“And the idea that once computers get advanced enough, they may be able to mimic the human brain.”

“That’s right.”

“And once you have a complex enough computer, you could copy the information from a person’s brain into it. The brain may die and rot, but the conscious person would have been transferred into an electronic being.”

“I know, I know,” I say.

“And then you’d be half and half. On one hand you would have the real world, but you would also be seamlessly integrated into this other world of fantasy and imagination. As long as you had a source of energy, you would never die.”

“I had all these same thoughts,” I say. “And it was terrible, because it gave me hope against death again. Hope that our generation may replace death with a method of virtual reality to allow our minds to go on living in a dream world.”

“Like lying dead in the ground but still being able to think?” asks Angela, parroting what I said the day before.

“And commanding my armies from my castle top,” I finish the quote.

“Exactly,” she says.

“Except you’d not be alone. There could be as many minds in the system as you pleased.”

“But you abandoned that hope?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Just look at where we are now. Not even personal robots or flying cars. I realized that if such a system were to be invented then it wouldn’t be in my lifetime. And that just made me all the more mad. Can you imagine a point where humanity conquers death? When humanity goes beyond our biological confines and enters a world of completely new rules?”

And every human who has ever lived and died beforehand, myself included, misses out on all of it.”

Angela takes time to mull this over. “There’s no such thing as eternal life either,” she says. “The sun won’t last forever. In such a system you’d have maybe five billion years as long as you didn’t run out of electricity.”

“But time would have no meaning, or whatever meaning you desired, within the system. Like I said, completely new rules. But that’s beside the point, because I will never see that happen. Well, I could, if every cent of every dollar in the world went towards developing this system right now, but that’s not very likely.”

Angela stares at me, right in the eyes. “Do you then feel that, if you were determined and resourceful enough, you could avoid death?”

I break her gaze by looking at my feet on the floor. “I have felt that way before,” I answer after carefully choosing my words.

“You don’t feel that way now?”

“No.”

“A lot of people do,” says Angela. “There are those people who have their bodies frozen so they can be revived when the technology catches up.”

“You mean cryogenic preservation?” I ask.

“That’s it. Ever think about that?”

“It’s crossed my mind, but you have to be super rich to afford that.”

“They let you just freeze your head. It’s cheaper that way.”

“Still, I’d have to save everything I earned even to afford just that,” I say with a sigh. “And what sort of a life would that be, one worth preserving? Besides, there are no guarantees. I could end up wasting what little life I had to begin with.”

Angela thinks for a second. “Let’s say that money is no object, just for argument’s sake. What then? Would you go for it?”

“No,” I say quickly without looking her in the eye.

“And why not.”

“Because I’m nothing, Angela. I’m not worth it even if I could afford it easily. I couldn’t live on knowing that billions of people greater than me have died already. If I were to ever achieve the artificial immortality or longevity that we’re talking about, I

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don't think I could take the amount of survivor's guilt that would be attached!"

Angela looks at her hands. "I hadn't thought of that," she says apologetically. She looks back up to me and I know that she can see the beginning of tears in my eyes. I feel that she can usually tell when she's pushing me too far, and like a skilled fisherman knows when to slacken the line to keep me on the hook. She deliberately tries to keep her questions pointed enough to get what she wants of me, yet open enough so as to not back me into a corner. But that time she did, and I don't think she realized until it happened. After an awkward period of silence she softly says, almost as if she's only talking to herself, "I wouldn't do it either."

I nod in agreement. After talking like gods it's nice to know that it's just us two mortals in the room again. The temperature feels about right, and the air feels good in my lungs. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. I begin to calm back down.

"How about I get us another cup of tea?" offers Angela. I nod again.

She takes longer in the kitchen than she really needed to, I think to myself again. I guess that's a kindness. When she comes back the tea is a little colder than I've become used to. I wonder about her passing time in the kitchen again. Does she look out the window and think about just slipping out the door and away from me? I don't know where these discussions are supposed to be leading me, but if she were to stop right now then I don't know how I'd feel. I'm doing this believing I'll be getting something back, right? There's something in it for me, right? I mean, talking things through like this, like I've never done with anyone in my life before is a good thing, but it's not what Angela said she wanted to do. I look over the rim of my mug at her sipping her tea in Gloria's chair. Her blonde hair looks like exquisite stained glass. Come on, I think. Next time you take me to the edge, go all the way. Turn me inside out. I am just as interested in what's in there as you are. By now you probably have a better idea of what will come out than I.

We drink out tea in silence, knowing that this is a rare chance for a break from talking. I watch Angela out of the corner of my eye for cues. When she puts her cup down I finish what's left of my lukewarm drink and do the same. She then turns to face me and

starts right away. “You said you came to this town to go to university, right?”

“That’s right,” I say, happy for the change of topic.

“What did you study?”

“Computers again. Any surprises there?”

“No,” she smiles.

“Computer science, but I never finished.”

“You dropped out?” she asks disbelievably.

“Yeah. At twenty-one. I kind of dug myself a hole I couldn’t get out of. Financially speaking.”

“Debts?”

“Yeah. Huge ones. Banks will throw as much credit at students as they can get away with, and I was pretty shit with my money.”

“How so?”

“Drinking, mostly,” I admit.

“Wow,” says Angela, and I have the rare sensation of having actually surprised her.

“Yeah. I got so badly into debt from going out all the time, and so far behind in my studies for the same reason, that it wasn’t even my choice any more. I had to drop out and get a job. I had planned to clear my debts as soon as I could and then get back to uni and finish my degree.”

“But?”

“But life didn’t pan out that way. Earning a full time wage I could meet my payments, but my behaviour never changed, so I never made a dent in that debt until years later.”

“How many years?”

“Eight,” I answer, and I’m not proud.

She doesn’t need any time to do that sort of maths.

“Making you twenty-nine. That’s two years ago!”

“I know. Then I paid it off in a matter of months. It was seven thousand dollars.”

“And you could manage to pay it back that quickly?”

“Yeah, I quit boozing, and suddenly the money was right there.”

“Were you an alcoholic?” asks Angela with all seriousness, and she looks a little surprised when I laugh.

“You know, that’s the funny thing. I never thought I was!”

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“But now?”

“Now, I am still not sure. It certainly sounds like a classic case, but I felt like I had more, well, more justification really. I guess every alcoholic thinks that too, though.”

Angela stops me there. “Justification?”

“Well, yeah. It was a way to not take life too seriously. It was just habit from about sixteen onwards. My friends and I, we’d just get hammered, that’s what we did. We would sit around and we would talk shit and drink heaps.”

“That doesn’t sound like a habit worth keeping,” Angela frowns.

“No, you’re right,” I say. “But it became a way to cope. Growing up in a small town we were perpetually bored. Some of my friends and I would talk philosophy, about death and all that. When we were tanked you could sometimes even believe some of the answers we come up with. Try that sober and it just gets you depressed. The self-deception is just too obvious.”

“So you’d get loaded?”

“Yeah,” I say, and it really was as simple as just that.

“And you spent seven grand and scuttled your studies for this?”

“Yeah,” I say again. “That money wasn’t all on booze. I ended up owing for some damage I caused while drunk.”

“What did you do?” she asks with a weary voice.

“I smashed a big plate window. Threw a rubbish bin through a store front.”

“Why on earth did you do that?”

I gather my thoughts. There’ll be no way to say this that sounds okay. “I wanted to affect something. I was drunk to my eyeballs and in a very philosophical mood.”

“You mean depressed, don’t you?”

“Well, that was a given back then, but yeah. I was thinking about life and death in the blurry, fantasy way that you can when you’re loaded, and I thought about not existing before birth and not existing after death. I then thought that what did constitute my existence was nothing more than following a set of rules, and I decided that was no more of an existence. So I wanted to prove that I existed right there and then.”

“By throwing a rubbish bin through a glass window?”

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“It was the nearest thing at hand.”

“Did you get in trouble?” she asks.

“Oh yeah, sure. I was there when the cops turned up and they roughed me down and cuffed me and took me away for a night in the cells. The cells were a strange experience. I was too drunk to be safely held with everyone else, I guess. I got my own room, and for the first time in my life I was somewhere where I couldn’t get out no matter what. I mean, when you’re naughty and your parents send you to your room, you could always sneak out. The same was true for anything I’d experienced up until then. But when I was inside those cell walls I felt utterly contained. And the feeling was familiar, because then I knew that those cell walls existed around me at all times. You’ve just got to test them to see them. Break a rule and they’ll rise up, real as anything. Sometimes they’re a set of solid walls and an unmovable door with a cop on the other side. Sometimes they’re a wall of cold stares or unanswered telephones. But they are always there. Realizing this I felt almost vindicated. Until I sobered up and got the bill for the window.”

“So this incident didn’t change your behaviour at all?” asks Angela, like she’s talking to a child.

“Well, I didn’t break any windows ever again, but I didn’t stop getting drunk, no.”

“Until two years ago?” she asks

“That’s about right,” I answer.

Twelve

“Did you ever really think that you’d find spiritual answers in alcohol,” Angela asks me, sounding like a disapproving teacher.

She’s still smiling though, that’s something, I guess. My face is getting red. I can feel it. It is so difficult to talk about being a drunkard in a matter of fact way. You can’t just say, yes, I drank heaps. I got under a ton of debt because of it. People expect you to apologise for yourself, to yourself. I’ve prostrated myself in more pathetic ways before this woman over the past two days. This should be a cinch, but it’s not. “I don’t think that was ever my intention,” I answer timidly.

“So you got drunk, and talked philosophy with your friends, yet never intended to get anywhere with it?”

“That’s right.” The words stumble out of my mouth. “I think I wanted the opposite. I had friends into drugs...”

She interrupts, “Were you?”

“No, I stuck to booze. But these druggie friends of mine would go on and on about getting high and expanding your consciousness and all that. They would sit around and talk on and on about reality and perception and on opening your mind. The argument was that drugs could unlock your brain in certain ways. That they helped you operate at a higher spiritual level.”

“And you didn’t buy it?”

“Not at all. I felt too conscious as it was. I knew why I was drinking, and it was for the opposite reason.”

“You mean, to narrow your mind?”

“I guess it was to simplify things. So yeah, you could say that. When you’re drunk all that matters is getting more to drink, girls, maybe something to eat and finding somewhere safe to sleep. If you’re going to have spiritual thoughts then you can pretty much arrive at any conclusion you like and you’ll believe your own bullshit until you forget it.”

“As in, you could stop believing in the finality of death?” asks Angela.

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“Well, as in you could slow your brain right down to the point that you wouldn’t be able to comprehend the concept of finality. You could make yourself simpler than you were at ten, if you like.”

“And then the problem goes away, does it?”

“Until morning,” I answer.

“And the friends of yours on drugs?”

“I think they were deluding themselves just the same amount, but in a different way. Whereas getting drunk would give me the intelligence of a child, them getting high would stimulate the imagination of one. There’s no such increase in your brain’s function or widening of your consciousness. There’s just a decrease in your brain’s ability to spot a lie. Especially your own.”

“I guess you’re right,” Angela says.

“That’s how I remember a lot of things from childhood,” I say. “The memories feel the same as memories of nights out.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know if it’s because the memories are so old, but I mostly remember emotions and sensations. The chronology of events isn’t as important, and changes around with each re-imagining. I don’t know if it’s how I’m remembering now, if it’s how I was storing that information then.”

Angela holds her hands together and looks away, like she’s thinking of what to say next. “Do you,” she starts speaking slowly, like she’s still not sure, “think that you would be happier if you weren’t intelligent enough to know about death?”

I take a deep breath. “No idea,” I say.

“I guess what I’m asking is, would you be happier in a perpetual childlike state, before you could grasp the idea that it would all end one day?”

“That’s hard to say,” I muse. “You’re basically asking if I’d be happier mentally impaired?”

“Kind of, I guess.”

“If that is truly like being a child, I don’t think so. When you’re young you can’t wait to grow up. It could just be frustrating. Then again, when I get very old I might slip back into a state of dementia and semi-consciousness.” I pause a second. The idea of death is familiar territory, but the idea of growing old, not so much.

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“Imagine that,” I say, almost to myself, “approaching death and not knowing what it was.”

“How about a step further?” Angela continues, ignoring my out-loud flow of thought. “Would you be happier as an animal?”

I snap back to the conversation. “As an animal? Who knows? I’ve been a kid before, but I’ve never been an animal.”

“But you were trying,” says Angela. “With the alcohol, you were trying.”

I can only nod my heavy head.

“Some would say that it’s humanity’s curse that we are aware of our inevitable mortality,” Angela says. “Some would say it’s our blessing.”

“Why a blessing?” I ask.

“Because of the drive it gives us, Thomas. It makes us think and prioritise. It makes us lead our lives in certain ways. It makes us express ourselves, and from that comes art, philosophy, innovation,” she says. “Would we have left the caves without knowing that we one day would die?”

“I had thought the same thing,” I say, “but in a different way.”

“Go on.”

“I looked at it from an evolutionary standpoint.”

“You mean that a creature that is terrified of death is more likely to try and avoid it for longer?” she asks, and she’s got it in one.

“That’s it,” I say.

“And by living longer it has a greater chance of passing on its genes, and its offspring will have the same attributes.” She looks up to the ceiling in thought. “I guess you’re right,” she says.

“But?” I ask, sensing she doesn’t fully agree.

“But can’t you see this fear of death as perhaps something that God would give you?”

“Oh, are we going to talk about Him today?” I chide.

She smiles at my jibe and continues. “Think about it Thomas. Why would God want us to know about our own mortality?”

I shrug. “To punish us for something?”

“And what good would that do?”

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I break eye contact for a second to gather my words. “Well, if God was to deliberately make us aware of death, then it could be to have us permanently scared. I guess we’d make an easily manageable flock if we were scared.”

“That’s a pretty negative view,” says Angela.

“Well, yeah,” I say.

“How about you try looking at it like this.” Angela tidily flicks a stray blonde hair back over her ear. Her eyes are wide and they shine and she’s smiling like I haven’t seen her smile before. “God gives us the knowledge of death so that we begin to ask questions,” she says. “And those questions lead us to Him, one way or another.”

I give her a sceptical glance. “When I was a kid that’s not what happened,” I say. “I believed that death was the end.”

“That’s what you believed then,” she says. “Now you tell me you attend church. You believe in heaven now though, don’t you?”

Having spent the past two days thinking like my childlike self I am suddenly shocked to be reminded. “Yes,” I manage to spit out.

“Do you think that if you stayed a child for ever you would ever think of God in a serious way? As more than just an imaginary friend to talk to in the fields?”

“I guess not.”

“That’s right, Thomas,” she says. “And that is why God opens your eyes when you are ready.”

“Like some sort of test?” I ask

“Sort of,” Angela answers. “When you’re faced with the true nature of life you can go one of two ways, into the darkness or into the light. By the sounds of things you went one way before you went the other.”

“You mean the drinking?”

“Precisely. You let the darkness overcome you. You began to live out of your fears, and not out of your hopes.”

I can only nod in agreement. My throat has suddenly gone too dry to speak.

“But that’s not what I’m interested in, Thomas,” she says, “and nor do I want to go on further about my own beliefs. Not just yet.”

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“Okay,” I force out of my choked up throat.

“What I want to know about is how you found the light,” Angela says.

I look up at her and my eyes are watering. Not tears this time, just a physical reaction to my raspy throat. I realize that I’ve probably talked more today than every other day in the past two weeks put together.

Angela looks back at me. “Is everything okay?”

“Sure,” I say. I take a deep breath and try swallowing a couple of times to get my voice back.

“So tell me,” Angela says.

“My wife,” I say. “I fell in love.”

Angela smiles the way people do when you talk about love. “How did you meet?” she asks.

“It was when I was living in the city, in this tiny shitty apartment. I was living pay check to pay check and pretty much everything I earned after rent went on alcohol. It was a Friday night and I was really drunk and walking home alone when I got mugged by a bunch of guys on the street. I reckon they made off with about fifteen bucks, tops. They messed me up a bit and I had a blood nose pretty bad. I was totally fazed and just walked towards the main road where the lights were, thinking I’d be safer there. Then I sat down under a streetlamp and tried to get my mind together enough to work out what to do next. I was pretty wasted and decisions weren’t coming easily. I’d taken a couple of blows to the head too which had slowed me down, and I was just feeling sleepy and groggy. I remember lying down and looking up at the street light and trying not to close my eyes.”

“Were you concussed?” asks Angela.

“I thought that at the time,” I say, “and knew that I shouldn’t go to sleep with a concussion. But I was just too lethargic and exhausted to do anything about it. I would have drifted off in a minute or two, but I heard a car coming towards me from down the street. I felt the headlights against my eyes and tried to turn my head to see. I heard the car coming to a stop and had the thought that it was the muggers again, but I still couldn’t muster the will to get up. It was like something more than just the booze and the dizziness was holding me down. Next thing I know I see her face,

and the streetlight behind her made a halo around her head. She was beautiful.”

My voice trails off a little as I get lost in my own memory. “Was it love at first sight, was it?” asks Angela, snapping me out of my trance.

“I guess it was,” I say, still imagining Gloria as she was that first instant that I laid eyes on her. It was like seeing her in her wedding dress.

“What happened next?”

“She coaxed me up,” I say. “I could hardly move my head from side to side, but once she started to help me I felt as light as a feather. She asked where I lived and she led me back to my apartment by the hand.” I am staring into space as the memory of the night plays like a movie in my head. “She cleaned up my face and put disinfectant on my cuts. She put my bloody shirt in water to soak out the stain. She checked my eyes and told me I wasn’t concussed after all. She helped me undress down to my underwear and put me to bed. I went out like a light. When I woke up she was sitting at the foot of the bed, smiling at me and she asked how I was.”

“And how did you feel?”

“Like I’d never felt before. Like she had been delivered to me to save me from myself. And I had this feeling of joy and optimism. It filled my entire body and I could hardly sit still.”

Angela keeps smiling. “How do you know you had never felt that before?”

“It was like nothing else I’d ever felt,” I answer. “It was completely new.”

“New?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying to find the words. “It was like an immediate connection to her. I felt like I had to be with her, at any cost.”

“Had you been in love before?” asks Angela.

“Well, I had thought so. I had told people so, but I had never felt like I did then. This bond was so strong, so fast and so sure. It felt like it connected not just the two of us together, but tied us into something else. Something higher.”

“Like God?”

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“Yes,” I say. “Like God. It bound us together and with him. Everything suddenly fell into place.”

“A religious experience, then?”

“Yes,” I say. “My first.”

“Not wanting to take anything away from your experience,” says Angela. “But I believe you had felt that feeling before, just in the opposite way.”

“The opposite way?” I ask, making sure that I’ve heard her correctly.

“The feeling you had at ten years old,” she says. “When you recognized death.”

I stare back blankly, stunned.

“When you met your wife for the first time did it not seem like that feeling again, just played backwards, like reversed video footage?”

I have no answer.

Angela looks at my blank face for a while longer. I don’t think she expects a response. Her smile is still there but now it just looks smug. “I should be going,” she eventually says. “But if it’s okay I think we have a lot more to talk about tomorrow.”

“Sure,” I stammer.

After Angela leaves I turn the TV back on to try and fill my thoughts. The six o’clock news is showing, but I switch to the documentary channels right away. There’s another wildlife show, this time about ants. I lose myself for the entire hour show, watching the structured and rehearsed movements of the individual ants within the giant system of their colony. There’s a social structure, a hierarchy, and tasks assigned to each animal. I begin to think about how alike to humans they are acting, but it comes out backwards. The animal kingdom continually reveals further parts of itself to be thinking, organized and feeling. The tool using birds, the puzzle solving mice, the signing apes and the grieving and vengeful elephants. There comes a point where one has to stop thinking how alike these creatures are to humans and concede that it is the humans who resemble them. We are not on some high pedestal of consciousness looking down upon nature. We are of the one tree, merely her longest observable branch.

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Like mechanical parts with the links turned invisible, the ants all work towards a common goal. As ants fight to the death, drown themselves or go hungry for the greater good they start to look less like animals and more like cells in some larger creature. It's the colony itself that appears alive.

The cells in my body are alive, and I am merely the sum of them. When they work together, I breathe, I eat, I think. I live. Apart they are meaningless, but the relationships between them somehow form me. When I die these relationships break down, so what will I become? Will I turn up in heaven fully formed, down to the e coli in my gut? Or is there some sort of spirit, separate from my physical form that will take that journey?

I told Angela that I believe in heaven and that is true, but I don't know what sort of heaven I believe in. Can it be visualized? Is it a three-dimensional space, or is it made up in such a way that no human brain could ever comprehend it? If so, what part does my brain play in the afterlife? The brain is the controlling computer of the body, I know that much. Damage it in life and it changes you. It changes who you are for good. It contains the memory, the instructions, the instincts and the entire makeup of ones personality. Yet it is just a sponge of cells and fluid and it rots like the rest of you once you're in the ground. It boils like the rest of you in the crematorium.

Does the spirit take these memories with it, these souvenirs of a mortal existence? What if not? What if just a life force continues on with no memory of its prior incarnation? Isn't that just about the same as death? Your life force lives on only in the same way as your bones fertilize the ground! Who you are, who you were, disappears forever.

But I'm guessing now. I'm over thinking. I keep coming back to what Father George told me on my wedding day right before he died. That feeling in my guts, that's His, put there like a signature.

And what Angela said. The chill in my bones that night as a child when I faced the reality of death, that feeling was His too. Just the other side of His face

My very being here, being alive and thinking these things. I can go on and on about the messy physics of death to myself, but

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how can I be so sure when I can't explain why I am here in the first place?

This is not my life. It is His. Even if I am merely a worker ant, I am here for a reason. It is not my life to take, I think, seeing in my mind the razor in the bathroom, the rope in the shed, the gas oven in the kitchen, the car in the garage. This life has a meaning.

The feeling in my guts now, this terrible, tearing feeling. This too is his. Put there like a test. I've been to the darkness before, those blurry years of drunkenness, and I got out. I can do it again. Is this what you want from me?

The first time I was sure that you had sent me an angel. Is it happening again? The first I betrayed so horribly, how can I deserve a second?

Has your plan for me turned into punishment, or is there still hope for me? I'm not yet a pillar of salt.

Feeling hungry as the program finishes I wander out to the fridge and find the salad that Angela has left for me. Having the same thing for lunch and dinner is no problem for me. The clean taste of the vegetables is as alien to me now as it was at lunch. I can only imagine how the cells in my body have been coping with the meagre diet I've been providing them.

I sit back down on the couch bed and finish my dinner. My rhythmic chewing calms me down and my thoughts settle like leaves washed down a waterfall then into a peaceful pool. I panicked as a teenager, I think to myself. I was faced with the terrible realities of life and I panicked. I didn't have an answer then, and why should I expect to have one now at thirty-one? Generally speaking, I'm not even halfway through life yet. If life is a journey, a set of challenges, I may not feel secure until the second before my death. Do the old and frail accept the closeness of death simply because life is so wretched, or do they feel something that a man my age does not? Why would a god give me eighty years if I wasn't supposed to use them all?

Do I believe in God? Yes, I believe in a light, while my entire life is dark. I believe in a love that is bigger than me, bigger than anyone. Yet my love, my attachment to this love has been ripped away, leaving only the pain of its absence. All the misery in my life has been brought about by my own actions. All my joy has

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been delivered by fate. Yes I believe in Him, but his ways are still a mystery to me.

Thirteen

I wake on the couch for the eighteenth day in a row. As I peel my eyes open I feel almost normal until my gaze falls on the vacant shape of wall where my wedding photo should be. Once that has registered everything else falls predictably into place, my nerves go back to hell and my stomach knots itself up again. I've left the TV on as usual with the volume turned right down low. I wonder what time it is. Sunlight is coming through the window. Ten am I guess, from its angle.

I arrange myself into a sitting position and stare at the space of air in front of me. The black of the laptop catches the corner of my eye and I drag myself around to face it. When was the last time I played the video that Gloria had sent me, I wonder? A couple of days ago? I can't remember for sure. The first frame is static, her staring back at me from the two dimensional screen. I start the video and watch the familiar face choke on her words and her tears as she begins to talk. As it plays I feel the knot in my guts tighten. I let the file play through to near the end, and then I stop it. I select reverse playback from the program's menu and press play again. It plays backwards. Her face moves unnaturally and her voice winds back into her mouth. The feeling I have doesn't reverse with it though. At least I'm trying something new. The video plays back to its beginning and I close it, putting the laptop back on the coffee table.

As I do something strikes me about the appearance of the table. It seems somehow different. When I hold my hands out to put the computer down I notice what it is. They cast a shadow. There is light shining on this coffee table.

I spin my head around and look behind to the window. The curtains are open. I looked right at them when waking up but I didn't realize that. I haven't touched them. Someone has opened the curtains. The window has been opened a little as well and the sweet outside air is drifting through the room.

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I hear some strange sound from the kitchen and I jump to my feet in shock. I step quietly on my bare feet to the lounge doorway. I can hear a rustling. Without sparing another second to think I spring forward, make it through the dining room in less than four steps and careen into the kitchen. Angela is there in one of her black skirts. That's all I can see, as she's bent over almost double, facing away from me in an unintentionally sexual pose. She's going through the bottom shelves of the refrigerator.

"Good to see you ate that salad," she says without turning around. I can't find a response, and the possibility that I could still be dreaming crosses my mind. "Hope you don't mind but I let myself in." She has a plastic bag and is flinging food out of the fridge into it.

"What are you doing?"

She chucks another item of food in the bag, looks like an old bit of broccoli. "This is all going off," she answers. "You might not have been able to smell it, but I sure could."

"Did you open the window in the lounge?"

"Yeah. I opened a bunch throughout the house. You want to get some breeze through here. The air has gotten a little stale. Like I said, you probably hadn't noticed how bad it had gotten. But you will notice a change for the better soon."

I already have. My lungs feel cleaner than I can remember them being in a while.

"And check this out," Angela says, turning around and pointing into the fridge. There are four more of the pre-packaged salads. "And this." She opens the pantry door. There's a fresh pack of earl gray there, and on another shelf there are a handful of instant pasta meals, none of which was there last time I looked. "You haven't been eating well enough," she says. "I want you to eat this stuff instead. Take a little better care of yourself."

My mouth is wide open in surprise. I guess I'm happy. "Thanks," I say.

"Don't worry about it," she smiles as she shuts the doors. "Do you want to go take a shower? I'll get some breakfast together."

I notice the shopping bag on the counter. I see what looks like a carton of eggs and a packet of bacon inside. "Sure," I mumble and step back out of the kitchen. I let myself into the hall on my

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way to the bathroom and I can feel the breeze that she's let into the house. I follow its invisible currents and see its destination. The master bedroom door is open. I walk up the hall to the doorway and look inside. The window is open on the opposite wall, letting the air flow through. Angela was in the bedroom, I think to myself. It shouldn't be a big deal, I think, but I can barely set foot in that room. For a stranger to have wandered through it seems a little odd.

I walk into the bathroom and see that a fresh towel has been put on the rail. On the chair is clean underwear and a clean shirt, both taken from my wardrobe in the master bedroom. I turn the shower on and set the water to be a little hotter than usual. Maybe I think that this will make me a little cleaner, I don't know. While undressing I can't help but think of Angela in the kitchen only a few walls away. Being naked when there's a woman in the house is a strange sensation.

I take my time under the steaming jets of water. Now that Angela has started to put the house in order I would feel out of place if I were to let myself go filthy again. I use the body wash and the shampoo that has been left on the little shelves in the corner of the shower. When I step out of the shower I towel myself down quickly and put on the clean underwear and shirt. The mirror is covered with condensation so I can't see my reflection. I run my hand over my face to check my beard. This too will have to go soon, but it'd be too big a job and potentially too messy for this morning with Angela already here. I keep the towel wrapped around my middle and go out to the lounge to get into yesterday's pants. My nose picks up the steam from my body and the smell of bacon frying in the kitchen. I don't know how I'm supposed to act right now. Should I be outwardly thankful for what Angela's doing for me? Although I appreciate the food and the conversations, wherever they are leading me, I really haven't asked for any of it. It seems like she's doing it for herself. It feels like something she would do anyway, even if I protested. I sit down on the couch bed and watch the TV. The sound is too low for me to hear over the sizzling noises from a few rooms away, so I focus on that, and wait.

When the sounds of cooking have finished I hear Angela getting plates out of the cupboards, then her footsteps as she walks carefully into the dining room. "In here, Thomas," she calls from the next room. I get up and walk through the doorway. There on

the dining table are two plates of bacon and eggs, fried, with toast and a glass of orange juice each. “Sit,” she says, her smile gleaming, gesturing with her open palm to a chair.

“Thanks,” I say softly while taking my seat. There’s a knife and a fork laid out beside the plate. The pepper grinder and saltshaker sit in the middle of the table.

“I didn’t know how you liked your eggs so I had to guess,” Angela says, taking her seat opposite me. “Firm whites, runny yolks. Okay?”

I pick up my knife and cut into one of them. The yellow yolk spills out of the slit and begins to soak into the toast below it. “Perfect,” I say.

“The bacon too,” she says. “I would usually cook it a little crispier for myself, but I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I held back a bit.”

“It looks fine.”

“That’s good,” she says, cutting into her breakfast.

I do the same. In my mouth the almost texture-less egg is in sharp contrast to my usual diet of dry toast and pizza, and the crisp salads from yesterday. It holds such a delicate consistency that I can almost sluice it through my teeth.

Angela looks up and watches me eat. “Enjoying your food?”

My mouth is too full to reply. I just have to nod my head enthusiastically. She smiles. I clear my plate remarkably fast. The orange juice too, I drink the glass dry in a series of noisy gulps. I give Angela a big grin, a wordless thanks, as she collects my empty plate and used cutlery from the table and takes them out to the kitchen. I hear the tap running as she rinses the dishes, and then continue as she fills the jug. I sit alone at the table while I hear it clatter to the boil. She comes back a minute later with two cups of tea and sets the black one down in front of me.

“So Thomas,” Angela says once she’s settled back in her chair.

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember where we got up to yesterday?”

“I told you about meeting Gloria.”

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“That’s right,” says Angela before taking her first sip of tea. She smacks her lips together in satisfaction. “You were telling me what love felt like, right? How it was love at first sight.”

“Yeah.”

“Did Gloria feel the same way?”

I scratch my chin. “Later she said that she definitely felt something,” I say.

“But it wasn’t the same, earthmoving sensation as yours?”

“No,” I sigh. “She said that she felt more sorry for me, the sad state that I was in, and she stayed around mainly to take care of me.”

“But in time she came to love you?” asks Angela.

“Well, maybe she loved me from the beginning,” I say.

“But I don’t know if it would ever have been such a shock for her.”

“Why’s that? Love is love, is it not?”

“Gloria already had God in her life,” I say.

“Oh,” says Angela, more out of interest than surprise. “Did you know this at the time?”

“Oh yeah,” I say. “That’s how she explained to me why she wanted to help me.”

“That she was doing God’s work?”

“Nothing that lofty,” I answer. “She was just being a Good Samaritan, I guess. Helping someone who couldn’t help themselves.”

“So she stayed at your apartment from then on?”

“No, just that one night. She would come over every evening though and make sure I was okay. She’d bring dinners around for me.”

Angela chuckles. “Sounds like we have a little in common with each other!”

I have to smile too. “Yes, well. And she would make sure that my cuts were healing well and not infected. And she would make sure that I was sober.”

“And you were?”

“Yeah, from that night on.”

Angela nods. “Because the void you were drinking to fill had been replaced with this feeling of love, right?”

“I guess you are,” I say, taking a sip of tea.

“You haven’t been drunk since?”

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“I had a couple of beers at our wedding, and that’s been it.”

“Wow,” remarks Angela. “That’s some restraint!”

I nod in agreement, hoping she can’t read the lie on my face. Unless she asks about why Gloria has left I won’t bring up the shots of over proof rum at Jeff’s party. Even if she does ask I’m not sure I’ll tell that story.

“So,” Angela continues, “Gloria was brought up in a religious family?”

“Yeah.”

“Anglican?”

“That’s right.”

“So that’s why you went Anglican yourself?”

I nod my head. “I guess it seems weak to pick your faith because of a woman,” I say sheepishly. “But I had just found this light, this love. It didn’t matter to me what name I gave it.”

“But it did matter to Gloria, right?”

“Yes,” I say. “And to her parents especially.”

“And to you?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well,” says Angela, resting her teacup on the table, “you say you’d just found this spiritual feeling, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you immediately call it Anglicanism?”

I nod but don’t make eye contact. “I needed to be with her. I would have done anything.”

“Isn’t that taking things a little lightly?” asks Angela.

“No,” I shake my head. “I felt God. It didn’t matter what I called him.”

I look up and Angela is smiling. “Good answer,” she says, and slowly takes a sip of tea. “You remember how I introduced myself,” she says. “You already know what I think about what you did.”

“That I’d subscribed to a brand of religion rather than think for myself?”

“That’s right. But under the circumstances I can see why you did it.”

“Sure,” I say, feeling somewhat vindicated.

“So, did you find that taking on this faith was constrictive?” she asks.

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“Not at all,” I reply. “It was just more of the same social walls that I was already used to.”

“That you’d had problems with before, as well,” says Angela.

“Yeah, but I didn’t have a problem with them now that they were in context. Now that I felt loved and part of the world and everything, the rules began to make sense.”

“You didn’t question them?”

“Well, sure, but I didn’t disagree with most of them.”

“You know, some religions wouldn’t allow you to have eaten that breakfast I made for you,” Angela says.

“What, the bacon?”

“That’s right. Can you see any great conflict with that feeling of love and connectedness, and eating pork?”

“No, I guess not. But that’s more of a cultural issue, I think. Pork wasn’t always safe to eat.”

“But nowadays,” says Angela, “when we have refrigeration and modern cooking techniques, it’s perfectly okay. But because it was written into spiritual beliefs, people who follow them aren’t allowed to eat it. Doesn’t that seem odd?”

I hold my cup in both hands for a second while coming up with my answer. “But people aren’t abstaining out of their own good,” I say. “They do it as a sign of devotion. To break ranks and eat the bacon would be to thumb your nose at everyone else. It would dishonour everyone who had walked the path before you.”

Angela’s smile broadens. “Another good answer, Thomas. Perhaps you should have a cooked breakfast every morning.” I send a weak smile back. “But pork is a timid example, and not relevant to you,” she continues. “What concerns me is when faiths set down bigger rules.”

“Bigger?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says. “You say you loved Gloria more than you had ever loved anything, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“I know this is a cliché, but would you die for her?”

“Yes.”

“Would you kill for her? Assuming, of course, that it came to that?”

“Yes,” I say quietly without hesitation.

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“Because your faith would prohibit you from doing either, you realize?” she says. “You may feel utterly compelled to do something like this. In fact, that spiritual feeling you have could demand it from you, but your actions would then be in direct conflict with the church. Do you see the contradictions you could get into?”

“I guess,” I say. “But these rules exist to protect people.”

“Yes, but they don’t have anything to do with spirituality, do they? It’s social control. Sure, there have had to be rules against killing each other. The human race probably wouldn’t have made it this far without them. But there have been times in humanity’s when murder wasn’t the greatest sin imaginable. Morality is simply a point of view, Thomas, shaped by the world and people around us. Have you read the bible, Thomas? The Old Testament in particular.”

“Yes,” I say, and it’s half true.

“Do you think that the God in the Old Testament is that opposed to killing?” Angela asks with her head cocked to one side. “He did drown the entire world, after all.”

“Well, it was his world,” I say dryly, then taking a sip of tea. Thankfully Angela laughs at this. I was beginning to sense some tension rising from her end of the table. The curtains behind her are open as well, and the sunlight is playful in her long, stray blonde hair as she laughs away. I let go of a few tense chuckles of my own, and once we’re both finished our smiling eyes meet. I feel a certain lightness. Perhaps all this talk is making a bigger difference to my well-being than I had been aware of.

“That’s nice,” she says after a while. “That’s a nice way to look at it, but you didn’t answer the question, now did you?”

“I guess not,” I say, happy to see Angela a little less intense. “But any faith you chose, none of them say that murder is okay.”

Angela drains the last of her tea. “Thomas, if there’s one thing that I want you to take away from these talks, it’s this. Just because everyone else thinks something, that doesn’t make it correct.”

“Like murder?” I ask.

“No, not murder. Just in general,” she says calmly.

I nod my head solemnly. “I guess I’ll keep that in mind,” I say.

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“Good.”

The sun has shifted and no longer shines through the window into this room. More and more I feel the unfamiliar breeze of fresh air through the house against my bare feet and forearms. It's a lively cold, and kind of invigorating. Not the lonely cold of the empty house. “I suppose you'd murder me if I shut the windows again,” I mention.

“You've got that right,” she jokes. “You getting cold?”

“A little.”

“I'm not surprised. Go put some socks and a sweater on.”

That's easy for her to say. All my clothes are in that sealed exhibit of the master bedroom and going in there isn't as easy as it was for her. I imagine her earlier, walking into that room of Gloria's and mine, without a care. I imagine her leaning over at the hips and opening the window, not aware of the hallowed ground that she was walking on. “Sure,” I mutter, and stand from my chair. I suddenly feel much, much colder.

I hesitate at the doorway into the bedroom, feeling as if to take a step further would be to plunge into cold water. Once in the room I hunt out an old sweatshirt as fast as I can. Being in this room while another woman is in the house gives me a stranger feeling than the one I had in the shower. I try to imagine what Gloria would make of Angela. She probably wouldn't think much of her. She would have turned her, or any doorknockers for that matter, away without a chance to speak.

Socks are in my drawers near the bed. The sight of the bed up close brings back memories I haven't had in a while. Memories of the two of us together. As one flesh. I can almost see Gloria lying there before me. The urge to lie down on that bed of ours is almost overwhelming, but to do so would be to let myself go to fantasy. My mind is strengthening, I think. Healing, almost, but not yet sound enough to drift off into daydreams unscathed. What progress I've made I guess I owe to Angela. Before she came along I was a wreck. Now I'm showered and fully dressed. That wouldn't have been physically possible a week ago. For a split second the image of Angela takes Gloria's place on the marital bed, but I shake it loose. Ashamed at my own imagination a chill runs up my spine. I feel the urge to see my wife's face, the same pushing emotion that forces me to play that goddamned video almost daily. To quench

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the urge and see her crying face, reminding myself that in all reality I am a terrible husband to a wonderful woman. Play the video over and over, fill the screen with as much of her face as is possible until the computer gives up under the strain. To fill my mind up with her so as to stop her from completely draining out. Perhaps to love her is to forget her, though. Perhaps all I can do is let her go. Perhaps I've been trying the wrong thing all along.

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Fourteen

Back in the dining room Angela's chair is empty. From the kitchen next door I hear the jug switch on, plus some other rustling that I can't place. I take my seat and wait. Angela returns a couple of minutes later with a couple of cups and a plate of sandwiches. "Ham and tomato," she says. "I made them before coming over today."

"Thanks," I say. I hadn't expected to be hungry again so soon after the breakfast that she had cooked for me, but I was. We both sat in our places and sipped our tea while nibbling on the sandwiches.

After I'd had a couple she remarked, "This is a nice house."

"Thanks."

"Did you and Gloria move in here right after getting married?"

"That's right."

"Did you live together before that?"

"No."

"I guess not," Angela says, almost just to herself. "I guess that wouldn't be the done thing."

I nod and sip my tea.

"It's big," she says.

"Yeah."

"And just the two of you lived here? You didn't take in tenants?"

"No, just us."

"Wow."

"Gloria's dad organized the mortgage," I say. "It wasn't done through a bank. The money came from him and some of his church friends. They had a trust. That way we could afford a place like this."

"Low interest?" asks Angela.

"Next to no interest. They all stand to make a loss."

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“That’s pretty incredible.”

I sigh. “Yeah, I guess it is. It was important for us to be able to afford a large home, and Gloria had quit her job. We had to find a way to get by on my salary alone.”

“Why so important? Couldn’t you have gotten a smaller place and worked your way up?”

“We were expecting to start a family.”

Angela leans back in her chair. “That makes sense,” she says, but doesn’t sound impressed. “But why so soon?”

“It is what was expected of us.”

“By Gloria’s family?”

“Well, yes, by everyone. We were quite open about wanting to start a family as soon as possible. That’s why we were helped into such a nice home.”

“What happens now?” asks Angela. “Now that she’s gone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think they’ll turn you out?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you heard anything?”

“No,” I say, “but I can’t guarantee anything. I haven’t checked the mail for weeks.”

“Why not? There could be something important in it.”

“Whatever they have to say, I’m not ready to hear it.”

“Fair enough,” says Angela. There’s a moment of silence as she eats another sandwich. They’re cut into triangles, all on white bread and meticulously arranged on the plate. She clears her throat and sips her tea, never taking her gaze away from me.

“Thomas,” she eventually says.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you and Gloria have children?”

“We were trying.”

She looks concerned. “Two years of trying?”

“That’s about right,” I say.

“There’s a room in the house,” she says, “that looks like a nursery.”

“You saw that?”

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“Yes,” she says, sounding a little ashamed of having poked her nose around the house. “I saw it while looking for a window to open. Was it for a baby?”

“That’s right.”

“But no baby? After two years of trying?”

I sniff. “Yep.”

“Did you try, you know,” she says, “treatment?”

I shake my head. “No. Gloria said that God would bless us with a child when he was ready. We shouldn’t try to force his hand.”

“Two years of no pregnancies?” asks Angela, her mouth an o.

“Oh no,” I say, “she was almost always pregnant. She would miscarry around ten or twelve weeks in. Every time.”

“Oh my.”

“Yeah. Every time we would get excited. We’d believe that this would be the time.”

“I’m sorry, Thomas,” she says.

“Every time, after about eight weeks we would be sure. Then one morning she’d wake me up early. There’d be spots of blood on our sheets. She’d be crying. And I’d know.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Or she’d be in the bathroom, and I’d hear a scream through the door. A wail. Then sobbing.”

Angela looks on in sympathy. I know she’s trying to help with kind words, but really, there’s nothing she can say as my mind fills with memories I’ve tried to be rid of lately.

“They don’t call it a baby, or a foetus, when it flushes itself out. It’s a Product of Conception. They make it sound like something you get because you had the flu, or a blocked nose. Sometimes you could see where the head was. The lumps where the little limbs would soon be. Your instinct tells you that it’s your child, but it looks like a puddle of spilled food.

“And you know? I’d be worse than she was about it. The initial shock of it occurring would send her to pieces and it would be down to me to console her. But the next day, when she was beginning to pull together, that’s when it would hit me. And I’d just go down. And then it would be up to Gloria to pick me up. Lay me down and talk me through it. It hardly seemed fair on the poor girl,

that she should have me to contend with after all she went through alone.

“After a week we’d start making love again, and we’d both be crying. She wanted a child so bad, yet every time the same horrible result. She wouldn’t let me blame myself, but it felt like I was doing it. It honestly felt like I was bringing this curse upon her.”

“How could that be?” asks Angela.

“Because of my past,” I say, taking a deep breath. “I’d had a couple of girlfriends, a long time ago, who had gotten pregnant. At the time it seemed like the right thing to do.” My voice trails off before I can finish.

“Abortion?” asks Angela.

I nod my head. I couldn’t have said that word myself. “We were young. It was before I had a steady job, and we weren’t really in love. I can’t even remember the first girl’s surname. We were shit scared and took the only out available. We decided on what we were going to do and then she took herself along one day and did it. She turned up at my apartment later that evening with a prescription for the pill that they’d sorted out for her after the procedure, and we never talked about it again. We broke up soon afterwards. When another girl I was seeing got pregnant it just felt like part of the game. I went along with her this time. I was the only guy in the waiting room of the clinic. Afterwards she was smiling and relieved.”

“I didn’t know, I’m sorry,” says Angela.

“How could you know? That’s okay,” I say. “I didn’t have any guilt about what had been done until I met Gloria. Then I started feeling bad, really bad about it. I felt like a murderer. It was worse when Gloria began to miscarry, because it felt like the punishment for my deeds. I’d thrown away lives before, and now that I desperately wanted to be a father, God was denying me.”

“So you felt it was your fault?”

“Yes, yes,” I say. I feel my throat tighten and know that tears aren’t far away.

“You shouldn’t have.”

“I still do,” I say with a sniff.

“Surely there was some reason. A medical reason?”

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“I don’t know. We never went to a doctor. We trusted in God. Gloria was so confused. I never told her about what I’d done before.”

I sit there and try not to let myself begin to cry. Angela looks on in silence.

“You know,” I continue. “She was pregnant when we wed.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Those weeks that she was coming round, taking care of me. One time we just ended up joining together. Neither of us had planned it. It just happened. I didn’t even think of protection. I just needed her.”

“Is that the reason you got married so soon?”

“I guess it was one of the reasons,” I sniff. “Then three weeks after the ceremony it happened for the first time. We were sorting out the final details of buying this house, and she called me crying from her parents’ home.”

“Did anyone know she was pregnant?”

“No. She kept the whole thing from her parents. We moved into this place soon afterwards and immediately tried again.”

“But wasn’t the first time a mistake?”

“Yes, I guess. But we had decided to go for it, and not to try again right away threatened to make the whole marriage and home buying pointless. We had made up our minds.”

Angela puts down the sandwich she had been holding.

“Thomas?” she asks.

“Yes?”

“Where is Gloria now?”

And that tear duct that has never fully closed is suddenly fully open.

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I’m on the dining room floor, shivering and crying, as Angela tries to pick me up. I’m much heavier than she is strong and her fingers just prod my flesh ineffectively. I must have dropped off the chair like a stone when the tears began. A grief inside me was reawakened, so profound and overpowering that for the muscles in my legs to stay alert would just be fickle.

Angela eventually lifts me up to a kneeling position and holds my weeping head in her arms. “There, there, Thomas,” she

whispers. All I can see out of my blurry, half closed eyes is a strange angle of the room, looking towards the doorway and the kitchen beyond it. The lines of the house look strangely familiar from this point of view, from my tear-wet face being cradled by a woman. I get an unsettling feeling of déjà vu.

I'm trying to say "I don't know, I don't know," but it all just comes out as blubbing. I hear the words in my head but I can't get them out of my mouth. My muscles are in collapse. My jaw chatters and vibrates in open rebellion. My body shivers beyond my control. Angela strokes my forehead, trying to calm me down. It's the only sensation that I'm truly aware of. All my other senses tell me I'm in a jerky video, like the one with Gloria, as the computer gives up trying to play it. My sense of time stretches and fails. My eyes, nose and ears alternate between over-focusing on tiny details and switching off entirely.

Once Angela can sense that some will of my own is returning to me she puts her arms under mine and urges me to stand. I follow her instructions and she guides me into the lounge. She lets me go gently and I flop onto the couch bed. A wave of fatigue crawls up my back and my eyelids get very heavy. She sits beside my body and lets her hand rest against my face. I'm no longer shedding tears but still heaving in huge hopeless moans, barely making a sound with my wide-open mouth. I try to talk but I still can't get my tongue or lips to cooperate.

Angela sees me struggling. "It's that feeling, isn't it?" she asks. "The one inside you?"

I can manage a nod.

"That feeling of love and connectedness. Now that she's gone, that feeling has changed, hasn't it? Now it's dark. It's dark and it's heavy. It's still God inside you, but it's not a connection, is it?" I shake my head. "It's a damnation, isn't it?"

I choke trying to hold it back but the tears come again before I can answer her, yes.

"He's letting you know. He's put that feeling inside you like a signature, hasn't he? You denied him before you found faith, and now that it's gone he won't let you deny him again, will he?"

"I don't know," I sob.

"Yes, yes you do," says Angela, reassuringly stroking my oily fringe from my face. "You know. You believe that it was your

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fault that Gloria left, don't you? Yes. Yes, you do. It was Gloria who put that seed of faith into you. You've followed her since you met her. You took her faith. You changed everything about yourself. Tell me, Thomas, which one were you worshipping? God, or your wife?"

"I don't know. I don't know!"

"Could you even separate the two of them in your mind? Or in your heart?" Angela waits for a reply but I can't muster the words. "You can't imagine a God that sees you without Gloria by your side. You worry, what am I now to God without my wife?"

"I hurt her," I blurt out.

"How so? How can you say that, when it's you here, falling to pieces? Surely her leaving hurt you more!"

"I betrayed her," I admit.

"In what way? Sexually?"

I nod. "I cheated."

Angela's face hardly twitches. "So what?" she bellows.

"What do you mean?"

"Marriage! That's another one of the social conditions that branded faiths have imposed on humanity," she spits. "So you break your marriage contract? Big deal. Do you think that marriage fits with basic human nature? To have only one partner for all of your life, of course it doesn't! But now because marriage and faith are inextricably linked, when you break one you break the other! It's madness! If your wife wasn't so stupid..."

"No!" I cry, interrupting her. I feel it before I see it. Her hand, with her long red nails, slaps across my cheek. I feel the warm fingers and the cold silver ring that she wears against my skin.

"Shut up and listen!" Angela spits, and I'm too shocked to protest. "If Gloria understood you, the real you, this wouldn't have mattered. But she followed rules that weren't set down by you, or by her. But by a church!"

I'm breathing too heavily to physically continue crying and my composure returns all in a rush, but I'm still speechless.

"She chose to leave you over a sexual indiscretion? She, who was your sole link with spirituality! She ups and leaves and rips that faith right out of your chest? Is that the behaviour of someone who loves you? Who knows what you need?"

"I don't know!"

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“Your wife may have left you,” says Angela, “but God has not. Remember that.”

I’m beginning to sweat. I feel it, cold and moist on my back. I begin to shiver. Angela is sitting over me staring right at my face with those all-seeing eyes of hers. There is a tangle of words trying to fight their way out of my mouth but I can’t put them into any order that makes sense. I shut my eyelids to try and get away from the conflict in front of me, the conflict inside of me. A phrase appears from out of my deepest memories and I spit it out without giving it a second thought. “What God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Father George on my wedding day, dressed in white robes in the morning, dead and drunk on whiskey by evening. “What?” asks Angela, as if I’m speaking a foreign language.

“The unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife,” I continue.

“Cut that bullshit!” she hisses. “You think being married to Gloria makes you holy?”

“She was my angel,” I weep.

“Shut up! Thomas, you’re being pathetic! Your wife was spoon-fed her religion from the day she was born. She wouldn’t have given her faith a second thought! That doesn’t make her holy. That makes her a fucking consumer!”

I shake my head and try not to listen to what she’s telling me. “The husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife has,” I rattle off, the quotes passing my lips the same split-second that they emerge from my thoughts.

“And your mind, Thomas? Your heart, your soul? Does the wife automatically have authority over these too?” I don’t respond, I can’t. “Forget the rules, Thomas. Forget what that pack forced down your throat. These rules are making you miserable. They no longer apply. That feeling in your guts should be a catalyst for change, not a vehicle for torment! That’s how they control you, Thomas. They take that misery and your guilt and your shame and they keep you on your knees. They turn you into an empty vessel. You have to let it go!”

If she knew when to stop her questioning before, when to pull back and go easy on me to stop me from going off the edge, today she doesn’t care. I’m trembling and weeping, my tears

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pooling around my eyes before trickling down my face by the path of least resistance. I can taste them sometimes when they pass the corner of my lips, and they're salty and gross. Angela's face gets blurry as the tears accumulate. I can still make out her expression though. Although she's raised her voice to a shout, her face is not one of anger, more of earnest frustration, as if she's trying her best to pull me out of the floodwaters but I won't take her hand. Instead I tread water in the violent waves and stare at her in abject hopelessness with my tearstained face. She's trying to reach me, to save me, but I won't let her. I've found comfort in the inevitable rising tide. To move now would be to unearth my miserable roots and drag myself back to an uncertain shore.

I raise a hand to wipe the tears from my face. Angela just watches me, suddenly calm. I try to let myself go into a fit of full-blown weeping, but my body holds back right on the brink. I want this feeling, this alien emotion out of me, but I can't expel it fast enough. All I manage is a pathetic, low moan. "There, there," comforts Angela, and she lets her palm rest against my sweaty brow. "There, there."

Her touch is relaxing and I feel the muscles in my face, tense and contorted with emotion, begin to rest back into place. Her cooing and stroking lulls me into a drowsy trance. I've never felt so tired. With her hand on my face I let myself drift into a shallow state of sleep. Lying there with a woman trying to comfort me, that sick sense of déjà vu settles in again as I sink beneath the waking surface. Gloria is there, in my dream, but she's nothing but a video image, floating there in the nothingness. Two dimensional and false, the feeling in my gut is cold when I look at her. My lungs are full of salt water and I breathe more and more of it in on my way to the bottom, Angela's fine and delicate hand is holding my face down all the way.

Fifteen

When I open my eyes again Angela is no longer beside me. From the angle of the sunlight through the window I estimate I've nodded off for no longer than a couple of hours. It must be somewhere just passed midday. I pull myself up on my elbows and look around the vacant room. The window has been closed. I wipe the back of my hand across my face and the dust of dried tears flakes away into the air. I listen for the sound of Angela in the kitchen but I hear nothing.

I swing my legs out and sit on the couch. The TV, usually flickering away mute, has been turned off completely. The room feels deathly still. I walk into the hall and it feels the same. I go into the bathroom and take a long piss. All the lights in the house are off and it feels as if I am walking around in an architect's model. Everything essential about the house is as it should be, but the details that make it a home are missing.

I walk back down the hallway to the master bedroom. The door is ajar, but not how I had left it. I push it all the way open and Angela is there on the bed. She is fully clothed and lying on top of the covers. I can hear her faint breathing and know that she is asleep. She is lying on Gloria's side of the bed. Her strange presence in such a familiar room is an odd sight, like a painting you've known all your life suddenly altered or vandalized. The window here has been shut too and the air is still throughout the house.

Part of me wants to scream at her to get out of the room, tell her she shouldn't be here, that she's violating this place. But I can't muster the energy to disturb her. I don't know if I'd even be right in chasing her out of here. Her blonde hair over her shoulders and the blankets looks like the negative image of Gloria's brunette locks. Her red jacket over her black top, much bolder colours than Gloria would ever wear. Yet right now she inhabits the very same place my wife used to.

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Deciding to leave her alone for now, I shuffle quietly back down the hall to the lounge. I turn the TV back on and passively watch the midday news, my eyes focusing a few feet behind the actual screen and my mind not paying attention to any of it. My thoughts are a million miles away. I have the physical memory of Angela picking me up off the floor, the force of her body against mine. I can still feel the excess warmth and blood that flowed into my genitals while she held me. So typical, she was just trying to console me, to help me, but my flesh had to react. My mind's eye sparks flashes of her imaginary naked form on my bed where my wife used to lie. I imagine my arm across her midriff as she sleeps, the two of us naked and together.

Trying to shake images from my head is no use, I've learned. They just find a way to creep back in until you can deal with them on their terms. If it's sinful thoughts that I am to have, then so be it. They don't decide who I am, just by my thinking them.

But what am I? Am I the man that I described to Angela? I had thought that I had lived a fairly average life, but the way she asks me about it I can't find a way to explain myself that isn't full of darkness and weakness. Since Gloria left I had forced the thought of our babies to the back of my mind. I was not ready to talk about them. I may never be. Why is that? How ashamed can I be? Were Gloria's miscarriages really a punishment from an interventionist God? The same God that Gloria and I were to devote our married lives to? Could my past ever be shaken off?

Whether it was God's doing, whether or not He was even paying attention, is beside the point anyhow, I realize. Were I not looking at it through his eyes I'd still feel remorse, terrible remorse, for the lives I never gave a chance to. After all my adolescent years grappling with the heaviness and inescapability of death, within a few years I am casually signing off the deaths of my own creations. What right do I have? I would have been a terrible father, if I was even around for those children at all, but is that really a fate worse than death? Could that fate ever be for me to decide? It's far beyond me. I don't ever expect to come up with answers.

If it's not some sort of divine retribution then it's certainly cruel coincidence that all of Gloria's pregnancies ended prematurely. Each time she lost the baby I would become more and

more sure that I had squandered my chances already with those previous abortions. I was dipping into God's well to often, taking the divine spark of life for granted. Spilling my seed upon the earth in bloody, vacuumed-out clots.

Had I life enough in me to give in the first place? Have I? Is that why I feel so strange, why I carry this feeling in my gut that changes with the years yet nobody else ever talks about experiencing themselves? Is it why I sometimes feel only half here, and half somewhere else? I am sure that my parents never wanted children. I was an only child and a mistake. They loved me and gave me the best upbringing they could, but I had always felt peripheral to their lives, and to life in general. I am certain that if I had been conceived in more permissive times that I would have been aborted. My parents bought that piece of land out in the country before I was born, then Dad had to commute back into the city to a job he hated for the next twenty years. That can't have been part of the plan. I can't have been part of the plan. I've skated into life on half a chance, then I turn around and treat life with this level of disrespect? Whether God is taking notes or not, my actions have failed my own standards long before I've breached his.

Gloria, you were the angel that showed me how wrong I had been. How my life was one great sinful mess. Yet it was beautiful, because I saw in you a way out, a way back to the fold. I think of those kids in high school who went to church and how we would tease them. Had they always had this feeling I was chasing? Had the answer been right under my nose all along? Maybe so, but I would never have been ready for it. Maybe those children were born with that goodness in their hearts already. I wasn't. I wanted for nothing as a child, but I was never satisfied. The world was always an alien place, governed by rules and justices that I could never fully understand. I spent my childhood in a dream world of my own creation for just that reason. I was not ready to contemplate the world around me, much less its creator. I had to go through the bottom of the world, sneaking a cigarette outside an abortion clinic while your girlfriend was inside, hung over in three-day-old clothes. I had to penetrate the mist I'd fogged up around my life and the way I lived. I had to be able to step back from myself and finally see how far I had gone wrong, before I would accept a remedy.

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Oh Gloria, by what plan did you drive your car down that dark roadway the night we met? How were you drawn to me, this absolute wretch? How I needed you then, when I saw the light in your eyes. The light of salvation, I recognized its face and my need for it in the same instant. And you took me in, you loved me, you saved me, and the unbelieving husband was made holy through you.

And now gone I'm coming down. I'm coming down hard. I still yearn for it, for everything we planned together, but my heart is dark. I couldn't stay sober, couldn't stay faithful. Just once, just once is all it took, and I should have known that. I did know that! How I was set up and taken down doesn't matter. Everyone in the world could see that I never deserved you, baby. I'm almost happy that you're rid of me. You might finally get that family you so desperately desire.

But for me, there's no more salvation.

I've let my bare feet carry me across the rough lounge carpet, silently through the hallway, and coldly pad into the bathroom. I'm looking at myself in the bathroom mirror and my skin looks gray and ill. I watch how my eyeballs track each other across the reflective surface. It's an instinct, I tell myself. I wave my fingers in front of my face and watch my eyes blink. Instinct again. I grab a hair from my chin between two long fingernails and pull. I watch my face jerk with a start and water come to my eyes. It's all automatic. My mind is just an evolved sponge, by good fortune trained to look after the rest of the meat on my bones. To move them around safely, keep them fed. My automatic reactions are just the beginning. It takes in my senses and stores my memories. It combines functions to form high-level thoughts, but it all boils down to instinct. It's all just mechanics. If there's a soul then I don't see room for it.

Like the world is a series of explainable natural phenomenon. Weather patterns, geological forces, a billion years of life and evolution. It is accountable down to the last carbon molecule. There is no room for God.

And as much as I need him, as much as I feel where he should be, without Gloria to guide me, I can't find him. All I am is misery, searching for something I can never get back. If God doesn't exist then life is melting away from me. If he does exist

then he has hidden himself from my sight, right when I need him most.

What do you want from me? You would ask me to have faith? Faith, after washing the sheets you've bloodied with my unborn children? Six times, Lord, six fucking times! Faith, after my angel has left me, over two weeks with not a word? I don't see the path, Lord! This woman who's come into my life, she tells me to unlearn everything I've been told about you, and that you still love me. Is it true? Can you love me still, after everything I've done? After the mess I've made of this life, this life of yours, this life that shouldn't be but which you gave me anyway? Then show me! From wherever you're hiding in this cruel, cold house, please show me.

I start to see the words I'm thinking appear at the corner of my mouth. I'm looking into my agitated eyes but can't see anything staring back from the mirror's surface. I see myself and the room I'm in reflected before me, and it all just looks like, like stuff. Like just things, objects, nothing divine or special about it. It's like the set of a play, ready to be torn down at a moment's notice, with me as just another prop.

I've unscrewed the razor and opened up its head.

Perhaps somewhere in the world is the person that all this is for, I think to myself. Perhaps somewhere someone has God watching over him or her all the time, and they don't have to scream for salvation. It's theirs. The world is theirs, and love and happiness is their birthright. The rest of us though, we're just extras in the scene. We mull about with our mundane lives so that the stars of the show can see how happy they are in comparison to us.

I hold the stainless steel blade at an angle that looks about right. Forty-five degrees. Should get the sharpest point.

Perhaps Angela is right. Perhaps I've learned all the wrong rules while trying to invite God into my home. Any case, what matter? Those rules are as instinctive to me now as blinking. I don't know if I could ever change.

But if we're tossing out the rules, here goes one more. I rest the point against the deepest blue vein I can find on my left wrist.

I wasn't meant to be born anyway. Had I been conceived in more permissive times, who knows? Those infinite years that

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knew and will know nothing of me. Those ageless times of creation, of planets drifting in cold space. Of stars burning out, of the universe spreading thin and cooling. Those years wouldn't have been disturbed by pesky little me popping into existence for a little while.

I feel the first twinge of pain as I let the razor's edge settle against my skin. It feels like the tiny teeth of some animal. I look down and make sure I have both hands over the sink.

Gloria, I love you. But I just don't deserve you. The woman at the bar was unforgivable. But in my mind, even in my mind I am unfaithful. Angela's naked form in your place, on our bed. Her warm body against mine as she holds me on the floor. Even in the mind, when praying for forgiveness, I am unfaithful.

I let an impulse in my arm force the blade down and it immediately punctures my skin. Blood flows, but not much. I haven't broken the wall of the vein. I need to slice down the length of what I can see, then quickly do the same to my other arm if I'm to maximize my chances of a quick departure. I push again, tentatively. I'm being too timid. I need to force it. It's not like I imagined. God knows what I imagined it would be like but it wasn't this. Did I expect it to be arts and crafts, making a simple quick score with the blade? It's meat I'm dealing with here. I'll need to rip right into it. Running through the blackberry bushes as a child, my skin seemed so vulnerable, like it was made to be torn into by those thorns. Now that I want it cut it feels like thick rubber. Let that point get deep and then rip all the way down the skin. I push again with my right hand and I feel the vein try to wriggle out of the way, like a worm under a shovel's blade. I change tack to follow it and pin it. There's a flash of white pain, like an ice cream headache, and the blade pierces the vein. It's just a tiny puncture, just the beginning of what needs to be done. Blood begins to pour in earnest from the wound. The sight of its primary red makes me dizzy. That's the easy bit, I think to myself. Now I need to line the blade up with the rest of the blue line. But the red blood coating my skin makes it hard to see where the vein goes, and the more of my blood that I see the fuzzier my vision becomes. I start to feel like I'm watching my own arm through an old, detuned television. The pain in my wrist comes in pulses, and I begin to feel it all over my body.

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My legs go weak and my ears buzz, and I realize that I'm about to faint before I can finish the job.

Pathetic.

Sixteen

I'm groggy and sleepy and I don't want to get up. I can hear a voice a thousand miles away but can't make out what's being said. All I see are blurs of pale colour. I can feel my mind shift gears and start to lift me into consciousness, like a slow mechanical pump. I feel as if I should be coming to beneath a street lamp, but the first thing I become aware of is the cold linoleum floor under my shoulder blades. Then there's the flash of dark movement above me against the pure white background. My bathroom ceiling, I realize. A naked light bulb hangs from the centre at a strange angle to me. It captures my attention and I try to focus on its tiny glowing filament but I can't get my cloudy eyes to cooperate. My left arm is cold and feels oddly heavy. There's still a muffled noise somewhere to my side, and I think I hear my own name. I turn my head and see Angela. She's wearing her black top in the white bathroom and she looks like a part of the room that is missing, like someone has taken a sledgehammer to reality and knocked a chunk out of it. My senses return to me in greater haste and I'm almost fully awake with panic when I see the blood again. Like the blinkers being ripped from the horses face I suddenly recall where I am and why I'm lying on the floor.

Angela has wrapped a towel around my wrist as tightly as possible and is pushing down on it. I can feel the bones in my hand forced into unnatural positions. The cut itself feels the length of my entire arm, although I know it's not going to be more than a centimetre long at best. It throbs in sync with my heartbeat and shoots pain all the way back up my limb and into my body with every pump. I'm aware of the short, sharp breaths I'm taking through my clenched teeth.

"Thomas!" Angela almost shrieks when she looks and sees my eyes open. Despite her tone she is not hysterical. She has not panicked. I see the blood on the floor near my hand, and smears of it above me on the sides of the vanity beneath the sink that I must have put there as I fell. There isn't all that much of it.

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I mumble a reply to her, but it's not in any language. It's just a groan to let her know that I can.

"You're going to be okay," she says, and her voice is cool and calm once more. The corners of my mouth can't help but to make a tiny smirk at the irony. Does she really think that's my main concern? "You haven't lost that much blood." I nod to show that I'm listening.

Blood has soaked through the towel in places, making deep dark stains, but it doesn't look to be getting any worse as I gaze at it. I feel drunk at the sight of it. Already with her free hand Angela is wiping away the smaller streaks of blood around the sink. She's pulled the bathmat over to soak up the blood on the floor. "Let's have a look," she says, and unwraps the towel a little. I can't see what she sees and her face gives nothing away. "It looks fine. Getting better. There's not much coming out any more." She pulls the wet towel back around and pushes down on it again. "Got to keep pressure on it," she says. "Speeds up the clotting."

"I know," I mutter.

There's blood on her fingers where it's made it all the way through the towel she's holding. It spiders up the lines in her skin. It looks natural on her, red like her jacket or lipstick against her ever-pale skin and black clothing.

As I'm becoming more aware and alert I'm also becoming more embarrassed at myself. I've turned my head away from Angela to try and hide my blushing face. I feel my cheeks beginning to burn up. There are tears swelling up in my eyes. "Everything will be alright," she says. A sob bursts out of me like I've been punched in the throat. "There, there," she says, and I feel her hand let go of my wrist, then stroke against the side of my face. This just brings more tears.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm sorry."

"No," she coos. "Don't worry, please."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry, don't worry."

My mouth is too screwed up by now to say much more.

"Please don't worry, Thomas." I feel her free hand reapply pressure to my wrist while she keeps stroking my forehead with her other. Like I'm some sort of startled pet, or a teething baby. I guess that's not too far from the truth. I try to let myself relax under her

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touch and cool down but the moment that I find myself in is inescapable. “It will all be fine,” she whispers, but I can’t see it. I can’t even begin to imagine simply getting up off the floor and walking away from here. I’d sooner attempt to fly.

I feel a sting as Angela pulls on my left arm and shoot a look sideways. “Sorry,” she says, “I forgot that I’m supposed to be elevating this.” She lifts my arm gently up. As it gets higher she shuffles across on her knees up to my side to hold it up. “It’s mainly stopped bleeding now anyway. Just like a little scratch now.” The new tension on my skin brings the cut’s pain to the forefront of my mind again. She must see this on my face. “There, there,” she says again, looking calmly into my eyes.

I stare back at her face. There’s a faint smile of reassurance on her red lips. I see a little touch of blood on the tips of her blonde hair in places where she must have leant too far over the small puddles on the floor. It’s a beautiful face. I want to fall asleep to this sight and not wake up again until everything is back to normal.

“You poor thing,” she says, her hand against my cheek now. I try to clear my throat to speak but it’s still too soon after crying, still too much resistance. I try to make some sort of facial expression but there are too many competing emotions to express at once. I can feel my heart racing. Out of fear, out of shame.

And, out of attraction? I can feel Angela’s breath on my face. It’s warm and deep whereas I imagine mine to be cold and shallow. Her soft face is mere inches from mine. Her eyes are wide, and when she blinks I feel it as a shiver in my spine. Her hand is down from my face, on my shoulder now, and she gives it a playful squeeze.

“Thank you,” I mouth, and for what I’m not sure.

The light from the naked bulb makes a halo out of her blonde hair. She moves her hand down, over my chest, down beside my ribcage. I try to control my breathing but my nostrils flare. I feel that rush of blood between my legs again and the weight begin to set in. I arch my back and her hand slips in behind. With my elevated hand against her side we’re in a loose embrace. My forearm brushes the apex of her breast as she adjusts her position. My crying has abated and has been replaced by a look on my face of childlike

awe. She is still smiling wide when she leans in for the first kiss. I bring my good arm up and hold her behind the neck.

She lies her body down on top of mine and lets go of my wrist. She grabs at my face and holds my chin in position while working her tongue into my mouth. She breaks off to take deep, lustful breaths and drags her fingers suggestively over my lips. I taste the metallic tinge of my own blood from under her long fingernails. She launches herself at me again, her hips rising and falling, rubbing herself against my chinos as I steadily grow erect. She slides a hand down my front and pops the button through its hole, then leans back and pulls my pants right off me. She takes my boxers too, and I see my blotched and reddened skin shine against the soft white linoleum floor. Things are moving too quickly for me to be embarrassed. Within seconds she is naked from the waist down and has flicked our discarded clothes with her feet to the corner of the room. She pounces back on top of me and kisses my face again as I feel her fingers find and then claim my penis. She sits up straight with a smile and shuffles herself up, over and onto my cock. There's a moment of friction as I first penetrate her, and her body comes down to meet mine slowly at first. Once our bodies are fully joined she takes her guiding hand away and begins to rock back and forward. Gently at first, she quickly increases the pace, riding my full length.

From my point of view the sex seems to be an illusion. We both still have our tops on and that's all that I can see. The familiar feeling of intercourse seems out of place with what my eyes are telling me. She has her eyes closed and her head tilted back. I make rudimentary motions with my hips, but Angela is in control and doing the lion's share of the work. I haven't had the woman on top in a long time.

My right hand is rested on her hips and my left arm is lying flat on the floor, with its bloody towel still loosely wrapped around it. I see Angela cast the occasional glance its way. It still stings like anything, and the competing sensations of pleasure and pain make a strange blend in my mind. I can't concentrate on one without the other colouring it.

Angela brings her body down on mine like a hammer, then up, then down again so quickly, over and over. I start to feel tightness in my groin and let out a small moan. She takes this is a

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cue and works me harder still. She's biting her bottom lip and breathing unpredictably. The sweat from my thighs and ass is cold against the polished floor. I writhe a little underneath her and my left arm twists involuntarily. "Hold it still," she whispers but I can't help it. A jolt goes through my body and my hand shifts again. I let out a yelp as my skin is pulled against the floor and feel the wound go wet again. "Bring it here," she says, and I arc my wrist slowly down and around to her. She puts one hand on it, pressing that towel down on it to stop the bleeding again, and leaves the other hand on my chest for balance. She doesn't miss a beat. The pressure on the wrist lessens the pain. I feel completely pinned down by her. All of me is held flat against the floor. All except my penis, which she has enveloped. Her insides stroking and caressing it, like a captive hostage being given the five-star treatment.

I close my eyes and let it happen. She slows down and speeds up. Goes gently for a moment and then throws herself about on top of me as violently as if she were having a seizure. I'm not conscious of myself as a human being any more. All I sense is the cut in my arm and the almost electric excitement in my genitals. They are like two opposing particles, orbiting each other in the ether. My flesh and bones have melted away and all that remains are these two vivid sensations. A terrible ying and yang of pain and pleasure, blood and sex. My mortal body is miles back, crushed under a pile of rubble. Trapped and pinned to the ground by the arm and the hips.

When I come I snap out of the trance. It feels wrong to end up in the same body as which I started. The equation is broken. The sex is exhausted but the pain and the pressure remain. Suddenly I'm back on the cold, slippery-with-sweat linoleum floor of my bathroom, and Angela Turnbull has just fucked me here.

We lie, still joined together, for a while. I can hear our two hearts racing as one and our breath running out. The sweat and floor are cold against my naked skin, while above is still moist and warm. A shiver runs up from my toes to the roots of the hair on my head. I look down the length of my left arm and see the bloody towel still draped around my wrist. I focus on it rather than look at Angela, who has rested her head on my chest.

After what feels like hours she finally decouples herself from me and rolls over. Now out of the embrace I feel as if I've

stepped back into reality. It seems as if the sex was a dream, or an action undertaken by someone other than me. I was simply present and viewed the exchange through the participant's own eyes, but it wasn't me. There's a shadow of shame that threatens to claim me if I admit to anything other than this version of events.

I close my eyes as I hear Angela getting back into her skirt. I can see in my mind's eye her pale white skin disappearing into her dark black clothing. I hear her footsteps and her shadow darkens my eyelids as she walks around my head and out of the door without a word. I wait for what feels like five minutes before opening my eyes again. I look at my left wrist. The blood is dry where it has run down my skin in thin red rivers. The wound itself looks pink and clean, like a slit in the skin that has always been there, an orifice of no purpose.

I reach down and pull up my pants. None of my clothes made it all the way off me, they just bunched up around my ankles. Getting up I make the mistake of leaning to my left, and my wrist lets me know quickly that it is not ready for it. I stop myself from falling with my right. I feel so stupid. I go to the vanity and examine my face in the mirror. Despite all the people I have been today, it is the same face I started the day with that stares back at me. There is congealed blood in the sink, but not much, only the amount that managed to escape before I hit the floor. The razor lies in the sinkhole where I must have dropped it. For a suicide attempt I have to admit that it was pretty useless. I've had worse nosebleeds.

In the cabinet I find a bottle of disinfectant. It's full, never been used. The cap's seal is intact. It's almost as if Gloria bought it and stowed it away here especially for me should this circumstance ever come to pass. I get rid of the plastic seal and unscrew the cap. The violent green liquid stings instantly on my broken skin and I see my mirrored face wince. I persevere, however. It doesn't get any easier. I don't go numb to it the second time. It feels like I'm cauterizing the cut with a flame. If I could try to take my life, I reason, I should be able to put up with this. But cleaning the cut is almost harder than having made it.

Once I think I've made enough of an effort I find the first aid kit in the bathroom's other cupboard and wrap my wrist in bandage. I take it around my thumb and up my palm, ending up

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with a long white glove-like thing. I wrap more of the bandage around my hand than I really need to, but I want it to look like a bandage for a bad sprain. The sort of bandage you'd wear after a nasty accident, not a self inflicted cut. Angela may well be the only person who ever sees it but I can't be sure, and I don't want any questions.

When I return to the lounge Angela is sitting in her usual position. Aside from the sun coming through the window it all seems like it could be any of the previous days, like stepping out of the bathroom moved me out of the world where I cut myself, where I fucked this woman. No, in the lounge that world seems so far away. Angela's clothes look untouched and her long blonde hair is immaculate. Not a strand is out of place. I stand in the doorway for a minute just to take stock of the room. Everything is so normal that it feels wrong. It feels like the clock has been turned back. I look to the wall and half-expect the wedding photo to still be there. After a moment, without a word, I make my way to my usual seat on the couch bed. Angela takes a long, analytical look at me. She seems so far removed that it only heightens the illusion that nothing just happened between us. I can still feel the warmth in my crotch, and the imprints of her firm fingers around my wrist, but these are the only evidence that things are not the same as they were yesterday.

"Are you okay?" she asks after a while.

I nod. I guess I am.

"You fell asleep earlier, remember?"

"Yeah," I sigh.

"I don't imagine you've been sleeping much lately."

"I've been sleeping heaps, but not quality sleep," I reply.

"What do you mean?"

"All I get is shallow sleep. I have very vivid dreams that can wake me up many times during the night. Sometimes I wake up feeling more tired than I did the night before."

"That's to be expected," Angela says, reverting to her cool, clinical tone. "You've been under a lot of stress. Sleep disruption is natural in those circumstances."

"I guess."

Angela looks at her nails. "You fell asleep in the middle of what was essentially an argument," she says without looking at me.

I nod, but she doesn't bother to look, and carries on, "doesn't that strike you as strange?"

"Well, yeah. But that took it out of me."

"The argument fatigued you?"

"That's right."

She nods, still looking away from me. "That makes sense," she says. "I was attacking what are probably your deepest defences, but I had to do it."

"Why's that?"

"The walls we construct deepest inside of ourselves are often the ones that we question the least," she answers, almost absentmindedly. "They are meant to be protection from the outside world. But if they are not, shall we say, constructed correctly, then they can turn into our own prisons."

"You mean my beliefs are my, protection?" I ask.

"They shouldn't be, but often that's what they become. In your case, the walls that you have built around yourself are flawed and you know it. Your whole world has shifted, but your boundaries have not. I fear I might be taking the metaphor too far, but do you understand?" asks Angela.

"I think so," I say, but I'm not really sure.

"It's quite simple," she says, now looking me in the eyes.

"I told you that what you believe in is wrong, and you shut down."

"Shut down? Like a computer?"

"Sort of. If you want to look at it like that then you slowed down, not shut down. Your mind stopped doing its day-to-day conscious work and devoted itself to processing the data that I had given it, understand?"

The laptop and the videos, loading them over and over again until the processor seized. "Sure," I say, "I understand."

"It's a good thing that you slept. It gave your mind the time to rejuvenate, to process these ideas. I am glad that you responded this way, Thomas, it's very positive. You may be able to exit the constrictive shell that you have made for yourself."

"Positive?" I ask. "When I came to I tried to kill myself! That's positive?" My voice rises with unchecked anger.

"Please," says Angela, plaintively.

"What?" I yell.

"Could you have done that before?"

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“What?”

“Kill yourself? Would you have been capable of doing that before?” she asks.

Gloria’s words in my head. That this is not my life to take, that life is precious. That this life is God’s life and is not mine to waste. The words are all still there but they sound distant, like they’re coming to me through a thick sheet of plastic. They sound like a talking doll, buried in a shallow garden grave. “No,” I mutter, the venom still in my voice but the volume gone.

“I know it is hard to accept, Thomas,” Angela says, “but you’re claiming your life back.”

I sneer. “By claiming my life, do you mean taking my life?”

“You’re still alive,” she says.

“Just!”

“But Thomas!” she cries. “Think of what you have achieved! You are moving beyond your old boundaries.”

“So?”

“They had you prisoner, Thomas. They were torturing you. They were making you miserable. They had to go!”

I feel my bottom lip trembling. Anger, sadness, I can’t tell. All I know is that no more words will come out.

“The beliefs that you were clinging to were holding you back. This is for the best!”

“How the fuck would you know?” I spit.

“Because when I left you back there, you didn’t try it again.”

Seventeen

That shuts me right up. I slump back into the couch with my shoulders low. Now it's my turn to break eye contact and mindlessly scan the room.

Angela continues regardless. "In any faith system you have to demonize suicide. If you believe in a paradise-like afterlife then you have to have some clause to stop the followers trying to get there immediately. Occasionally you see spin-off sects that don't follow suit."

"Suicide cults," I say, holding my wrist.

"Precisely," responds Angela. "Some folks get it into their heads that they can take a shortcut, so for a religion to work it has to outlaw suicide. Otherwise the faith wouldn't last a single generation. But, like I've said, most rules that the church arbitrates go against nature. The insistence on monogamous, lifelong marriage is one example. That killing is never okay, despite what might be demanded by your conscience, is another."

"And suicide?" I ask in an unbelieving tone.

"Sure," she shrugs. "Suicide is as much a part of nature as anything. Just as killing can be justified, so can dying. Can't you imagine that force inside of you demanding it just the same way? I'm sorry, of course you can. Otherwise we wouldn't be having this talk."

"Right," I sigh.

"I'm just saying, it is present in all of life. From the grandest ultimate sacrifice down to interactions on a cellular level, entities chose to cease existing. And they wipe themselves out. It is a fact of life and to demonize it is wrong.

"Of course, I don't want to come across too positively on the subject," she continues. "It's about the darkest act that one can commit. But I obviously can't mask my true emotion here."

My eyes narrow. "Which is?"

"Happiness," she says, very matter-of-factly. "You're finally following that feeling you have, not fighting it. You're not

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trying to explain it or justify it within a certain set of rules. It's just beginning. You are truly living."

"I tried to die."

"I know, I know, and I'm sorry," she says. "Because this whole mess has gotten you so deep down this dark hole. It must have been terrifying."

I nod.

"Tell me," she lowers her voice, "what did you expect to happen?"

"I don't know."

"Come on. Did you expect to die?"

"I don't know," I repeat. "Like you said, I just followed the feeling. I didn't think about dying."

"So you didn't imagine yourself about to wake up in some magical afterlife, then?"

"No."

"Did you expect to just die and that be it? Nothingness?"

I shake my head. "I didn't think about it. I didn't think of it at all. I didn't care."

"That's strange," she says, and she sounds almost excited, "given the amount of thought you've given death in the past. You were just as close as you've ever been to it and you didn't think about it?"

"I guess," I say. "All I could form in my mind was the idea that I wasn't going to be buried where I had planned."

"Where's that?"

"Gloria and I have a double plot. It's on the church grounds. They wouldn't bury a suicide there," I say.

"Wow. The house, the nursery, and a plot of land in the cemetery? You guys had everything planned out."

"I know."

"That's a little scary, actually," she says.

"I know," I say again.

"What if something happened? What if one of you did die well before the other and was buried there, then the other partner remarried or something, and they never took the other half of the plot?"

"There are graves up there like that," I say.

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Angela casts a glance out the window. “All those lonely corpses,” she says, just loud enough for me to hear.

“A corpse can’t be lonely.”

“I know,” she says, looking back. “That’s why you wanted to be one.”

I can make no response. We sit there just like that for a couple of minutes in silence. Eventually I get an idea and speak. “I think a bird killed itself against that window there the other day.”

“Flew into it?”

“Yeah.”

She gets up and walks the short distance to the window. “Oh, there he is,” she says, as her eyes must find the shattered bird on the ground outside. “Poor little guy.” She cocks her head to one side while observing it. “Sparrow. You can tell it’s a guy by the dark head feathers.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I say, settling back into the couch, looking the other way. “I think he did it deliberately.”

“What, killed itself?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would a bird do that?”

“You see that tree out there?”

“The big one?”

“Yup. Can you see a female sparrow there?”

I don’t look but I can imagine Angela’s eyes peering out into that tree, trying to search out the tiny fawn creature with the light coloured crest. “I don’t see one, no,” she says after a while.

“There’s usually the two of them, the male and female, out there. I think they nest somewhere in the house’s spouting. They spend all day, every day, in or around that tree. It attracts little flying insects that they catch.”

“Have you seen her since this guy died?”

“I haven’t looked. I’ve had the curtains drawn until today, when you opened them.”

“Were the curtains closed when he hit the window?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” says Angela, returning to her chair. “That doesn’t sound like an accident, then.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“You think he knew what he was doing?” Angela asks.

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“I can’t say. I’d be guessing. I don’t even know if a bird has those sorts of urges. Are they, you know, smart enough to want to kill themselves?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know either. How would you know? A bird can’t have brains enough to want to die, even if his wife has gone.”

“But the bird in your imagination, that bird did,” says Angela. “I bet you feel a pretty powerful empathy with that bird.”

“I was just sitting here, day after day, wondering if the bird was braver than me, or more cowardly.”

“And now what do you think,” she asks, “after your experience today?”

“I don’t know. I guess it was brave to make the decision, but it was a cowardly one to make.”

Angela nods her head. “Thomas, I’m glad you didn’t die today.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“And although it was a terrible event, I want you to concentrate on that bit about the bravery. You are right. It was a brave thing to do. With that strength inside you now, you may be able to find a different way out of this prison of yours. A better way, a way up.”

“Okay,” I say.

“That is why I am here, Thomas, I want to help you. I want to see you be able to live your life again, independent of the rules you have learnt. I want you to be able to get over your wife leaving you. Or if you want to get her back, I want you to feel that you deserve to get her back.”

The feeling these words evoke is strange. I had never thought this far ahead.

“I’m sorry if this hurts you sometimes, I really am. But it has to be done this way. You could walk right out of this room today and rejoin the world, but until you have torn down the walls that live inside you, you will never be free.”

I gulp. “I understand,” I say, then timidly add, “thanks.”

“Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“Did you feel very close to death?”

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“No.” I shake my head. “I just passed out. I fainted. I knew I was going to wake up again.”

Angela nods. “I’m not surprised. You didn’t lose much blood.”

“It was the sight of it that did me in. I can’t stand the sight of blood.”

“Do you see much of it working at the hospital?”

“No, thank goodness,” I reply. “I wouldn’t be able to work around blood.”

“It’s funny,” says Angela, “how the sight of something can have such an effect on you. I mean, you’re just looking at something.”

“I guess,” I say. “Seeing blood is just one of the ways the body realizes that it’s been hurt.”

“But when it’s not your blood that you’re looking at?”

“I guess then you feel it in sympathy. Your brain doesn’t bother to work out whose blood is whose.”

Angela looks at her hands, her mouth at an odd angle.

“Maybe that’s why ancient people, before they knew how the human body worked, those people recognized blood as the liquid of life. Because it is so hard to look at. You feel like there’s more to what you’re looking at than what you are seeing.”

“Maybe,” I agree. “That, and it’s the blood that you lose that ends your life.”

“The blood in Gloria’s miscarriages must have looked like more than just blood to you, I bet.” I shiver but don’t respond. Angela has taken her piercing eyes off me and is looking off into empty space. “There are lots of things like that, sights or experiences that elicit strange responses in us. You can take either the biological view of them, or the spiritual. That’s why I wanted to know if you had felt close to death before.”

“You wanted to know what I thought of when I saw my own blood?” I ask.

“Sort of,” she answers. “Well, no, not really. I would be interested in what would have happened if you had lost more blood. A lot more. I want to know what if you had gotten to a critical tipping point, and then been brought back.”

“Like a near death experience, you mean?”

“Yes.”

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“Why would that interest you?” I ask.

“It wouldn’t interest you?” she responds with a startled tone. “I can’t imagine anything more interesting.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Come on, Thomas. Think about it. Almost everyone who experiences one describes the same sensation. The tunnel of light, the feeling of detachment, of serenity and well-being. Aren’t you at least a little curious?”

“There are explanations for all those things,” I say. “Scientific explanations.”

“Oh, I know that,” she says. “Don’t get me wrong. When the brain stops getting its oxygen it does all those things. The parts of your brain that control your vision go haywire and paint the picture of a bright white light surrounded by absolute blackness. Your emotional systems must do much the same in the same circumstances. Yes, it can be all explained scientifically. But just think, doesn’t that sound just a little bit spiritual?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

“People who have a near death experience say that they feel like they’ve glimpsed the afterlife.”

“I think they’re confusing cause and effect,” I reply.

“In what way?”

“I think it is people’s near death experiences that shaped the view on what the afterlife looks like. It might be nothing of the sort. It could just be the physical manifestations of some vital systems temporarily malfunctioning. That their minds are still alert enough to be able to remember this happening, to me that says they aren’t as near death as they think they are.”

Angela simply smiles. “I agree, Thomas. I’m beginning to really like the way you think.” She flashes a little smile. Her red lips curl, there’s a hint of teeth. Her eyes sparkle. The familiarity of that face she makes, it’s the first time that the memory of having made love to her just minutes ago feels real. She speaks again, “But how do you explain that feeling inside you? That spiritual feeling?”

“I don’t”

“Surely, it’s the muscles cramping. Or an imbalance in your stomach.”

“I don’t think so.”

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“Or the chemical make up of your brain. They’ve done studies, you know? Compared the brain scans of believers and atheists.”

“What were the results?”

“Inconclusive, as always. And if they weren’t, would that matter to you?”

“Probably not.”

“You really feel God inside you, don’t you?”

“I feel something,” I say.

“A good something?”

“Sometimes.”

Angela nods like she understands. “Thomas, did you try to die because you felt you had done wrong by that feeling?”

“That might have something to do with it,” I respond.

“The abortions?”

“Maybe.”

“You can tell me, Thomas.”

“I don’t honestly remember. There was a lot going on inside my head right then. I wasn’t thinking straight. I don’t think I would have done it if I had been thinking straight. I always thought that you’d have to be insane to kill yourself. To know what death is and to still invite it, you’d have to be mad.”

“Did you feel insane?”

“No. That’s what scares me. I was confused, but I wasn’t mad. Yet I still went ahead.” A lump forms in my throat.

“Some people feel they have to destroy themselves as a sort of atonement for their sins.”

“Like Judas?”

“Yes, I guess,” she says. “And Jesus too, if you want to talk the gospels. Those two were more similar than most people would care to admit. But I don’t want us to go looking for answers there just now. There are lessons to be had there, but a lot more rules and many, many more walls.”

“I’ve hardly read any of the Bible,” I say, a little embarrassed.

“That doesn’t matter. I’m trying to get you to live by your own rules, not someone else’s. And certainly not rules two thousand years old without question.”

I nod.

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“What I want you to do is to tell me, do you think that God really looks down on suicide? Can you say that you cannot see a situation where it would be permissible? From the bird against your window, to the microscopic parts of your own body that give up the spark for the good of the rest of you, suicide is everywhere in nature. Can God really be against it?”

The ants that drown so others might cross the stream. The soldiers who die so others might live. “I don’t know,” I say. “I guess you’re right.”

“And have you ever felt that if you were around someone who was very, very old, and they started choking on their food or something, that it would be cruel to try and save them? That it would be better to just let them go?”

I look to my feet. “Yes,” I answer.

“And what about killing? The bible explicitly warns against killing, then spends the rest of the book justifying it. From the feeling inside you, to the terrible world outside you, can you see that sometimes it must be right to kill?”

“Well, yeah, sure,” I say. “In extreme circumstances, okay, I guess.

Gloria closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and holds her hands together. “Abortion, then.”

I gulp. “Yes?”

“There are millions of starving children in the world. Tens of thousands slip away each day because they don’t have enough to eat. Meanwhile in places like this, people are fighting an obesity epidemic that’s killing them too. Not in such terrible numbers, and not so pathetically young, but it’s killing. That’s just food. Other resources, like timber, oil, energy, fresh water. How many people can the earth truly support? If everything was shared about evenly then we might just get by as we are now, but it’s not and it never has been.

“War is all across the globe. Children soldiers. Suicide bombers. Soft targets. Land mines. Famines. Children are smuggled in suitcases over borders to be sold as sex slaves. Dictators hoard their riches while their countries turn to dust around the ankles of their starving people. Meanwhile us, the better off, if you will, our governments just chase the dollar and turn a blind eye to the terror outside. Corporations get away with murder then sell

their hit men out for a buck. Forests burn, rivers turn black and fish swim on their backs. Men get paid just enough to keep them buying. Hillsides of tree stumps turn to mud and slide over a village like it was never there. The air is thick and hot with poison. Everybody's choking one way or another.

"The world is in decay and its people are in misery. Do you ever think, that if there were a God, he would be crying for this to stop? Crying, please do not subject one more of my creations to this horror you've created. By any means possible, let not one more suffer this fate?"

I hear echoes of a conversation that I was not present for. Angela's words would have sounded right at home in my father's mouth thirty odd years ago.

"In all of this, can you tell me that abortion is wrong? That it can never be right?"

Deep, cool air in through my nose, out through my mouth. I swallow once, twice to make sure I won't crack up when the words start to come out. "No," I finally answer. "I can't."

"Thomas, I know that you have your doubts and your regrets. I know you have your darkness and your misery, but honestly, listen to me. With everything wrong with the world today, you're probably the closest to doing God's work of anyone I've ever met."

Eighteen

The day I tried to kill myself, or the day that Angela and I had sex. I can't work out in my mind which one of these to call it. It seems like too much to happen in just one day. There are so many vivid and important memories competing for the same hour in the timeline of my life. It feels like more happened during that day than had happened in the ten years before it. All my time living alone in the city. All my time with Gloria. Did those really take years? Those years feel two dimensional now, like faded photographs. The flash of that day in my memory is like the big bang, an impenetrable barrier. What happened before it is so divorced from what happened after it that I feel like a completely new person. All that remains is the house, but even it seems changed.

Which one was it that marks the boundary? Letting go and making the cut, or the love made immediately after? The act of death and the ultimate act of life in the same brushstroke, like two sides of the same coin. An explicit and disturbing ying and yang.

I no longer mark my days off by how much time has passed since Gloria left. I now measure the time since Angela moved in. After the suicide attempt she said she didn't want to leave me alone. She said she felt a little guilty for it having happened, and if I were to try it again without her here then who knows what could happen. I might actually succeed in killing myself, and she didn't want that, she said. I said that I wasn't likely to try anything, but she said it was safer if she stayed. That night we slept in the master bedroom, side by side in the bed that once was Gloria's and mine. I didn't feel uneasy about being in the room. Things had changed, the walls had shifted. This was so longer the same room that reminded me of my missing wife. This was a vacant room, ready to receive its occupants anew.

We lay and she held me until I drifted into sleep. My dreams were strong and strange. Peculiar sensations, rather than visual images. I tasted the blood on my tongue again, like a copper coin. It was sugar coated like a painkilling pill, and as it dissolved

away I tasted it switch into the resin-like lipstick, red as blood itself, that Angela wore. I felt the chill of the cold floor against the skin of my leg, then felt the floor lose its solidity, and I began to float on a warm lake of salt water. The salt stung the broken skin on my wrist, but by the time the sensation of pain travelled up my arm and to my brain it was honey, slowly pouring down from a spoon onto my tongue again. I felt the freshly dug earth of a grave and the dust of a cremation in the creases of my hands and underneath my fingernails. I felt the heat of the centre of the earth and the absolute cold of space. I woke up in a sweat, Angela's arm still across my chest. It was in the early hours of the morning and she was still asleep. I watched her all the minutes until she awoke, silently tracing with my eyes all the lines of her face. Memorizing every detail, locking them away inside my mind, making a map of her within me.

She made us a breakfast like the day before. Eggs with crispy bacon. I wolfed it all down. I had been eating only out of necessity until then, but suddenly I felt real hunger. A true desire for food had overcome me. Angela smiled at the speed at which I ate and offered me the rest of her plate. I greedily accepted, yet I was still hungry after that as well. She got me one of the packaged salads from the fridge and I ate that too. It went some way to sate my hunger but I still felt unfulfilled. Before lunch she left the house and returned with savoury pastries from a nearby delicatessen. I chomped them all away. At dinner she left the house again, while I stayed on the couch in front of the TV. When she came back she held plastic containers of white rice and a pair of Indian curries, plus naan bread. I hadn't had such a variety or such an amount of food in one day for years, and although I the food was delicious and lifted my spirits I still felt unfulfilled on some level.

Between meals the two of us would sit on the couch together, or lie on the bed with the bedside radio on. We were never paying attention to what was playing, we just left the devices on to occupy our eyes and ears. We didn't need them for anything else. We wouldn't speak, we would just hold each other tightly and stay that way for hours. I felt myself absorbing her warmth, and I felt better than I had in weeks. It was as if the heat of Angela's body was transmitting all the answers that she wanted to gift me that couldn't be put into words. They were speaking to me via the rhythmic interactions of our two hearts, beating away in

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synchronicity mere centimetres apart. The throbbing beat of our blood made my mind drift and forget where my body ended and hers began. The barrier of skin was no longer, and with our eyes closed we would sit there and I would feel at one with her. Eventually I wouldn't be able to tell the heartbeats apart, and I would only be aware of one pulse. Times like this I couldn't even be sure whether the thoughts in my mind were mine or hers.

Hours pass like this without a word. When she does speak it surprises me. The communication between our skin feels complete and the need to talk has been superseded. When she calls me Thomas I question my need for a name at all. When I open my eyes and see that we are still two distinct people it clashes with what my mind has begun to believe. I think I have begun to understand it. What it means to become one flesh.

Only when we disengage from this hypnotic embrace to my thoughts return to Gloria. I feel sick at myself, as always, but I am surprised that I don't feel worse. The house has changed. It is no longer hers. Angela has replaced her within these walls. The food she prepares, the cleaning she's done, has not only been for my benefit. With every meal made, with every dusted surface, she solidifies her status as the woman of the house. This feels right. The house feels alive again, and everything is as it should be. Gloria's absence no longer lingers in the air, nor in my heart. Her presence is a vague memory now, like one from childhood. Like a movie I've just watched that hasn't stuck in my mind. It is as if the two-dimensional video image of her face on my laptop was all that Gloria ever was. The video that I haven't watched in days, the laptop shut down and put away.

Any remaining unease about her that I can't explain away evaporates all the same when I am with Angela. I become so calm, so content. The darkness in me, the twisted shame in my guts vanishes. I've let go of my wife, who I've betrayed so horribly, and I feel fine. I may be a sinner but I feel redeemed. I may be doing everything I thought I shouldn't do, but at least I'm trying something. It appears to be working.

On the fifth day I watched from the lounge window as Angela dug a tiny grave in the garden for the sparrow. She found a trowel in the garden shed and made a little hole next to where the bird lay. She carefully scooped the broken animal up and put him to rest

at the bottom, then brushed the bits of feather and bone that had come loose down the hole with it. She packed the soil back down and I felt the scab on my wrist with my fingers. Poor bird, I thought. I would have liked to bury the creature myself but Angela had offered to do it, and this way I didn't have to leave the house.

I am still very uneasy about the idea of leaving these four walls. More than ever I doubt my ability to explain my situation if I should run into anyone I know. I fear that my new fragile peace might somehow be toppled if anyone were to question me on it. If someone were to mention Gloria to me, how would I react now? Would my face burn up with shame? Would they ask me what I had done? Why she had gone? The answers to these questions might be all in my mind, but there's no way that they could cross my tongue. I just don't believe it would be possible. I fear that I'd simply break down again, and all the progress I've made since being the foetal wreck that I was would be shattered. And how would I begin to explain Angela by my side, if she were there? The joy that I've begun to unearth would be so much harder to impart on someone than the misery I carried around before. No, until my skin is as thick as my resolve, the outside world is still a hostile place.

Angela still goes to the shops for us whenever that's needed. When she leaves I hear her car start up but try as I might I can never catch a glimpse of it from the kitchen window. I don't like it when she leaves. The house begins to cool. She's always back before I can start to panic, but I can feel that pressure rising in me until she walks back through the door.

Often, after one of her trips into the outside world, I notice things in the house that weren't there before. Usually it's mundane items like clothes of hers that she must be picking up from somewhere and bringing here. Stylish outfits of hers in bold colours appear in the bedroom closets. Sometimes she returns with books or CDs and puts these on the shelves next to mine. I smile with each new discovery, the merging of our belongings symbolizing in my mind the merging of the two of us as people. A whole navy blue suitcase appeared on the thirteenth day. It's a modern type, tall with a handle at the top and wheels on the bottom edge. I found it like a standing stone in the corner of the bedroom. It was yet to be unpacked and looked to be bulging at the seams with Angela's belongings. The next day it was still untouched, and now propped

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up against it was a leather laptop case, looking like my own, but newer.

I never asked Angela to stay and move in with me, nor did she ask permission. It's all just happened gradually and without question from either of us, like the most natural thing in the world. I don't know where she's moving from, and I don't ask. If she has a home that she is leaving, or at least neglecting, I can't say. If she owns furniture or appliances then they aren't being relocated to here, at least not yet. Maybe later we'll have that conversation, and begin to sort out how our permanent home will look. Will it be this house, or another? What was the place like that she was living in before? Does she have an apartment in the city that she's abandoned? From the small amount of belongings that she's brought into the house she could have been living in her car, but she always looks so professional and flawless that I find that possibility hard to entertain.

Did she live with anyone before? A husband? I simply don't know. I try to remember our discussions and pick up a clue, but I can't put my finger on anything. Did she have a man? The idea shoots across my brain that before coming here she might have lived with another like me. Another hopeless soul, shutting himself off from the world. Known only to the people who deliver his pizzas, and the striking woman who knocked on his door one day asking to talk about God. This is what she says she does, after all. Am I the only one to be involved with her on this level? We haven't talked about it. She spends every hour here with me, except for her brief trips. There's no time for her to be seeing anyone but me. That much I am sure of. But what of the future? Is this a relationship, or simply another part of her therapy for me?

These thoughts get me worked up when I have them, but I only have them when she's not around, and she always returns. When she does we melt together again, and any doubt in my mind melts away accordingly. I'm a fool to think of our relationship like that, I realize. I'm thinking about it like the old me would, as a social contract with rules to be followed. With Angela it's so different, the rules I follow are the rules of the moment. I don't even bring up these thoughts I have with her, because the second that she is around they no longer apply. Any worries that I have, she absorbs.

We're doing fine for money as well. Angela doesn't seem to have a job, but she never asks me for anything. It's not like we live a costly existence like this. Meanwhile my finances are ticking away on autopilot as before. On day fifteen Angela cleared out the letterbox that I had been avoiding. To my surprise it was all junk mail. No bills were due and there was nothing from Gloria, her family or anyone representing her or the church. The realities that I had been afraid to face give no hint of existing.

Despite our bodies in constant contact, holding each other as close as we can, we never kiss. The first couple of times in that warm embrace I let my lips try to find hers, but her face was down on my shoulder and wouldn't come up to meet mine. I was a little unsure as to why. For me it felt like the thing to do, the step to take, but obviously I was wrong. Sex, also it seems, is not on the agenda. I didn't know what to think about that at first. The time on the bathroom floor when she climbed on top of me, that felt like a breakthrough. I was a little shaken when I realized that it was a one-off experience, as of yet to be repeated. I would lie uncomfortably with her, wondering what I should be doing. Did she regret having done it before? Every time we held each other I would imagine making love to her then and there, but it would never be realized. At first I believed that we had taken a step back, but now I think the opposite is true. The holding of each other is more important. The emotional transfer so much more intense this way. Though I can't help but fantasize about taking the feeling of calm and oneness I get with her now and combining that with sex. If it were to work it would be the ultimate feeling. But what if it didn't work, what if it was ruined? Is this why Angela holds me back? She would know. She was the one who brought me to this place. I can only trust her to guide me.

It is on the twentieth day that we wake up and shower together. She leads me wordlessly by the hand into the bathroom, perfectly clean and gleaming. At some point she had removed any trace of blood from the wall, floor and vanity. I close my eyes as her two hands slip me out of my sleepwear. Just being in the bathroom with her again is a turn on. She pulls the white singlet top that she sleeps in off over her head and skips out of her gray cotton knickers. Under the shower she takes a body wash that she had bought for me and lathers me all over with it. Still, when she

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touches me there is nothing erotic about it, despite every inch of my being wishing that there were. We hug there, under the showerhead, and the warm soapsuds slide off our naked bodies. Her fair skin glistens, her blonde hair shines. She pays no attention to my arousal, and I try to do the same. She dries me down with a freshly cleaned towel, being careful of my arm, and lays out clean clothes for me.

While she leaves to dress herself I run the basin to shave. I feel cleaner than I have in ages and I want to go the whole way, to see if I could begin to look and feel normal again. The razor has been carefully put away in its place. Seeing it again gives me a shiver, but it is in my eyes an essentially different item. The other day it was for cutting, now it is for shaving, and the two are not to be confused. I foam up my face and begin running the blade across my skin. First I start up near my ear and draw the razor down to my chin. The hair is long and coarse but the blade manages this bit fine. I do the other side, then around my cheeks and mouth. Finally, the part I hate, I shave from my neck upwards, doing it in vertical sections as if wallpapering. Here the blade snags on the occasional rough hair, and in the mirror I see a spot of pink as the blood and shaving foam combine. The razor is a little blunt, that's the problem. It hits a hair that it can't take in one go and it jumps or slides. That's how the cuts happen, when the blade slides or slips a little. It's the same on your face or on your wrist. I'm taking it carefully. I'm doing this to look good, to look clean, not like another bloody mess. The thought occurs that maybe it's this fledging beard that Angela doesn't like. Maybe a freshly-shaven me would be more appealing, at least to kiss. I push the thought from my mind. I'm doing this to be clean.

I manage it okay. Afterwards I use my towel to get rid of the spots of blood, already drying on my face. I look normal again. It's a strange sight to see in the mirror. I walk out of the bathroom and step barefoot into the lounge. The TV is off and Angela is there. We smile at each other and I go to sit next to her on the couch, but when I sit down she doesn't curl into me like she usually does. Instead she looks at my face, a sparkle in her eye.

"It looks good," she says of the shave.

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“Thanks,” I say. The word comes out awkwardly. I haven’t talked much these past few days and my throat isn’t used to it.

“How do you feel?”

How to describe, I think to myself. If I want to clear my throat properly I could talk for days about how I feel right now.

“Great,” I say instead.

“That’s good,” she says.

I nod, and my mind thinks vaguely of breakfast. It’s also strange to be talking, not just cuddling together. This is a mild shock to my morning routine.

“We haven’t talked in a while,” she says, and she’s right. “I was just wondering if there’s anything on your mind?”

“About us?” I ask.

“Well, no. More about what we had been talking about. Life and death, all that sort of stuff.”

“Um,” I pause. For the life of me I can’t think of a thing to ask. The past few days have been so simple, so perfect, that these sorts of thoughts have been irrelevant. There are a thousand things that I want to know about her, however. “Not really,” I eventually answer. “I think I’ve put most of those questions behind me.”

“Behind you?” she asks, a little surprised. “You were acting like they were the most important things in the world the other day.”

“And they are, just…”

She cuts me off, “Just you’re not depressed now, so you don’t think about them?”

I nod, a little sheepish at being read.

“I’m happy for you, Thomas, but really. If you truly have faith you can’t just let it go when you feel you don’t need it.”

“I guess.”

“And you have come so far, and broken out of that dogmatic shell that I found you in. I’m curious as to what you’re feeling right now.”

How do I tell her that all I’ve thought about is her? Shouldn’t she know that? Everything in my head is her. Is she not the same, but for me? I want to feel her reassuring arms around me, but she remains sitting where she is, awaiting my answer. “You want to know what I believe in?”

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“In a way, yes.”

“In what way?” I ask.

“Do you believe in God? Life after death, the whole lot.”

“Well, yes,” I answer.

“Yes to which?” asks Angela, but before I can reply she starts again. “Do you think that you can believe in God without believing in life after death?”

“I guess so,” I say after a second of thought. “I mean, we could be purely biological creatures, nothing spiritual about us, but a God has created us this way.”

“An interventionist God? One who demands our faith?”

“Well, why not?”

“A God, but no heaven? No human soul or afterlife?”

“I guess it’s feasible,” I say. “More feasible than not, now that I think about it. Why would a creator need to also make an afterlife? It’s a waste. It’s like computer programmers laying down huge pathways within a machine that are only used for data that has been deleted. It’s a waste, really.”

“So you don’t believe in an afterlife?”

“I kind of thought that by believing in God I did, yes.”

“And now?”

“Not so sure,” I say.

Nineteen

“So it doesn’t follow for you that faith in God means faith in eternal life?” Angela asks me.

“I guess not,” I say. “But how can you ever be sure of things like this?”

Angela cocks her head to one side. “You did say that you felt that you understood what it meant to not exist, but I’ve never heard you talk about an afterlife. I’m curious. You see death as oblivion, a finality, yet still have faith in a higher power?”

“I guess that’s true. I hadn’t thought of it like that. Before finding faith I was certain that death was it, the end. But even now, as a believer, I haven’t felt anything to the contrary.”

“You’ve simply believed in an afterlife because that’s what your brand of faith taught?”

“Well, I guess,” I say. “But find me a brand of faith that doesn’t teach that. Is there any school of thought that says that God created us, yet we are just mortal flesh, and when we die it’s all over?”

“Not that I know of,” she says. “But the idea of an afterlife is the biggest carrot in the game of social control. You tell the followers if they misbehave now then they go to hell, but if they play by the rules then they get to go to heaven, and they’re yours.”

“I guess the big question is, why?” I say. “Why would God make us, simply to have us end?”

“Why would God do anything?” she asks back. “You can’t ask these questions, you get nowhere like this. You have to look at the world around you, and at the feeling inside you, and come to your own decisions. That’s what faith is.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I am,” she says with authority. “And I think you are too, if you can just let go of your preconceived ideas about eternal life, heaven and hell, treats and punishments. Look, leaves fall from the tree and rot. They decompose and become part of the soil. Do you suppose that the leaves go to heaven if they’ve been good?”

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“Of course not.”

“Then why people?” she asks. “Because you know you’re going to die you expect to be spared the fate of the leaves? The bits of your skin that make up the dust on every forsaken surface of this house that I’ve been cleaning, do they all go to heaven?”

“No,” I say.

“This is the problem every religion has. Where do you put the soul? It’s a made up concept to begin with, that’s what makes it so hard to define. Every faith bends and shapes its definition to suit the circumstances. Especially now that we know more about the human body, health and aging than ever before, where does the soul fit in? It’s giving them headaches, I tell you.”

“So you think the concept of there being a soul is false?”

“False, I don’t know. Flawed? Definitely! At least the idea of a soul that goes on living after the body dies. At first, and you see this in their artworks, people believed that the soul would pop up in heaven as a fully formed version of their living selves. What if a person loses a limb, does that mean that their soul loses a limb too? Apparently not, they thought, but what about the brain damaged? The idea of your soul carrying with it your personality and memories of a previous life can’t be true. Any clumsy neurosurgeon can tell you how and where to cut into a person’s brain to irreversibly change someone. Delete their memory, their ability to talk. To see, to hear. Their ability to drive a car. Their ability to do mathematics in their head. You could probably make an incision in the brain that meant the patient switched from preferring tea to coffee. So more and more, we are seeing that what we perceive to be our individuality is purely biological. It is how a piece of meat operates that makes us who we are. There can be nothing spiritual about it at all.”

“So, no soul exists?” I ask, trying once again to keep up with her.

“Not the type of soul that people are hoping to find, no. Why peer deep into the mind, looking for some faint spark of the divine, when our whole existence is miraculous? Can we not be satisfied? The soul and the body can be the same thing, can’t they? Most creation myths agree that this world was made to be a paradise. It is how you live in it that determines your fate. You don’t wait for heaven or hell to happen to you after you die! You

create your own, paradise or torment, purely by how you live the life that has been given to you. It's the same for any living thing. Just humans are so complicated. The lows are so much lower than any other creatures', but the highs are so much higher. Judgment isn't some far off event. It is not some summation that occurs after it's all over. It's a continuous thing, and you know it. You know it as it happens because you do it yourself! It's how well you live by your rules that counts, not by anyone else's!" She suddenly reaches out and grabs my hand, twists it around and presses is against my guts. "There! What you feel there! Understand?"

I nod. Of course I know.

"That's why I ask you how you feel, Thomas," she says, almost pleading. "I have to know. Are you out of your hell yet?"

I blink and feel warm water between my lids. "Yes," I say.

"It is only this life," she says. "You can't let yourself spend it in hell." I look at her face, my hand still in hers, and I see that she looks close to tears as well. The soft lines of her face, the way her hair falls around it, the visage I have studied so intently since she arrived. Like a key in a lock, her face upon my eyes lifts me. I don't need to be in contact with her to conjure up that feeling of togetherness. It's within me now. I feel light and pliable. It's as if she's comforting me after no more than a bad dream. I can't imagine how I used to feel. The pain I felt. The tension within me before Angela came into my life.

"I think I am in heaven," I finally say. I watch as her moist eyes smile with the rest of her. I smile too, like her mirror image. I wait to hear her say "me too", but it never comes.

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Breakfast is a simple affair today, just toast and tea. It reminds me of my days alone before Angela even arrived. The difference now is that she fetches it all for me while I sit on the couch and let my mind be occupied by the television.

"I'm happy," I say to her after I finish eating.

"Why's that?" she asks.

"Because," I say, "I think that's the trick. I'm happy because that's all I'm meant to be. And I am."

She nods.

"Do you think that's what it's all about?" I ask her.

"What?"

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“Does God simply want me to be happy, and happiness is my reward?”

“Perhaps,” she says.

I shake my head. “What’s up?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, usually when I say something like this you then weigh in with some mighty opinion. But it’s like you’re not listening.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, absently

“Do you think I am wrong?” I ask.

She sips her tea and glances towards the ceiling before responding. “No, I don’t think you’re wrong.”

“But you don’t think I’m right, either.”

“No, not that,” she says. “I think you could be on to something.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

She sighs. “I think you’re right. I think leading a happy life could be the pinnacle of existence.”

I sense a loaded statement. “But?”

“But I think there’s more to it,” she says.

“Okay,” I say, a little resigned.

“Don’t get me wrong, I am glad that you’re happy. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t. But after all that we’ve talked about I am surprised that you settle for such a simple explanation.”

“An explanation of what?”

“Of life. Of your purpose, you know? I don’t think it’s as simple as just finding happiness. If anything, that’s a consolation prize, not the main focus. Not that there’s anything wrong with being happy. But if you believe that you were created by some higher power, and that power somehow delights in you attaining happiness, you’re basically relegating yourself to the status of God’s pet.”

“Yeah, and why not be?” I ask, a little sternly.

“Maybe that’s how it was meant to be, Thomas, maybe once upon a time. But you look at the world around you. Tell me that we are the pampered pets of the Lord. Humanity has some dark and scary corners, Thomas. The planet has some ugly sides. I don’t believe that just attaining happiness for yourself means anything, in the greater scheme of things.”

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I try to read between the lines of what she's saying. Is she talking in code about something? About us? "Well," I say, "you find happiness yourself, and then help others to find it. Like what you did for me. That's a perfect example."

"And this is all God wants out of us?" she replies in a cold tone. "Don't forget that pretty much every one of God's chosen people in the bible; Jesus, Judas, Job. They all suffered great miseries in the course of their service."

"I thought you didn't believe what's in the bible."

"I'm just saying," she retorts. "Your opinion wouldn't be a popular one. The concept of happiness is pretty hard to find amongst the pages of most traditional religious tales."

"But that's," I stutter as I begin to speak, "that's about overcoming obstacles."

"What obstacles, Thomas? You have obstacles, do you? Your wife left you because of something you did, then you've sat around this house being as helpless as a babe. Even now you rely completely on me for everything, from your food to keeping the place clean. So this makes you happy, but do you think for a second that it means that you've attained your purpose as a human being?"

Her eyes never leave mine. I feel tears of indignation begin to rise, but there's no way that I'm breaking stare first. "That's the problem," I say, with a vague flail of my hands.

"What's the problem?"

"The world, the planet, being human. Having to work for a living. Having to eat. Having to clean. That's the problem," I say, painfully aware of how pathetic I sound. "I just, I just can't deal with the outside world, and still feel this way. I can't take it on."

"You can't have one without the other, Thomas. Even monks don't have it so good."

Deep breaths should help, but they don't. "That's the thing," I say. "Just as you don't believe that we've been put here to be happy, I don't believe that we've been put here to struggle. And that's what the world outside is to me, one big struggle."

"Hey, don't put words in my mouth," Angela protests.

"I'm not saying you're wrong. In fact, maybe that's how it is meant to be. Maybe we were meant to be God's pets and all be happy and find our own personal heavens while on this earth. But you can't

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look at the world today and still say that this is the case. If happiness was our original purpose, then our purpose has changed.”

“To what, then?”

Angela leans back and smiles. “Do you believe that God is watching over you?” she asks. “After everything you’ve been through, do you feel like you’re being watched, or guided by Him?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I hope so. It feels like it sometimes. You coming into my life right when I needed you, that feels more than coincidental.”

“So, you do?”

“I can’t say for sure. Sometimes I just feel that things are happening for a reason. And then I get these feelings. Good or bad, they kind of let me know.”

“It’s important for you to feel that your life has a purpose, isn’t it?” she asks.

“Yes! Of course,” I exclaim.

“No matter what that purpose might be?”

“That’s the thing,” I say. “Even if it’s to be miserable my whole life for some reason, if I have a purpose then I want to know. Even if my whole life is simply necessary so that I die and become part of the soil for some later generation to live upon, I would feel so much better if I only knew. If my bones are simply needed to nourish some sapling tree that then plays its part in the ongoing scheme of life, I’m okay with that. But I want to know. But then, with you, I get that feeling that this is where I’m meant to be.” She’s looking at me intently as I speak. I wonder if I can fit the next sentence through my mouth with her eyes watching me. I gulp and clear my throat to make sure. “I feel love,” I say, and instantly feel the cold sweat in the small of my back.

“Love?” she says with a puzzled look.

Shit. Should I have used that word? Have I just made a grave error of judgment? Oh well, what can I do? Take it back? Don’t be silly. “Yeah,” I manage to slip through my quivering lips. “I do.”

“And love is what it’s all meant to be about?”

“Yeah,” I say, just as sheepishly as before. My heart is sinking. I can feel it sliding through me towards my feet. “Don’t you think so, too?”

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She looks to the ceiling. “Hard to say,” she begins. “I mean, what really is love? You could say that it’s just a neuro-chemical phenomenon, evolved to better aid us reproduce. Nothing special about it.”

Is this really the same woman that I’ve been laying within a tight embrace for the past four days without moving?

“And with love comes happiness,” she continues, “so you feel fulfilled.”

I look into her eyes for a clue but find nothing. I’ve just told her that I love her and she’s responded with a lecture on the subject. Say something, I think to myself. Say something that means something to me, and only me. “So love is meaningless?” I ask, fishing for a reaction.

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far, but I wouldn’t attach supernatural importance to it either,” she says.

I can’t help it, I stare at her, my mouth an o of surprise. I can’t believe the line that she’s taking. “Then what does it take?” I ask. I’m flustered. I’m exasperated and I’m near exhausted. “What is it that we are for? What is it that God wants from us?”

My raised voice hits every surface of the room and can be heard a few fractions of a second after the last syllable escapes my mouth, ricocheting about like an unruly and embarrassing child. Angela’s expression is one of concern now, but she still feels a million miles from me. There’s a silence as I feel those eyes of her upon me. I feel opened up on the operating table, having laid everything I have out there for her to inspect. I’m desperately trying to second-guess her thoughts. By bringing up love have I scuttled the whole dynamic? By brining our relationship under examination has it dissolved? My bottom lip trembles, daring me to speak, to fill the cold void between Angela and me. Could a word make or break it, bring her back into reach or permanently shunt her beyond my grasp? I can’t read the land here.

Eventually she speaks. “Thomas, I don’t think God wants anything of us. Not anymore. I don’t think God even knows that we are here.”

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“There are over six billion people alive in the world today,” Angela says. She speaks slowly and deliberately, in that hypnotic way of hers. “That’s more than have ever been alive at any one time

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before. And it hasn't been gradual either. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw such a surge of population growth. Because of new medicines, better healthcare and living standards, people are living longer. More babies are being born every day. The rate of births outstrips the rate of deaths the world over. The globe is literally teeming with bodies.

“To people of our age this is simply a fact of life, as the only Earth we've ever known is the one we find ourselves in today. Overpopulated and dense with humanity. But historically speaking, the time that we inhabit is an aberration. The world isn't meant to be like this, and the strain is clearly showing on its face. Whole demographics are starving to death as the land fails to support them. Pollution from so many of us all packed in together is making parts of the world uninhabitable. What we find before us is clearly not a harmonious planet. In fact in places it is terrifying and cruel.

“That's the argument that religious people are constantly faced with. Namely, if there is a God, how could He let this happen? Well, the answer to me is simple. Our ability to reproduce. As much as the church tries to turn the topic of sex into a matter of faith, it is obvious that God has left it all up to biology. All up to us.

“And it is us humans, these biomechanical beings on God's earth that replicate themselves so efficiently, that have let the world fall into misery. Whether you believe that God created man, or merely created the planet that we came to call home, or even simply created the flimsy reality that we exist within, you can see that we are stepping out of sync with what he had in mind. And that's our fault. We have failed to keep our house in order. We are the locusts upon his crops, the cancer in his bones. We have failed in our half of the bargain.

“There are simply too many of us. Even an omnipresent God would have to operate within some form of reality, and managing our exploding numbers would become an ever-increasingly difficult task. His love, attention, his ability to intervene would be spread thinner and thinner as our numbers grew. The spike of population growth in the past two hundred years that we've thrown at Him could well have been impossible to cope with.

“So with all the disharmony and misery in the world, even if God wanted to set things right or to deal out justice, he probably couldn't now. Simply wouldn't have the strength to in the face of

our numbers. The miracle of birth, thousands of times a minute. Billions of prayers a day. Like the strain on our planet, our food supply, our air, our infrastructure, our water, so too is the strain upon our God. And we see the same effects.”

I look to Angela in amazement. “You believe this?” I ask after catching my breath.

“Sure,” she says with cool confidence. “You believe in God, and you see the state of the world around you, don’t you? When you put the two of those together, what’s not to believe?”

“But isn’t that,” I falter as I search for the right word. “Isn’t that impossible?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” she asks, obviously unimpressed.

“Shouldn’t God be able to do anything? Couldn’t he intervene at any time if He wanted to?”

Angela smiles. “I bet you’ve heard this one before,” she says. “If God could do anything, could he make a rock that was so big that even he couldn’t shift it?”

“I know that paradox, but...”

“But what?” she cuts me off. “It’s the same thing. Even if God could do anything, this universe is built to specific rules. It stands that his interaction with it must follow the very same rules. If the rules for this universe dictate that we have free reign over our rate of reproduction, then that’s that. The problem is inherent.”

“Then He can change the rules,” I say.

“While the world is active, he can reach in and tweak it? I think not. And if He could,” she replies very slowly, like she’s talking to a child, “why doesn’t He?”

My throat goes dry waiting for a response to form there.

“Besides, if anyone’s changing the rules, it’s us,” she continues. “Our growing numbers have all but forced God from our lives, and we’ve been scrambling to replace Him.”

“Replace God?” I ask.

“That’s right. Through medicine, technology, industry. You name it. You used to pray for a good harvest, now you use chemical fertilizer. You’d pray for healing, now you go to hospital. Humanity is doing all it can to fill the void left by God.”

“But God didn’t do that,” I stammer.

“Do what? Provide for us? So you think that every culture on Earth having some form of prayer is just one big mistake?”

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“No, I...”

“Every religious text from antiquity describes an interventionist God. Coincidental error, right? Get real, Thomas!”

“What? And God isn’t around now, because there’s too many of us?” I ask hesitantly.

“You got it,” Angela replies. “There are an overwhelming amount of us. God simply doesn’t have the resources to care for us anymore. Like an old lady with a bunch of cats.”

“That’s a pretty sad analogy,” I say.

“I know, but I believe it is the truth,” she says. “As we’ve grown and multiplied we’ve strayed so far from our keeper’s gaze that I don’t believe He knows that we’re missing anymore. We’ve lost our way. We’ve got empty spiritual leaders now, the heads of church. Maybe once their offices were in liaison with the Lord, but they sure as hell aren’t now. The link between God and us has been severed. That’s why organized religion has become such a shackle on people. It used to be about celebrating faith, which everybody had, but as God and man slipped further apart the church was increasingly without a solid basis. They turned to fear and rules to maintain their foothold, eschewing faith and love.

“Faith is disappearing. Misery is increasing, as us primitive beings lack the compassion and love necessary to care for our own kind. We can’t make the judgments required of a divine shepherd. We don’t understand ourselves well enough. We can’t grapple with the ethics of who lives and dies, who is right and who is wrong. Everything about us is distorted.

“The ages of mythology and magic, where God’s powerful and supernatural presence shaped the world we lived in, they dried up centuries ago. We’ve been losing our faith every since. Now everything is cold and scientific. We understand how most things work, but we don’t know why. We’re trying to be Gods to ourselves, but it’s not working. No prayers get answered anymore.”

A word of hers still rings in my ears like a dissonant bell. “Magic?” I ask, in a surprised voice.

“Yes,” she says. “Magic or whatever you want to call it. How many mentions of magic do you find in old legends? Prophets, sorcerers, wizards, they’re just different words for the same people. Blessed people, people that God has given a powerful gift to. You could rattle of as many names in mythology and history as you like,

from Merlin to Jesus. But with our link to divinity lost, you could hardly expect someone like that to exist today. The same would probably be true for mythical creatures. But now, with so many self-aware beings on the planet, there just isn't the energy or the resources for anything truly special to exist like that. It's all spread out so thinly it's hardly even there."

"Seriously?" I say. "You mean you believe that God used to interact with man all the time?"

"Sure, on some level," she replies. "Perhaps not as literally as a boy playing with toy soldiers, and stories do have a habit of getting exaggerated. But I believe he certainly gave proof of his existence in one way or another."

"In a way that can't be seen today?"

"Right," answers Angela. "There's no proof any more. Only that strange feeling in your guts like some residual message. A weird compass, feeling part physical and part spiritual, which guides you down rudimentary paths. Not many people pay attention to that, Thomas. Now humanity is lost and alone, and trying to figure things out for itself. But it never works. If there was a plan that God had for us, we have derailed it. We have taken the world out of His control, and now we don't know what to do with it."

Twenty

It was Angela who whipped herself into a frenzy today, and I who had to calm her down. It was she who spoke, she who dug deep and talked about what she believed, and ultimately it was she who had cried. It wasn't much of a cry. A handful of slightly embarrassed tears had simply appeared in the corner of her eyes. There was no sobbing or monumental wailing such as I'd been prone to display. Just a brief and dignified weep. She buried her face into my shoulder, as if to hide her face in shame, and I was glad for her to be in contact with me again. I tried to comfort her with words but had nothing to say. I thought about making her a cup of tea, but I didn't want to break the embrace, and as I thought about it I really didn't know what I hoped to achieve by doing so. I marvelled at the memories of how well, how professionally she had handled my constant crack-ups. I felt low that I couldn't return the favour just this one time.

It's only now that I've put her to bed that I find I have a chance to digest what she said and think for myself. Only now, that she is sound asleep and facing away from my side of the bed, do I feel like I have some questions worth asking. Should I wake her? No, that would just lead to more tears. Any worries I have can surely be addressed in the morning. But oh, the worries I do have.

Her blonde hair falls away, revealing the pale skin on the back of her neck. It's met there by the two cotton straps of the singlet top that she sleeps in. I can see her fine shoulder blades beneath, and the reminder that a skeleton walks within her, within everyone, flashes up upon my sleepy mind. The rest of her gorgeous body is slid away under the duvet. I don't go out of my way, but any time I need to rearrange the bedding I cast a glimpse her way to see if any more of her is visible than before. The curve southward, where her ribcage must end and before her hipbone begins, seems simply designed for my arm to wrap around. It's hard to resist reclaiming that position, but she is asleep now and I mustn't wake her. Instead my hands lie restlessly about wherever they fall.

Simply lying with her, not even touching her, invokes enough subliminal activity to give me a fast erection. It's a biological embarrassment, I feel, and I wish I could reel it in. Not that she is aware, but I feel my cheeks flush anyhow. Still, it's a good feeling. That conflict within again, over such a small incident. These tiny battles that remind me that I'm still engaged in a much larger war. What do I have to be embarrassed about anyway? Angela is asleep, there's only me here, and if God is watching, he made me this way.

Is God watching? Can he be watching, if what Angela said is true? They ask what God busied himself with in the boundless eons before the creation of the universe. What does he busy himself with now, now that his Earth has been taken from him? Does he have other, more faithful subjects in other lands? Does he have universes that worked out better than this one? Do his followers in those worlds, do they get an afterlife?

All together, like a cold drink right after a hot one in the belly, the feeling of faith in a higher being and the feeling of being so utterly alone combine within me. They swirl around, and although once they propped each other apart with their contradictions, they now merge and spread themselves throughout my body. This must be how jigsaws feel, I think to myself, when the last piece of sky finds its place.

I feel shaky. Angela before me, the bed, the room, everything looks like a fragile layer of cellophane between me and what is truly there, and that is nothingness. It is as the physical world is a tricky optical illusion that is only maintained by keeping one eye closed. I lie cold and still, my nerves fearing that any movement could tear the fabric of this worn reality, worrying that I could open that eye and inadvertently stare into it. I feel so terrifyingly close to understanding, like that little ten-year-old me reading history books in the dark, just what the end of it all means.

That feeling had no right to interfere with that ten-year-old child. What had been a colourful world of boundless adventure and excitement was turned on its head. It was no longer safe. Not safe to swim, to climb too high or to wander too far from food and water. Not safe to stay out in the snow too long, to fall ill, to happily waste time that you were never going to get back. No longer safe to love your eldest relatives for fear of them falling eternally asleep the

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minute your back was turned. How the world shifted in the few short years after that one dreary night. From a playground to a minefield. Toys dusted up in the attic, the limitless imagination that had made them bright objects of happiness now shanghaied down dark corridors. It had no right to do that to that poor boy. It still has no right now.

I realize the claim that is upon me, that I am already sold down the river, as I have realized it a thousand times before, and it never gets any easier. If anything, the older I have gotten the harder it has become. Tonight, however, exceeds all expectations. I can almost feel death against my skin, within my brain. Death posing the unbeatable argument that makes you just want to lash out at something, anything. This much is at least familiar. What is strange is the perspective death has taken since today's conversations. No heaven, no hell, just what we've got now. A god, yes, but a weary and ineffectual one. A creator but no maintainer. How death looks now with no hope of eternity. At least before, even as a non believer, I held solace in the unknown when faced with the horror of mortality. But now everything just seems to make too much sense on its own for that hope to still linger.

I shudder as it hits me. I twist and I turn. This pathetic discharging of the fight or flight instinct when faced with adversaries within my own head. What a piece of meat I am! What a creature of habit and instinct. How much better am I than a slug, or any animal of basic and predictable nature? Am I different at all, or is it just part of man's makeup that we trick ourselves into thinking we're better? We fool ourselves into believing in concepts such as free will and decision making and thought, when in truth we are nothing but simple animals, slapped together haphazardly out of meat and bone and a few other basic ingredients which when shocked by a nerve produce predictable results.

Did God ever mean to create anything so feeble as man? Did life simply occur on Earth as part of some experiment, and the lowly species of man is as far as it's gotten up until now? Was the experiment a success? Did God even mean to create the Earth? Surely the Sun, with her gravity and light, is to blame for our planet's creation. Isn't the Earth just part of the sun, after all? The photosphere is what you see, but her energy spreads so much farther than that. The planetary veil that she wears, made from the off cuts

of her own fabric, it too is a part of her. We on Earth are one with the Sun, and our existence is merely another manifestation of her energy. Life is just what you get when you mix the right amount of heat, light, time and matter. It rises into existence and falls away again like the giant magnetic arcs upon the solar surface.

And none of it matters. Not one thing. Because when I die that is it. There are no memories to take with me, there is no haunting, there is no afterlife. It's only my eyes that I have with which to see the world, and once they are closed forever everything that has happened before will count for nothing. Everything that I've done in my life, everything that anyone has done in their lives. The wars fought, the art created, the struggle of humanity for thousands of years. The shaping of the earth, the life that thrived upon it, billions of years of creation. The formation of the planets, the birth of the sun, the expansion of the universe, the big bang. The future, the fate of the planet, the destiny of nations. The death of our star, the end of the world, whether the universe will expand forever or one day crunch back down to a point. None of it matters at all the second you are dead. Those that live on into the future that you cannot, they matter the least. They cannot experience this future for you on your behalf. Once you are dead, everything ceases to exist, or to ever have existed as far as you're concerned.

I'm shivering at the thought when it occurs to me how silly it is for me to be worried. Aren't I the guy who tried to kill himself just a few days ago? What right do I have to get miserable about death? I can't explain it to myself. I just wasn't thinking like this, I wasn't thinking of death as an end, but as a remedy. Would I have ever tried such a thing if I were thinking this way about dying? I try to imagine the man who, knowing what I know about death, still decides on suicide. Surprisingly it's not as terrifying a thought as I had anticipated. Once you agree that the day you die that nothing will have existed, your own life becomes beside the point. Taking that step earlier rather than waiting for it to take you seems, well, reasonable. Be it a good life or a poor one you lead, there is no difference at the end.

I feel a rising resentment towards my parents for having brought me into the world, simply so I could be an arc of uncertainty and terror before returning to the void. The children that Gloria and I had hoped for, how lucky I now felt that they had met their ends

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before they could have their beginnings. Never would those poor souls lie awake like this at night and curse everything in creation, from me to their God to themselves, all because of this wretched feeling that we must all come to share.

Is that what Angela meant when she said I was doing God's work by terminating them before birth? Was this the greatest benevolence I could show them, to spare them the unnecessary life that I had begun to create? And God too is spared the trouble of their existence, for there are that many fewer humans cluttering up his planet with their misery. Years I have believed that Gloria's miscarriages were God's way of punishing me for the prior abortions, but was I instead being blessed? Did his guiding hand initiate these spontaneous evacuations? Did he try to write his message in the foetal wreckage upon these very sheets? No more, no more! The world can take not one more!

Angela would disagree here, I know. God can no longer reach us, she'd say. And why is that? Because there are too many of us. Maybe that's what Angela was talking about when she talked of me doing God's work then. The fewer people on this planet the closer we get to God. I wonder if we will ever get through to Him, remind Him that we are here. Will He take us back, I wonder? Will He listen to us, to these horrible fears we have inside us, and would He put them right? Would He build this heaven for us that we want so much? Would He change the horrible cycle of birth and death that turns us into quivering ghosts within our own skin, simply trying to stay out of the ground as long as possible but not knowing what for? Would He?

So what's it going to take to get you to notice us, God? Are the churches, the cathedrals not enough? The hundreds of years of song and art didn't capture your attention, did they? Do these prayers that we push up into the air ever reach you at all? What's it going to take? By the myths, legends and biblical tales it can't have been too hard to reach you in the past. How can we get back to that? Too many people, Angela says. If the birth-rate slowed, if the population of the Earth were to shrink back down, would we be able to reach you individually once again?

Could this even happen within my lifetime? I do a quick sum in my head with the rough figures at hand. I'm already thirty-one years old. There are over six billion people in the world, and

counting. It doesn't look good. Just like the possibility of artificial immortality technologies emerging but not until I've been dead a long time already, so too the circumstances needed to reconnect with God seem just out of my grasp. Oh, the cruelty of hope, shoving its foot in the door just when you almost have it shut. I feel my joints ache with the tension in my body. What now? Can I simply swallow this pill and move past it, or is this yet another fear that will stalk my every waking night? Time will have to tell.

Sleeping Angela is so beautiful in the soft moonlight that sneaks into the room between the curtains. To look upon her right now is almost unbearable. The tenderness hits my grieving heart hard, and I can't stand the feeling it gives me. Yet I can't break off my stare. I feel so torn that I've lain here, telling myself that nothing in the world matters, when before me lies a figure that means everything. She's told me to trust this, this feeling in my guts. She speaks of it like the final signposts that God placed within us, so that we may try to guide ourselves by his way after He's gone. I focus on the feeling that she gives me, hoping to push these shadows from my heart if only for as long as I need to get to sleep. This time I follow the urge to put my arm around her. She stirs lightly at my touch and makes a little hum.

"Hey," I whisper softly. I don't especially want to wake her but if she is awake then I want her to know that I'm here. She doesn't respond. "You awake?" I ask, just a little louder. I hold her closer. This time she mutters a little, sounding a little confused, and I can tell that I've woken her up. Good, I think to myself a little guiltily. I hated being awake and alone. "Hey baby," I whisper to her.

She mumbles and twitches her face a bit as she begins to come to. "What's up?" she eventually asks in a sleepy croak.

"Nothing, nothing," I coo. "Are you okay?" I add, remembering that the last time that she was conscious it was her who needed consoling.

"Fine," she sighs. "Can't sleep?" she asks me, economical with her words.

"Yeah."

She suddenly rolls to face me and puts her top arm around me, hugging me back. The unexpected contact sends a shiver through me. "What's the matter?" she asks.

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I try to pull it all together into one sentence but give up.
 “Nothing,” I mumble.

“What?” she insists, sensing my lie.

I take a deep breath and clear my throat. “I guess I’m still digesting what you said.”

“Sorry, Thomas,” she says. “I got so wound up in my own feelings I didn’t take the time to listen to your reaction. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I say. “It just changes things. I mean, it changes the way I see things. Not the things themselves.”

“Things?” she asks.

“Death, God, the whole lot,” I reply. “The idea of there not being life after death at all.”

“I didn’t think that this was a new idea for you?”

“No, you’re right. It wasn’t. I used to hold that belief, but since then and my time with the church I had started to believe in there being a heaven or something to go onto when we die.”

She nods to let me know she’s following. “It’s a hard idea to come back to?”

“Yeah, but back when I had it the first time I was just a kid, and right after that I turned into an angry young alcoholic. It is a hard idea to come back to, but then again I don’t know if I’ve ever really been here before.”

“But you’ve said that you understood what it was to die,” she says, sounding a little puzzled.

“Yeah, but I don’t know if I ever really applied that to me,” I say. “Well, I have,” I backtrack. “I don’t know. I have these moments, you know, where I feel so bad about having to die. They come all the time. Just after today it feels different. Like it’s a familiar painting in a new frame.”

“Because of what I said about God?” she asks.

I take a big breath to try and hold together. “That’s part of it, I think. I’m now seeing death and God as being separate. I don’t know if I ever did before. But it scares me.”

“More than usual?”

“Yeah.”

“Why’s that?”

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“Because,” I say, “because it gives me some hope that he could intervene. That if there’s this creator, and he sees what a horrifying world he’s made, maybe he’ll fix it up for us.”

“What, and save you from death?” she asks.

“That’s the idea,” I reply in a voice of resignation. “I’ve no idea how it would work though. But it’s that thought that there is a God and that he’s not listening, it drives me nuts. Because that hope, that tiny sliver of hope that maybe He just might turn around one day and grant me my wish, that’s the worst bit. That hope is like a hole in my heart because it means I can’t let go of the question, as much as I hate it. I can’t just shrug my shoulders and say to hell with it, I live then I die and there’s nothing that can be done to change that. Now I have this sickly feeling that maybe something can be done about it, but I haven’t a clue as to what!”

I’m breathless and my hushed voice is scratchy by the end of my rant. Angela’s wet eyes stare into mine in sympathy. Her lips part, I see them peel away from each other like water forking around a small rock, and she says something softly which I have never heard from her before. “That’s how I feel too.”

“Really?” I ask in surprise, my voice jumping uncontrollably in volume. After all our discussions I had never even thought that I might one day hear those words out of her.

She nods her little head. “You know it,” she says. “If God has stopped listening to us then how else do you expect me to feel?”

I feel almost at once wide-awake and energized, like a dog on a scent. “Angela?” I ask.

“Yes?”

“When you said, right when we first met, that you wanted to talk to me about God, is this what you meant to tell me? That God has stopped listening?”

She hums a tone for a second before speaking. “Yes, in a word.”

“It took you so long to get around to telling me,” I say.

“I know,” she replies. “I’m sorry, but I had to be sure you were ready to receive that information. If I had just come out and said it to you on day one you would have thought I was crazy.”

“I don’t know about that.”

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“It’s true, you would have. Everyone does unless I spend the time letting them get to know themselves, getting to know what they really believe.”

“Your organization,” I begin to say.

“What?”

“Oh, you know. The movement that you’re a part of, that affiliation or whatever you call it. You spoke about it on the first day I let you into the house.”

“What about it?”

“This belief that God has become too busy for us, is this what they’re trying to spread?”

“Yeah, sort of,” she answers. “You could say that.”

“Wow!” I’m excited. I’m almost sitting up in the bed while still holding on to Angela. “If you could spread this belief throughout the world, imagine the possibilities!”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“Surely you know what I mean! If you could get enough people together who shared this belief then, I don’t know, something could be done.”

“Like what, Thomas?”

“Like mass synchronized prayer, or something. Anything to get God’s attention. Or have something built! Something so monumental that God wouldn’t be able to ignore it.”

“I guess,” she says.

“You guess?” I almost shriek. “This could be it!”

“I wouldn’t get too excited. I don’t know if that would do it.”

“How many people belong to this group?” I ask.

“I don’t know. It’s difficult to gauge.”

“Well, is it on an international scale?”

“Oh, yeah,” she says.

“Members in various countries?”

“I believe so. I mean, that’s what I’m told. I really have no idea as to numbers.”

“Can you find out for me?”

“Perhaps,” she mutters. “Look, you’re not going to solve anything tonight. If you’re feeling better why don’t you try for some sleep?”

“I don’t know if I can now,” I say.

“Don’t get yourself too worked up,” she says. But it’s no use. With nothing else to do Angela falls back to sleep no problem, and as excited as I am I don’t have the heart to wake her a second time tonight. I can hear the blood pumping in my ears, daring me to move, to get up and tackle the world head on tonight. That sliver of hope has kicked in the door. I lie awake for what seems like forever, scatterbrained half-ideas flitting across my mind, a confusing combination of adrenaline and overtiredness. I can’t get my strands of thought together to form a whole, and feel so dizzily close to a solution while still hardly understanding the question that I’m posing myself. The white moonlight fades from between the curtains and is eventually replaced by the blueness of dawn. Hours I must have passed here with my mind a whirr, yet it feels like mere seconds. Angela is still asleep and I hear her peaceful and measured breaths matching the rise and fall of her chest. I concentrate on them jealously and try to find sleep myself by mimicking her rhythm. As I feel myself falling I am still aware of the sparks that I am leaving behind in my waking mind. But Angela is right, there is no point getting wound up right now. If solutions are to be found I shall find them. It doesn’t have to be right now. I feel suddenly afloat, and push off with my toes into a blissful and dreamless sleep.

Twenty-One

The room is light when I awake. The first thing I notice is the odd feeling in my arm. I've been sleeping on it and it's now gone completely numb. I can't even move it, it's just hanging off my shoulder like meat in a butcher's window. It doesn't feel like mine. Next I notice that Angela isn't in bed beside me and I work out that she must have slipped my arm from around her when she got up, leaving me to unconsciously roll onto it. The lights are off but the curtains are open and the outside light completely illuminates the room. I wonder what time it is. I try to crane my neck to see the bedside alarm clock because without both my arms it proves too difficult to turn to face it. I can see its digital-red glow in my peripheral vision but can't make out the numbers. I'll have to wait for the feeling and strength to return in my arm before I try to get up and look again. It must be a little after midday, I judge by the angle of the light coming through the window. I've gotten quite good at doing that, I think to myself.

The final thing I become aware of as my mind dusts itself off from its slumber is a strange noise coming from somewhere in the house. It's a strange, medium-high pitched sound, and it comes in pulses, in a predictable rhythm. It sounds so alien to my ears that I seriously consider the possibility that I'm still in a dream. But then the reality of it dawns on me, it's a familiar sound but one that I have not heard in a long time, nor ever expected to hear again. It's the telephone. The phone is ringing.

I vault out from under the covers with my one good arm, almost overbalancing with only three clumsy limbs to steady myself as I stand. I don't bother throwing on a shirt or pants, I just hop around the corner of the bed and to the door. I swing it open quickly and lurch into the hall. The phone is in the kitchen and I can hear it clear as day now. Hurrying towards its trill calling I wonder who on earth could be on the other end of that call. Gloria? The possibility fills me with butterflies. Why would she be calling now? What could I begin to say to her? More mundane a possibility, and far

more likely I think, is that this is the call from the divorce lawyer that I had feared. Or perhaps one of the church busybodies whom I always suspect will turn up sooner or later but never do. Shit, it could just be a telemarketer or someone taking a poll, getting me out of bed and worked up into a state for no good reason. Still, I can't help but feel a certain nervous excitement as I get closer and the ringing gets louder. From the big to the little, it's the unknowns that affect me the most.

I swing my dead arm as I go and begin to feel a return of sensation. I can pull my fingers into a fist now, just as my nerves demand. I put a little more speed in my heels as I begin to trust my waking body more and as I hit the familiar last few steps from the hallway, through the dining room and into the kitchen. How long has it rung already? I imagine the phone ringing off the second I reach it like some cruel prank, sending me back to bed without knowing who tried to call. That would be typical, wouldn't it? There is no answering machine, never saw the need before.

The phone is in sight, and still ringing. Without thinking I reach for it with my bad arm, and as I lift it from the cradle my fingers fail and it drops to the floor. I'm panicking, I realize. Why am I panicking? I take a deep breath before retrieving it. I will have answered the call when I picked it up. The handset that lies on the floor is live. I stoop down and pick it up with my good hand. Its cold plastic feels strange against my ear as a thin film of perspiration has formed on my face in my rush. I take another big breath and answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Thomas?" comes from the other end. Immediately I recognize the voice. My father in law.

"Uh, hi," I stutter out. God, even Gloria calling me would be better than this! What line is this old man going to take with the likes of me, I wonder? I've fucked around on his daughter, for Christ's sake. Okay, maybe not literally, but what's the difference going to matter to this ancient dogmatic? Calm, Tom, calm. If he's going to blast you he's going to blast you, and you're just going to have to stand here and take it. It's not like your standing within the church is important any more, even if it were salvageable. That's all this old guy can do to you. That, and chew your ear off for breaking his daughter's heart, which isn't going to be easy to hear, but you've got to hear it sometime. And for betraying his trust, after he took

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you in like a son. Oh, and the money you owe him and his pals for the house. Okay, maybe this guy can really fuck you, Tom, maybe he can. But getting hysterical isn't going to help in the slightest. Why does he pick now to call? God, surely he's been stewing the past three weeks, and you're about to get the lot in one go. Be polite, Tom, that's the only defence you really have anymore. And for God's sake, don't mention Angela!

And then any preparation that my internal panicky ramblings may have constructed is immediately derailed by what he says next. "Can I speak to Gloria, please?"

And the bottom falls out of my mind. "Gloria?" I repeat back out of surprise. I must sound as if he's asked to speak to the family pet. I go to bite my fist in mute embarrassment and find that not all feeling has returned to my fingers. Lucky me.

The old guy saves me by piping up again. "Yes, we haven't heard from either of you two for some time now. It's not like her, I must say."

"Ah, yeah," I mutter, trying to fit together reality with what I'm hearing down the phone. How could this be? Does he really not know?

"And we like to hear from you, you know. We've missed you at church lately as well. Is everything okay?"

"Well," I say as a way to clear my sleepy throat. I gather my resolve. If I'm going to have to be the one to tell him, then so be it. "I'm surprised she hasn't told you."

"Told me what?" he asks, and the apprehension in his voice dissolves all the courage I'd just called upon. I change tack.

"Um, about her friend," I scramble.

"What friend?"

"Oh, Jenny, I think it was," I say, picking a name from thin air.

"I don't know a Jenny," he says, puzzled.

"I could have it wrong," I say, speaking a million words a minute. "I'm not great with names. She's from out of town."

"Oh, then I probably wouldn't know her," he says, his stern and paternal voice softening a little. I hope like hell he's not reading this lie.

"No, I guess not. Anyway, she called Gloria a while ago, said she was going through a rough time and needed her help."

“Really?”

“Yeah. Said she was having a crisis of faith, you know? From what Gloria told me it sounded like she needed her to be with her, even though the two of them aren’t very close friends.”

“Oh,” says Gloria’s father. “Does this woman not have friends in her own town?”

“Yeah, but not like Gloria,” I answer. “This girl was having it really bad, I tell you. Gloria told me she was even talking about suicide. She was really collapsing. I guess Gloria was the friend that she thought she could turn to.”

“That makes sense,” says the old man, and I can hear the concern in his voice barely masking his pride for his daughter. “Gloria always was good like that.”

I’m used to these subtle reminders of my life before Gloria and how she helped me out of my situation. Hardly a conversation between her father and me can pass without one such reference. I don’t know if he ever really knows that he’s doing it, but it’s been an effective tool for letting me know my place from time to time. “That’s right,” I say. “So Gloria took off immediately to visit her. That would have been almost three weeks ago by now. And she never called you?”

“No, she never did,” says her father. “She might have tried, but you know we don’t have an answering machine. Have you been in touch with her?”

“Oh of course,” I lie. “But not too often. I think this friend of hers takes up quite a lot of her time. She tells me that they’re praying together and reading the bible together and,” damn, what else would the old dude want to hear? “Generally just getting her life back on track.”

“That girl’s a saint, if I say so myself,” he says, and I can hear in his voice that he’s got a smile on a mile wide. “Has she given any indication of when she’s likely to be back?”

“None, sorry. She say’s she’ll stay until she isn’t needed anymore, and who can say when that will be?”

“Well, do you perhaps have the number of where she’s staying so we can get in touch with her?”

“No,” I blurt out. I’m a terrible liar, I think to myself. I just shout out what I want the sucker to believe and then rush to come up with a supporting explanation. “She said that no one

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should call her. She's staying in the home of this poor woman, and her nerves are at an end, you know? Apparently the phone ringing gives her terribly anxiety."

"So, what, we should wait for her to call us instead?"

"Yes, that's what she told me to do."

"Oh well," he sighs, "I guess she'd know best. You will tell her that we're keen to hear from her, won't you? Her mother and I were getting a little worried. I haven't known Gloria to miss church for anything, so to have the two of you missing three weeks in a row was quite something."

"Oh, she's attending," I say. "She says there's an Anglican church near where she's staying that she's been going to instead."

"Oh, what town is she staying in? I might know the minister."

"Sorry," I say. "She didn't even tell me which town."

"Well, that is strange," he muses, but stops short of actually questioning me. And I was sure the game was up the second I slipped that weak line. "And is she taking that poor friend of hers along to church too?" he asks expectantly.

"Of course," I say.

"That's good, that's good. And Thomas, you know just because Gloria is away doesn't mean that you can't come to church yourself," he says, laying on the father stuff thick. "You're as much a part of the congregation as anyone else. Don't feel like Gloria is your ticket in. You are in, boy."

"Thanks," I say. "I've wanted to come. But to be honest, my weekends have been so busy with cleaning and doing the laundry that I've had to pass."

I hear him chuckling. "Oh, so your wife is away and you have to fend for yourself! Ha! Oh, it's a rough life, isn't it?"

I laugh as well, just happy that he doesn't seem to see through my charade. "It is, it is," I say.

"And how's work going?"

"Fine."

"That's good, Thomas, that's good. Well, it's been nice chatting but I really must go. Do pass on our best to Gloria, won't you?"

"Sure thing," I say.

“And do try to come along this Sunday, whether she’s back or not. It would be nice to see you there.”

“Next Sunday?” I stop myself just in time from instinctively asking what day of the week it is today. “I’ll see what I can do,” I say after catching my tongue.

“That’s a boy,” he replies. “Talk to you later. Bye.”

“Bye,” I say and hang up the phone. Perhaps a whole minute passes while I stand in the cold kitchen, and my panicked sweat begins to chill in my t-shirt and boxers. I just can’t find the will to turn around and walk away. It would be like admitting that the phone call happened, and clearly it can’t have. No way on earth would Gloria’s father not know that she’d left me, no way at all. So what then? Was he winding me up? Was he listening to me compound lie after lie, all the while knowing the truth but still curious to see how deep a hole I could dig for myself? I doubt the old man would be quite so cunning. He really can’t have known. My bare feet stay rooted to the linoleum, as if by holding still I am pausing in time the moment of that ridiculous conversation until I can find a way to make sense of it. Until this piece of the puzzle is made to fit I can’t let normal life resume. If reality was simply allowed to continue unabated, it could no longer be called reality.

But I can’t get it to fit. My mind spins like a top.

Questions have barely enough time to form in my mind before they’re swept away by some new and more urgently pressing concern. Why hasn’t Gloria told her parents? Can it be that I’ve shamed the poor church girl so much that she cannot even face her family? Has she turned to her friends instead? Even then, surely she’d have told her folks where she was staying. And she’d be going to church too, no doubt about that. So did she leave this house and jump straight on a bus out of town? Did I force her to flee the city? But there’s nothing packed, she didn’t take a stitch of clothing. She could have bought more. I haven’t checked the bank account in what feels like an age. Perhaps she had some of her own money someplace that I didn’t know about, a special fund set aside just for the purposes of leaving me when it all went south. No, no, now I’m just being paranoid. But as I discredit one fear, another more terrible one inevitably takes its place. And for the first time I begin to feel scared for Gloria. Not just for the emotional pain I know I’ve caused, but for her physical well being as well. The

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worse fears have a habit of letting themselves slide back in. What if she learnt about the girl in the bar, sent me the goodbye video, then ended her life? Could my actions have cut her that deeply that she'd ignore all the rules about suicide and just go for it anyway?

No, that's impossible. This is not your life, she would say, it is God's to do with as he will. She hasn't killed herself, this I can be sure of. My anxiety drops away as I come to my conclusion, making me aware for the first time just how high it had risen. The mental images of her, cold, lonely and unfound, broken at the bottom of a bridge, or smacked clear of the train tracks in the night still flash in my mind, but now carry no weight. She is alive. Gloria will have fled somewhere, and she will be supporting herself out of our joint bank account. Yet another reason to not check up it, I reason. She is hiding herself from me and she deserves to be left alone in privacy. Sleuthing around the bank statements for clues to her whereabouts isn't going to help anyone. Plus, I know if I don't see any unexpected transactions that it'll just make me worried again. The cat stays in the box.

I can argue, ask and answer tangential questions of myself all day, but the heart of the matter is still unresolved. I try to replay in my mind the exact conversation that had just transpired. I force myself to recall every inflection, every tone, the precise nature and length of every pause between words. I'm searching for some deeper or more sinister meaning, buried away. On the surface it doesn't make a shred of sense. Where did those lies of mine come from? Did I really have what it took to deceive that old man? He really doesn't know, I think to myself again. How incredible. And in that instant Gloria feels just that much further away from me. I was coming around to being okay with not knowing what she was up to myself, but for someone in my life near to her to not know either is unexpected. It is as if she has become a dream or a legend, not entirely real. Not able to be tied down to concepts such as time and place. If it weren't for the change in tone of the wallpaper where the wedding photo once hung her existence might not be verifiable at all, and even now she is simply inferred from what is noticeably absent. Can I even recall her face anymore? I have always been so bad with faces, but surely my wife of two years will have made a vivid impression on me. I close my eyes and see her hair, her skin tone, and then it all falls away before the picture can

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be completed. Angela's face is all I can summon. She now sits in that seat.

There are some things in life that are simply facts. You can hate them, dispute them, deny them, beat your head in indignation against them, but you'll never win. As long as you treat facts as if they are ideas that can be tested, bent, sidestepped, explained away or discredited, you are on the losing side. A fact is a fact. Gloria is missing. Her father doesn't know. I'm a liar now, on top of everything else. A coward too, probably. But I don't care anymore. I sigh and return the phone to its cradle, before finally leaving the kitchen. Angela is still out but her presence can be felt in the house.

Twenty-Two

I walk myself into the lounge and sit on the couch for a while in just my briefs and a t-shirt. Just like the old days, I think to myself. Wearing what I slept in, adrift in the empty house with my mind on fire. If the pizza boxes hadn't been thrown out and the duvet returned to the bedroom it could almost be one of the very same days. The days before Angela.

Where is she? I keep my ears alert for the sound of her car returning. Carrying with her something delicious for lunch, no doubt. That will surely be worth the wait. Perhaps a new and alien item will turn up in the bedroom again this time, another one of her belongings taking up residence as she moves herself into the house piecemeal from wherever she was before. If there are any other purposes for her outings they are none of my business and I don't ask.

Thoughts of her take my mind off Gloria and her father. I decide to clean myself up and change into fresh clothes. I don't want Angela coming home to find me like this. She'd think I'd slipped back into a state of helplessness. She'd at least know that something was not right, and although I may want to talk with her about the strange conversation I've just had, I don't want her asking any questions today.

I shower myself, washing myself in the same order as Angela had done when we were both in here together. It's hardly the same but it invokes the images that I am after. It's a good motivation to clean myself thoroughly. Afterwards I shave before the mirror, wet with condensation and fogged beyond usefulness. I'm confident enough to do it half-blind anyway. It's an easy shave, like it used to be. The razor in my hand is just that, a shaving tool. Its cold steel touch is no longer sinister, simply utilitarian. I don't make a single nick, I don't bleed once. The tiny specks of stubble on my face simply lie down and go easily. By the end my skin is as smooth as it's ever been.

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I pick fresh clothes from the piles maintained by Angela. Briefs, a shirt, trousers and socks. The sort of stuff that's smart enough to wear to work. Usually it'd feel like a bit of a waste to wear them on a day indoors, but putting in the effort to look presentable is its own reward. I know that Angela will appreciate it.

Again, where is she? I was half expecting to be interrupted by her return halfway through my shower, or at least as I was getting dressed. I took my time. Almost an hour now since I woke up. Who knows how much time elapsed before then, since she left the house? I do a quick circuit to make sure that she hasn't slipped back in while I was busy, but with every expectant door opened there lies beyond a disappointingly empty space. I even check the would-be nursery, the first time I've opened that door in weeks. It's emptier still. I stand in the kitchen and look out the window to the path, hoping that my eye will register the faintest flash of red coat the very second that she returns. I pass twenty minutes this way, but the only colours seen are gray and green.

Lunchtime comes and goes. I'm on the couch now, set up in front of the TV. I haven't eaten yet today. I'm waiting for her. It's a habit I've fallen into, I find. Before Angela came along I'd feed myself. It was junk that I ate but at least it was I who fed myself. Without her bringing me my meals I feel like an abandoned pet. I get up and check the fridge, but it's bare. No pre-packaged salads or any other convenience that Angela keeps around for my benefit. She keeps a meticulous eye on the food. The second something passes its expiry date it is binned. It's all so economical and keeps the kitchen neat and ordered, but that does no good to me at this instant. Right now I'd happily eat a salad whose dressing has had a couple of days too long on the shelf. I think about making some toast, like I'd do for myself in the sad old days, but I can't bring myself to exercise that paltry skill once more.

I spend the afternoon spread out on the couch, mindlessly absorbing documentaries on the tube, keeping my thoughts away from my complaining stomach and from the unmoving front door to the outside world. I engross myself thoroughly in what my eyes see coming from the screen. The programs roll into one once in my head. It's only after the third show in a row, about four pm, with no sign of Angela that worry begins to creep back into my thoughts. Worry and hunger. I surf the channels for a couple of minutes,

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hoping the variation will put these feelings back to sleep, but I know there's no chance of that now. I turn off the set and instead look at my hands. Where can she be? The answer isn't here, it isn't within my grasp. I'm left to speculation and blind guessing, the land where all your unreasoned fears stand to be counted. Why is she not here? Asking it over and over only makes me agitated.

The hunger I can do something about, I decide. In the kitchen I flick the jug on and put a couple of slices of frozen bread down the toaster. I drink the tea too hot and I eat the buttered toast too fast and none of it is satisfying. I clatter the dishes into the sink. I don't deal with those anymore, I tell myself.

I know better than to try and second-guess the conversation that will presumably happen when Angela finally does come home, but I can't help myself and my thoughts run away with themselves. How will I play this, I ask? Am I to be angry with her? On what grounds? Are we in that sort of a relationship where one needs to know where the other is? I know I am, but is she? Should I start off by asking her where she's been, or try to draw it out of her slowly, so she doesn't catch the scent of desperation in my tone? I catch myself auditioning lines out loud to myself, and imagining her responses. How will she be when she returns, before I even say whatever I'm going to say? Has there been an emergency? I know nothing about her life, about her family. Perhaps she has an elderly or terminally ill relative whose bedside she's been at all day, watching them slip away into a very real and present death while I've stewed here alone, selfishly needing her to guide me around a far off and abstract fate that I'm facing down from my comfortable thirty one years. Oh, how precious I would look if I got angry with her when she returns and that turns out to be the case.

Like a confused animal I retrace my steps back to bed. Back to where I last saw Angela. She's not there, of course. It's around six pm now, and given what little sleep I got last night I decide that now is as good as ever to turn in. She simply must return before the morning, and I'll sleep through the rest of the tense worrying between now and then. But the second my head hits the pillow I realize that it's not going to be as easy as all that. My eyes refuse to close, my mind is hyper-alert, and my gut is a familiar bunch of knots, like padlocks locked to padlocks and so on with no

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“I’m sure you understand. We need mass communication for the sort of things we’re talking about. Mass prayer, organized gatherings, that sort of stuff, if you’re still serious about it.”

“Sure,” I say, the lump of excitement in my throat once more.

“So, we need to elevate this network or movement or whatever you think it is that I belong to up to a workable scale. If you think of your patient database at work as what we’re aiming for, then the so-called network is currently more like a scattering of ants, trading scents and basic information between themselves whenever they happen to bump into each other,” she tries to explain.

“And how much money is this going to take?” I ask, concerned.

“Don’t think you have to pay for this all yourself,” she replies. “What we need is just the start-up money, fairly modest in comparison, to get this ball rolling, to get the word out there. Phone calls, travel and accommodation, that sort of thing. Living expenses for the time being, we’ll be too busy to hold down jobs for a while. We’ll have to meet with or talk to a lot of people. People I don’t even know. If you can get all the ants in line with your ideas then the network will support itself.”

“So you’ve already talked to some people?” I ask.

“A couple, yeah, and they seemed keen.”

“And you explained the purpose of it all to them?”

“Yep,” she says, too casually for my liking. “But they both said the same thing. It’s going to take a massive effort.”

“And money,” I sigh.

“And money,” she nods.

I take a breath and count to five in my head. “There’s an account. Fifteen thousand dollars, maybe more.” After all, I don’t think Gloria and I are going to be having that child together any time soon.

“You can spare that?” Angela asks, intrigued.

“Half. I can spare half of it. It’s our joint savings. The other half is Gloria’s.”

“Your wife, who left you?”

“Yes.”

“Who didn’t have a job while you were together?”

“That’s right.”

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“It’s all your money, Thomas,” Angela states.

And she’s right, but I don’t care. Those savings aren’t just numbers on a statement, money in the bank. We’re talking about the baby fund here. I can’t think of that as money anymore. That sort of promise, however unfulfilled, shouldn’t be able to be measured in coins and notes. The smear of miscarriage on these sheets, the empty nursery, these things can’t be seen as a windfall, as that much more interest on the principle. The wifeless home can’t be seen as a net gain. It’s money with purpose, it is beyond money, and treating it as simple, everyday money feels like a backwards step. Like roughing up a diamond with sandpaper. If I’m going to have to cash in my half of this lot then so be it, but I won’t speak for Gloria’s share.

“Fifteen grand would be perfect,” she says.

“I can spare seven and a half.”

Angela stares at the wall. The clock says two am. “That’ll do for a start,” she says.

We sit there in silence for a while, my eyes tracing the fine line of her jawbone in profile. After a while she silently stands, dresses for bed and gets in under the covers. I ready myself for an embrace, but it doesn’t happen. She lies with her back to me again. “Angela?” I whisper.

“Yeah?” She doesn’t turn around.

“Is it just going to be my seven and a half thousand?”

“I don’t have money to spare like that,” she says. It sounds rehearsed. “You supply the money, I supply the contacts. I’ll do the talking. I’ll make the plans. You just have to front up and reap the rewards. Sounds fair, no?”

“Sure,” I mutter.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, picking up on something in my voice.

“I’m just a bit confused,” I say.

“I’ll handle it,” she responds. “Don’t stress.”

“No, I mean, I’m confused about you.”

“About me?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised, I guess. I didn’t think you’d be keen for something like this?”

“Why not?” she asks.

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“It just seems so anti what you’re about. Mass organization, money, infrastructure, networking. Bringing people together around a central idea. It seems contrary to how you operate,” I explain. “It’s beginning to sound like a religion.”

There’s a pause before she talks. “I guess you’re right,” she begins. “But I said that what matters above all else is the flexibility to adapt to new ideas as you come across them. I think you’d know better than most people what I mean by that now.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I do. I just felt a little foolish last night after talking about this grand, naïve sounding plan to reconnect with God. I felt like you didn’t take it seriously.”

“Well, that might have been the case,” she says, “at the time.”

“At the time?” I ask.

“Yeah, but you know how major events in your life can alter your point of view. You’ve been there.”

“Sure,” I say, “but ‘at the time’ was only twenty-four hours ago. What’s happened since then?” There’s no reply. “Angela?”

“I just think it could be worth a shot,” she finally responds.

I decide to leave it there. She’s on my side, after all. Why make it into an argument and risk losing that? I envisage wrapping her up in my arms and the two of us drifting off to sleep together in blissful excitement, eager to see how our new project plays out. That’s what I see with my mind’s eye, while my arm in truth lingers around under the duvet, searching for an excuse to touch her. I can hear her breathing. It’s steady, but she’s not yet drawing deep draughts of air like she does when she’s asleep. I think about speaking up once more, if she could bear to hear my whining voice again, and pull close for a cuddle, but she beats me to it.

“I’m late,” she says.

“I know. It’s past two am now, and you must have been out all day, right?” I respond.

“Not what I meant,” she says.

“I had no idea where you were,” I continue.

“I said that’s not what I meant.”

I feel the very marrow of my bones stiffen and tense as her words find meaning in my mind. A terrible feeling of unease, like in a falling dream the very instant you lose your balance. I want to scratch my skin off and pull it all out of me. “Are you...?” I begin,

but my tongue turns to stone and I can't finish. My throat wants to spin shut.

“Yes,” she answers.

I'm rendered monosyllabic. “Mine?”

I watch the hair on the back of her head move as she nods.

“Yes.” There's no uncertainty in her voice.

I don't have words to respond. That day, the only day, that we made love, with the blood and naked flesh and bathroom tiles. My dizzy, suicidal and over stimulated head. Contraception was the last thing on my mind. God, after three years of trying and failing with Gloria, the link between sex and birth in my mind was tenuous and untested at best. But still, how did I not consider this? That she and I, alone in this house, cut off from the outside world, are still subject to basic laws of human biology comes as an unwelcome shock.

Then a rush of warm comes over me, like being lowered into a bath. Angela is pregnant by me! My ridiculous attempts to be 'close' to her, touching her skin or trying to kiss her, so meaningless now! My seed is inside her, mixed with hers. How much closer can you get? I count the weeks since the conception. Only three or so. “Are you sure?” I eventually ask, and she nods again.

“I had the test done today at the doctors,” she says.

Three weeks in, I think. So early.

“I'll keep it,” she says suddenly.

“What?” I exclaim in surprise.

She turns to face me this time, and her face is stern and creased. “I said I'm keeping it.”

“Wow,” I say, breaking her stare for a second.

“What?” she demands.

“It's just, after all you've said in favour of abortion, against population growth and all, I kind of assumed.”

“That was then,” she states.

“Wow,” I breathe, trying to get my head around it. “Have you ever been pregnant before?” I shouldn't be surprised that she ignores that question and simply glares. I change tack. “You're going to keep the baby,” I say, not as a question, more as a statement so that I can hear how it sounds out loud. I'm happily surprised by the way my body reacts. I feel butterflies in my

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stomach, and lightness in my being. I feel, I guess, happy. A part of my brain somewhere, a base and competitive part, is saying “Finally.” Still, I caution myself, anything could happen at this early stage. It has before. Often. But the excitement of the mere possibility is overflowing in me. We’re going to have a baby!

“That money was supposed to be for a baby,” I say.

“The fifteen grand?”

“Yeah. If Gloria had ever managed to carry to term then that money was set aside for the kid.” I sigh. “Or to fix whatever was stopping us having one.”

“That right?” asks Angela, sounding a little bored.

“Perhaps the money should be saved for this baby instead, rather than this silly idea of mine.”

“No!” she snaps. “We have to see the plan through.”

“But the expense! Seven grand won’t come near to covering both, surely!”

“Thomas,” Angela says, staring me right at me with her beautiful wet eyes. “I’m only keeping this child because I believe in your idea. I believe in our ability to reconnect with God. I believe that this will go some huge distance to making the world a better place. A much better place. It’s the hope that this kid might be born into such a world that means I won’t abort it. I want it to be born while God is watching. So we have to go with the plan, you hear me?”

“Yes,” I say, stammering. The complex brew of emotions inside of me is welling up behind my eyes. “Yes,” I say once more, as I can blink them back no more. She kisses me on the mouth and I taste tears of her own as they slide down her cheek and between our lips. She curls into my arms and we lie, holding each other once again. I imagine us forming a trinity. Her, the baby and I. I’m struck with a sudden sense of purpose. A paternal instinct perhaps, but unique amongst all I’ve felt before. I want the new day to begin immediately, for me to leap out of bed and start preparing. Preparing myself, preparing the world. It’s a feeling that stays with me and keeps me awake long after Angela complains of nausea and shuffles just out of my reach to sleep.

Twenty-Three

I wake up before Angela does and slip out of bed. Quietly I sneak out of the room. An exact turnaround from yesterday, I'm guessing. Still in the briefs I slept in and nothing more I slink through the chilled early-morning silence of the house, up the hall to the lounge. The laptop sits, folded in two like a letter, on a shelf in the corner. It's been a very long time since I've used it. I know that once it's started up that Gloria's grief-twisted face will appear, begging me to play the video through. That's not what I am here for, I think to myself. As I press the power button the machine's insides spring to life. The black screen begins to glow as the computer loads up and after some clicking and whirring the image of my crying wife is displayed. Such a martyr I was, having this video load on start-up. The pointer hovers above the virtual play button, but I resist and close the file instead. That's not what I'm here for, I tell myself once more. I can feel my heart rate rise. I knew that getting past that first frame of video wouldn't be easy. All the better that Angela isn't awake to see.

I use the wireless connection to log onto my bank's website. The access number and password are still automatic in my mind. There's a tiny sting in the scar on my wrist as I type. I brace myself for what I'm about to see as the account details and balances flash up on screen. How much has Gloria helped herself to since running off? How much would a humiliated wife feel entitled to? Part of me has been worried that she'll have drained every account dry. I don't expect that to be the case but the idea of it has kept me too afraid to check. I'm just hoping that the seven and a half grand that I promised to Angela is still there, and realistically there's no reason why it shouldn't be. But still, until I see it in black and white I can fear almost any possibility.

But what I see when the amounts are displayed is something I'm not prepared for. The wind goes out of my lungs in surprise as I read and then re-read the numbers on the screen. No change. There's been not one withdrawal. The current account is ticking away fine by itself, its automatic payments siphoning away

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my final pay bit by bit for utilities and mortgage payments at a predictable rate. Otherwise there's no activity. The same is true of the savings account. Just over fifteen thousand dollars, not so much as a cent has been removed since the account was first opened two years ago.

I flick the power off immediately, giving no time for a dignified shutdown. I'm in shock. Gloria hasn't touched any of the money. I would have assumed that she'd at least have helped herself to some of it, whether it was out of revenge or just to get by. But every last cent is accounted for. What then? She's not getting money from her parents. Is she truly staying with some super-generous friend somewhere, every financial need attended to? No, Gloria wouldn't allow herself to be so dependant. Unless....

And then it hits me like a cold slap. Another man. That would explain it! Gloria is with another man! Some other guy somewhere, bringing home the bacon. That's why she hasn't told her parents anything! What a mess of an explanation that would be for her poor old folks to hear. What a collection of sin in their eyes. First the husband strays, and then the wife. Me, I can hardly blame her. I guess I deserve a lot worse. It just hurts, is all. I can't be too cut up though. I hope she's happy with this new man. I am happy with Angela, so maybe everything is all for the best.

Wait. I'm getting confused. I'm not remembering things as they truly happened. That night at the bar, the strange girl, the weird buzz of the cocktail, the hidden camera down the alleyway. It was no accident, that was a trap. All this time I've been fretting about what I did that night and ignoring the major question. Who set me up? Blackmail can be ruled out. There was never a single demand made. So who really stood to gain from breaking up my marriage? Gloria herself? First the video of me by the dumpster, then the video of her telling me it's over get emailed to me. Did I really believe that the two had nothing to do with each other? It seems beyond the bounds of coincidence. Had Gloria been seeing another man, and the two of them conspire together to make me feel like it was my infidelity that ended our marriage? The bitch! The stone I've been wearing around my neck, the hell my heart has been through these past weeks, has it all been by design so that my darling wife could get away from me, into the arms of someone else, and I take the blame? All the shame I've taken on as my own! It

makes too much sense to ignore. Am I still the terrible judge of character I was when I was young? Dating psychos and calling it love? Gloria? That was some acting job you did on the tape. Where did all those fake tears come from?

I try to think of the men we know who own video cameras. Any number of the church congregation would have one of those devices plastered to their faces during weddings or social events. I can picture a line-up of them all, standing there with half a face, the rest of their head taken up by a gray box and lens. Which one has Gloria left me for? The hours I'd be at work, were they rolling around in my bed? I can't block out the images of my wife's flesh intertwined with another man. It's making me nauseas. Did they make little films of each other while in the act, I wonder, with that fucking camera of his?

I've stood up and I'm pacing. I can feel my nails digging into my palm as I make my fists tighter and tighter. I just want to find her now. I want to show her. Show her the scratch on my wrist. Show her the weeks I've killed just lying on this couch in despair. Have Angela sit her down and tell her every last horrible depth my heart and mind has sunk to since she walked out. And for what? So the adulterous wife can escape without a spec of dirt on her gown? Fuck you, Gloria.

But hey, the joke's on you, you know? I'm going to be a father! Angela is carrying my child! And the chances of her being as terminally barren as you are fairly slim, you'd have to admit. You can do your worst. Divorce me. Blame me. Shame me in front of all our friends. Turn me out of this house, claim every joint possession. I won't fight it. I'll even swear up and down in support of your version of events. You see, I don't care anymore. I've got something greater now. Something you can't take from me. Angela and I, we're going to find God in a way your feeble faith could never comprehend! And once we've done that, we're bringing a new life into this world. Beat that.

My rage makes me light inside. I feel vindicated finally. The one last doubt in my mind has been flushed away. I see the patch on the wall where our wedding portrait hung. Good riddance, I spit. I almost throw the laptop back onto the shelf and stride out of the room. I can feel my nostrils flaring with every determined breath. I pause in the hallway before the bedroom door. Better to

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calm down before letting Angela see me this way. I try my best but my whole body just shakes and sparks. I eventually reach for the door handle and swing it open. I'm moving like a machine, there's no delicacy in my actions. My nerves and muscles are pulled taught. I walk heavily into the bedroom and jump into my side of the bed. Unsurprisingly Angela stirs from her slumber and emits a light moan.

"Fifteen grand," I say.

"Yeah?" comes her sleepy response.

"Yeah. It's ours. The whole fifteen grand."

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We doze, arm in arm, until late morning. The room comes alive at this time of day. The light from outside hits at such an angle and intensity that the whole space seems to glow. I come to in this soft light, but my anger is still with me and every breath has to be measured lest it gets out of control. I lie there, still on my back for a while, hoping that by going over my thoughts and assumptions time and time again I can reach some sort of conclusion that will allow me to breathe out all this rage. I don't get to one. I don't even feel close. I feel dirty just being in this bed, this bed that was once ours. Gloria, did you make it his as well? The thought of our mutual contact with these sheets makes me squirm, but I'm too rooted to the spot to bother moving. My disgust has made me a stone.

Angela is awake, I can hear by how she draws air, but she too is silent. Not a word. I imagine she can sense this in me, this tension. This fire with nothing to burn. What would I say to me right now? She's seen me in some fine states, Angela has, but she's never seen me angry. I'm maintaining calm, but I'm angry. No doubt about that. And whatever I stretch over that anger, it's still going to be there, and it's still going to be ugly. I'm thankful that she can just lie here with me now. That's all I need. I don't even feel that ever-present urge to touch her skin. I don't want to move at all.

I watch the dusty air play amongst the light in the room for a while. It goes some way to sooth me. Eventually Angela sits up next to me and gives my hand a good morning squeeze. She smiles but doesn't say anything. Then I watch her get up in her cotton undies and top and busy herself over the pile of bags in the corner of the room. Her growing personal effects that are gradually turning

up here after each one of her trips to the outside world. She sits cross-legged at the end of the bed with one leather case and opens it. Sure enough it's a laptop computer, a nicer one than mine. It whirs to life beneath her hands

"You have wireless here, right?" she asks softly, as the machine gives its start-up beep.

I nod, never taking my eyes off the spirals of dust and light that she's kicked up by moving about. I hear the light tap, tap, tap of a woman's fingertips working a keyboard. It's surprisingly relaxing.

"Thomas?" she says after a little while." I look her way. "Thomas, I want you to look at this." I sit up a little and follow her eyes to the computer screen. "These are the accounts that you are to transfer the money to," she instructs.

"Accounts?" I ask.

"Yes, five of them," she answers smoothly. "These are accounts that I control. You're to place random sums into each. Nothing too close to a round number, and don't put the same amount into more than one account."

"What?"

"Make them look like an everyday business transaction, you know? Not like a lump sum payment."

I rub my eyes and take a closer look at the details on the screen. Five account names and numbers. The first one is named Stevenson Concrete. I look at the next on the list. Torrenson Roofing Ltd. Its account prefix tells me it's with a different bank to the first one. "These are businesses," I say, thinking out loud.

"No, these are the names of businesses," Angela corrects me, stressing the word "names." She wears a knowing smile.

The other three accounts listed follow the same pattern. Fake company titles, spread randomly amongst the major banks. "I don't understand," I finally mutter.

"You don't need to," she says. "I can take care of everything. You move the money to these accounts, I move it on to other accounts. And so on and so on. It gets split up and passed around enough so that tracing it all back to you is just that little bit more difficult."

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I'm puzzled, but she seems happy enough with herself. "Look, if this is so that my wife doesn't come after the money, I don't think that's necessary," I say.

"Oh, no," she responds. "It's nothing like that. This is just a precaution, is all."

"Against what?" I ask.

"Against it all looking like your money."

"I don't see the problem."

"Don't worry," she coos. "You've just got to trust me on this."

"Is this something that your network wouldn't like?" I ask. "The start-up money coming from one guy? Does that look too centralized?"

"It's not that."

Further confusion is the last thing I need. "Then what?" I ask. "Why are you laundering the money?"

"It's a precaution," she says.

"You said that already. A precaution against what? There's nothing we need to hide."

She nods and tilts her head to one side. "No. Not yet," she answers.

"What the hell does that mean?"

She sighs, but doesn't lose her smile. "You haven't really thought this out, have you?"

"Well, sure I have," I respond. "And there's not a bit of it that's illegal or dodgy or anything."

"Yet," she says again.

"Sorry, I don't get it. And if you think I'm going to hand over fifteen grand to a woman who's not playing straight you can think again."

"Don't you trust me, Tom?"

"How the hell can I answer that?" I plead, exasperated.

Angela breaks her stare and gathers her breath. "Tom, it's just a precaution, okay? I don't want it looking like we started this, okay? I don't want our fingerprints on this money. When we end up using this money it will look like a religious organization is giving it to us, not the other way around."

"What, so we don't look like cult leaders?" I ask. "I'm not worried about that."

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“Neither am I, Tom,” she speaks calmly. “Yet. But when the organization takes off, when we begin recruiting on a large scale, then we have to be cautious. We will have no idea what sort of people might walk through the door. If people take this message a certain way, if people react in certain ways to this message, then we won’t want there to be any chance that either of us can be fingered as having started this thing. We could end up wearing the blame.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look, it’s unlikely. Hugely unlikely, but we need to take precautions, okay?”

“No, sorry. I don’t follow you. Are we even talking about the same thing here?”

“Sure, Tom,” she says.

“Well, what I’m talking about is a... Its’ a faith organization, set up to find God, the way you said! What you’re talking about now sounds more like the mafia or terrorism or something!”

“Calm down, Tom. It’s not like that.”

“And what are you talking about when you question how people will react to this? React? What does this mean? How else could you take it? We’re all going to get together and find God, that’s the mission statement. Your options seem to be to take it or leave it. What do you mean, react?”

“Thomas, think about it. You’re going to say to people that there are too many people on Earth. Too many now for God to reach us anymore. So you say let’s get together, mass prayer the whole thing, try to shout through the noise, make everything okay again. Cool. But can you see the other solution that some people could come to?”

“What?” I ask.

“Too many people, not enough God. The problem’s with the ratio, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you make more God?” she asks, drawing my thoughts out of me.

“No,” I mumble.

“Can you make less people?” she asks.

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I look up into her deep wet eyes and see what she's getting at. I nod my head.

"That's one way to balance the ratio, Tom. And that's what a lot of people are going to hear come out of your mouth when you try to spread this message."

"That's not..." I begin, but my words catch on something in my throat.

"If this were to go sour, Tom, you would not want to be caught out as the head of this sort of organization."

"But I'd never," I start. "I'd never advocate murder." My voice is shaky once more, trying to find its feet.

"No, of course not," she casually replies. "I don't think anyone could say that individual murder would be much use. To really affect the God to human ratio you'd have to get rid of a lot of humans. Billions, probably. And quickly too. Birth-rates can adapt to catastrophes within a generation and almost replace the population in a matter of years."

There's something in her voice that I don't recognize. "But no one would seriously consider that to be the solution," I protest.

She cocks her head to the other side. "Really?" she asks. "Don't you?"

I'm about to respond, offended and hurt, but her question burrows deep into me and I can't dig it out to answer it. Do I? My automatic lurch is to deny it flat. But there's a resonance there, a little spark of a flame within that catches my eye. Do I really care? If billions of people were killed, would I really care? These are people, after all, who have fallen from the path, out of contact with God. Too many they are, like feral cats left to breed unchecked in an abandoned house. There's no purpose for these people, or for anyone anymore. But if the deaths of the many could secure the salvation of the few who would be left, wouldn't that be a perfect sacrifice? Wouldn't that simply validate these countless otherwise empty vessels of biomechanical life? Once they die there's nothing for them anyway. There's nothing for them now. So why not? The few of us left would remember them forever for their generous gift. That's much better than what they're in store for as it is, with their clumsy religions and meaningless deaths.

Angela is waiting for my answer. "Well, hypothetically," I say, "sure."

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“Hypothetically?”

“Yeah,” I say. I hang back a second before speaking again, afraid of what her answer might turn out to be. “What about you?” She simply nods. “What does that mean?” I ask hesitantly.

Her reply is flat and measured. “People will have to die.”

I nod sagely and shut my eyes. I don’t know why I want to cry but I feel that tears are starting to well up.

“Your idea of mass prayer and everything is a good one, but historically it has been tried and tested and failed countless times before. The Hajj, the Maha Kumbh Mela. There’s just no way that we could get a movement going that could even challenge the more modest previous attempts within our lifetimes. The ratio between God and man is too great. Those old rituals don’t work anymore. No, instead it is the ratio itself that must be attacked directly. Many people will have to die if we’re going to reconnect with God.

“They branded Him a jealous God and made people fear Him to get everyone on the same page, but it’s the opposite that now needs to be true. We must be jealous followers, fighting for His attention. Killing for it.

“But this is okay. This is beautiful,” she continues.

“Without it everybody will suffer the same fate. Oblivion. But if the majority of the population take that fate all at once then that leaves some chance for a small number of humans to stay, and be recognized by God.”

“I,” I begin hesitantly. “I was thinking something like...”

“So you agree?” she asks expectantly.

“Yeah,” I say, and a tear slips from my eyelids.

“What’s the matter?” she asks, wiping it from my cheek.

“It’s impossible,” I say. “We could never do this.”

“Do what?”

“Fucking genocide,” I stammer.

“Hey Tom, it’s important not to think of it like that.”

“No, I just mean that it’s impossible, logistically.”

“Oh. I don’t know,” she says with a broadening smile.

Twenty-Four

“If we get this thing running properly we could potentially end up with a lot of useful allies in that field,” Angela says. She’s so casual I let the fact that we’re talking about mass murder slide in my mind. “This network, as you call it, the loose affiliation that we’re trying to tie together, is fairly international.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I’m talking about reaching some fairly dark corners of the world. People you’d probably call dangerous if they weren’t on your side.”

“Like extremist groups?” I ask. “Militants?”

“Well, you know most of those types of groups are fairly dogmatic. New ideas such as ours wouldn’t fly very far with them. Hence the need for this network in the first place. But I’d say that there are people on the fringes of those societies that we can reach. People who might have some influence over some strategic resources.”

“Yeah?” I ask, trying to be as cool as her. I feel like a cigarette again. At least something to hold between my twitching fingers.

“People are blowing themselves up all over the world in the name of their God already. With a little sugar-coating of our message I’m sure we could take advantage of that. Dress it up in words and beliefs that they’re familiar with. If they’re ready to kill and die already why not go the whole way?”

“But that’s not going to affect much,” I say, the typical dismal flashes of the television news playing back in my mind’s eye. “These groups are all at each other’s throats. No way would they work together to a common goal.”

“They don’t have to know that they’re working together,” she says. “Better if they don’t. Their retaliations against each other will make the whole thing a lot more efficient.”

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“Even still, what’s that going to achieve? How many people could this really do away with? Bombing market places and hospitals won’t change a thing.”

“You’re right,” she smiles. “But it’s not the little everyday terrorism that we’d be looking to get from these people.”

“What are we looking for then?”

“Nukes,” she says.

“Nukes?”

“Sure. They’re out there. Black market stuff, stolen from the power stations and missile silos when the USSR broke up.”

“How the hell do you suppose that we get a nuke? That’s just ridiculous.”

“We don’t have to,” she says. “We just have to convince someone who could get one, to get one.”

“We could get to people like that?”

She nods. “I certainly believe so.”

“There’d be people willing to do that for us?”

“It wouldn’t be for us, Thomas,” she says in that soothing tone of hers. “It may seem like you’re the only person who feels the way you do, but when it comes right down to it I don’t think there’s a person alive who wouldn’t do all that they could if there was the slightest hope that they’d find God. I mean, really find Him.”

“Or have Him find us.”

She smiles. “Exactly. And if you feel this way, what’s to say that other people won’t feel the same? Isn’t that what we’re counting on?”

“I guess.”

“If my friends can get me to someone in that sort of position, and I believe that they can, and we talk to him the way that we’ve talked to each other, we can get a nuke.”

I stare at the ceiling and try not to let the whole absurdity of the situation overcome me. Can I really be having this conversation? “Still,” I say after a while, “one nuke still isn’t going to make a dent.”

“Sure it could,” she says.

“You could never smuggle it into any cities. Not in this day. Still, even a whole city obliterated wouldn’t do a thing. And letting it off in the middle of nowhere isn’t going to help.”

“You’re wrong,” she says in a happy singsong voice.

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“How?” I ask, smiling. This little exchange feels like the playful teasing of a couple in love, not a pair plotting Armageddon.

“It’s easy,” she says. “Cumbre Vecchia.”

The strange words bring up a sense of déjà vu within me.

“What?”

“Cumbre Vecchia,” she repeats. “It’s an island in the Canaries.”

“A volcano?”

“Yes,” she smiles, like a teacher impressed by their young student.

“I’ve seen something about it on TV,” I say. “It’s made from two different kinds of rocks, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And the hard volcanic rock traps water in the softer porous rock, and when it erupts that water boils and expands.”

“It’s ripping the island in two,” she grins.

“And if it does break apart then the landslide into the sea would cause a mega tsunami.”

“That’s right. All across the Atlantic. Like a big fat guy getting into an overfull bath.” I half expect her to clap her hands with joy as she talks. She’s so excited. It makes me feel good to see the woman that I love so happy. “The east coast of North and South America, the west coasts of Europe and Africa. Every city on the sea would be destroyed.”

“So that’s where our nuke would go? Cumbre Vecchia?”

“Yep.”

“How would we be sure that it’d work?”

“The same way we’re going to do everything, man! Find someone who knows how to do it and convince them to help.”

I do a quick estimate in my head. “That couldn’t be it though,” I say. “That wouldn’t do enough.”

“The states would retaliate,” she says, her eyes wide.

“Why? Wouldn’t they just assume it was an eruption?”

“Not if we tell them it wasn’t! Just have a web page, registered somewhere in the middle east, claiming to be some extreme militant group and saying that there’s more where that came from. Make it look like we’re based in the North Pole or something crazy. See if they nuke them back, melt the icecaps!”

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“They’d never!” I say, nevertheless joining in on her enthusiasm.

“Sure! They’d be panicking! They’d nuke whatever!”

We laugh together at the thought. I have to say that I’m warming to the idea. “Would it be enough though?” I ask once I’m done chuckling.

“That’d be just one prong of the attack,” she smiles.

“Biological stuff would probably kill more people than the nukes. There are cultures of Spanish flu still in existence. There’s biological weapons, gasses, all sorts on the black market. They’ll probably be easier than nukes to get a hold of. Let some of that stuff into major water supplies and the work is practically done for you.”

“And this could be done?”

“If we find the right people, anything can be done.”

“Can enough be done?”

“The disease that follows the events will be the big killer, and that’s one thing that we can’t ever be certain of. But use your imagination. Whatever you can come up with probably isn’t as bad as how it will be.”

“Ha, I see why you want to launder the money.”

She smiles at me, the little corners of her red, red lips twisting invitingly.

“And if all goes to plan, how do we avoid getting killed ourselves?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugs.

“But when we find someone who does know...”

“Precisely!” she laughs. I see the joy on her face and giggle along. While wrapped up in the happiness of the moment I feel her take my hand and give it a playful squeeze. I squeeze back. Our eyes meet and linger on one another. I feel my heartbeat rocket as I recognize that look. She falls gracefully on top of me, working the bedspread out from between us with her legs as she does, kicking like a swimming frog. Her free hand goes for my underwear and her lips go for my neck. Finally, I think, but whatever bitterness I was carrying about the time elapsed between encounters is swept away in an instant.

When it’s over and she’s snuggled up naked under my arm she whispers to me, “So are you in?”

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“Yeah,” I mouth breathlessly, the word only just escaping my mouth. She hears it though, and tightens her embrace for a minute.

“Good,” she sighs, her hand on her belly. “Eight months. That’s how long we’ve got, more or less. But things have to start soon. Real soon if the second phase of disease is to happen in time.” The laptop still sits on the other side of the bed. She bumps it with her toe from under the covers to draw my attention. “When you’re ready,” she says.

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We lie there peacefully for hours afterwards. She sleeps, I merely inhabit some strange daydream state. My body is completely relaxed, my flesh sated and at rest, accomplished. Still my mind won’t power down enough to drift off into sleep. There’s still a nagging doubt in my mind. This is no small undertaking that we’re talking about here. I have to be sure that I’m doing the right thing.

Well, that is one way to look at it, but do I really have to be sure? More and more the concept of uncertainty seems to be okay by me. I’ll die some day, that’s a given, that much can be taken as a constant. And as far as I can tell that’ll be it. No afterlife, no heaven, nothing. Nothingness. No future, no past, no memories, no time. Ceasing to exist will mean ceasing to ever have existed. The whole world shares this fate. The whole world is replaced by nothingness the second my eyes are closed. Why should I feel a single regret for what I do in this temporary arc of existence? If the people of earth are all meant for this nothingness anyway what matter that we kill them off at once? It’s all the same to them.

I realize suddenly that there’s no decision to make. I’ve already made it. I’m the guy who tried to kill himself. Rubbing myself out of the world or rubbing the world out of myself, can the two acts really be called different from each other? The fate of the world doesn’t matter a bit to someone who’s dead. Why should it matter at all?

That chance that there’s a God, too busy to save us. Whether it’s some big dude in the clouds or just some creative energy that we can’t comprehend, over tasted and diluted by a swelling human population. That slim chance, the tiny weakness in the coffin lid’s wood grain, it drives me mad. I have to take it, have

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to go for it. It must be attempted, at whatever cost, otherwise life will be just sitting around waiting to die.

At least I'm trying something.

What a family we'll make. Angela, the child and I, survivors of the flood. The first generation under God's benevolent stare for thousands of years. There'll be no neatly packaged home in the suburbs for us. No standing shoulder to shoulder in crowded churches to worship. No old drunken loudmouth of a human priest as our spiritual guide. We'll have the real thing by our side, just like it was supposed to be.

I wonder how novel this idea is. Have others had it before me? Have others tried? How many famines have been planned? How many wars have been calculated? Was the Nazi concept of 'Living Space' misunderstood to mean physical land? Even earlier, as we did multiply, did the prophets see what was in store for us? Was Christ trying to lead by example even at the end? Could Noah have built a bigger boat if he had wanted to?

I see a dead world, a quiet world. A saved world, and it is beautiful. The people are few and blessed and their fields are rich with bones. Nature is no longer cruel. Everyone is young and nobody is dying at all.

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Early afternoon and I'm still lying here. Cooped up in this little room like it's the extent of my world. Practice, I guess, for whatever fallout we'll have to weather in the coming months. Angela still dozes at my side. I can't tell if I've slept or not, but I am calm and relaxed enough to know that my mind is made up. I softly slip Angela off my arm so as not to wake her and sit up in the bed. The bed is warm where the laptop has been silently running all this time. I pull it onto my lap and the screen lights up at my touch like a pet. There still are the various bank account details that Angela outlined earlier. I take time to read them in detail and then open up my own bank's website. I set up various electronic payments, picking the individual amounts at random. I future-date some of them to pay at certain times over the next week so that all the money doesn't all go out at once. That wasn't part of Angela's instructions but I reckon that she'd approve. Her computer feels sleek and alien beneath my hands compared to what I'm used to. When I'm done the savings account is half emptied, with the other

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half pending. I read and re-read the summary, proud of my work and excited to have taken the step.

After a while I become aware that I'm still holding the laptop for the sake of holding it, staring at the never-changing screen like I'm hypnotized. I'm holding Angela's laptop. I would never let her near my own one, and yet here I am with hers. I'm reminded of just how little I know about her outside of this house. If there's information to be found out then this is the device with which to do it. I look at her flawless sleeping face. She trusts me, I think. I shouldn't.

Hang on. She trusts me? I'm the one who just signed over fifteen thousand dollars to a woman I love, a woman carrying my child, but ultimately a woman I hardly know. I hit the familiar keyboard shortcuts without another thought. Her document folder opens up. I'll just read the filenames, the directory titles, I think to myself. I won't dig too deep. I'll just have a quick look around, and once I see that everything is in order I'll be satisfied and never have to worry about this again.

But everything is not in order. There's nothing on this computer. Nothing. It's as if it has only just been bought and never used before. There are no folders, no documents, no programs installed aside from what would have been bundled with the operating software. There is no internet history aside from the bank sites visited today. There is no sign of any email ever being read or written on this device. The machine has no past.

I look over to the leather case that this laptop had been sitting in before Angela got it out. It's scuffed in places, a little worn. It certainly isn't as new as the computer is pretending to be. What then? Has she wiped the slate clean on this machine since meeting me? To hide what? Or perhaps she just bought the machine herself, and got a second hand case for it. No need to be paranoid all the time, Tom, I tell myself.

But still something doesn't sit right with me. I close the folder window, I close the internet window, and am suddenly stunned by the first sight of her desktop. There's no image, just a background colour. Red. Like her coat, like her lips. The whole screen primary red. I would never have a background colour so bold, so hard on the eyes. More to the point, neither would a computer be set up this way in the factory. This is the one thing that

she must have done on this machine herself. This is the one personal touch.

I'm so dazzled by the monitor that it takes a couple of moments before my eyes register the two lone icons on the desktop. The brightness of the screen on my indoor eyes stops me from focusing on them right away. Video files, I note with interest. I read their filenames and feel a cold stone right in my stomach. I recognize them.

I double-click the first one, titled 'Alleyway.' Surely this is coincidence, I say to myself silently. No way could this be the same file. It is. My grainy black and white, night vision face, eyes closed and mouth around a smoke hit the screen. There's ice in my veins and I'm sweating it out. The video is silent. She's still asleep. How has she gotten this? Why has she? Did she get to my laptop and copy these? What for? How the hell? There's something not right with this video. There's the girl on her knees. There's the dumpster, but there's something different. It's the same camera, everything is shot from the same angle, yet it seems further away. It's not been cropped! The version sent to me had the extraneous scenery cut out of it, leaving just the girl and me. Just the detail so that there was no doubt about what was going on. In this version you can see as far down the alleyway as to see the door back to the bar. I guess whoever set up this camera couldn't be sure where the deed would take place, so set up the lens to take in as much of the scene as possible. Then this version, with no edits and no cropping, this version has to be the original!

My heart's beating so hard I expect blood to drip from my mouth. My eyes are stuck still like stone. They ache. Have I blinked lately? Can I blink? I stop the video and close it, my flustered fingers making several misfires on the keyboard before hitting the buttons I want. I feel like I'm about to throw up. I squeeze my eyelids down tight like I'm slamming a door. In the blackness I see the ghostly image of the girl, the dumpster and me play all over again. I'm panting for air. I try to get it under control so I don't wake Angela. Angela! What on earth are you doing with this video?

I wish there was time for me to stop and try to think about this, but there isn't. The next file is called 'Dear Thomas.'

Just like in the email from Gloria.

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Don't think, man, just do it!

The video begins and I see a chair facing forward. It's one of ours. The wallpaper in the background is indistinct, but it looks familiar. I see a shadow against the wall and muffled voices. I recognize Gloria's pants as she walks into the frame, turns and sits down on the chair. Her face is puffy from crying. This is the same video as was sent to me, no doubt about it. The difference is that the version that I got was cropped to just show her head and shoulders, and this preamble of her taking a seat was edited out. This version shows her almost head to toe, and a good portion of the room as well. The nursery! It's the nursery from this very house, I finally realize. Furniture has been moved about a bit so I didn't immediately recognize it. I scan the scene for further clues when I see Gloria's hands resting on her lap. They're bound.

She's crying on camera and it sounds more like the whimper of a caged animal than of a betrayed woman. A shadow crosses her face as someone from behind the camera moves within the room. Gloria looks down at her hands and sobs.

"What are you doing?" she manages to say.

A voice answers from off camera. "Shut up." It's a woman's voice. Earthy yet delicate. Pretty yet strong, and all too familiar.

I watch Gloria's bowed head tremble with fear. I feel myself begin to shake a little. Movement from the corner of the frame catches my eye as a handgun reflects a glint of light. It's pointed right at my wife's head, held by a petite hand with bright red nail polish.

"Repeat after me," the voice says. "Thomas, I'm not coming home. I know what you've done."

Gloria just convulses, her shoulders rising up and down. "What? What do you want?"

"Shut up!" comes the voice again, the gun waving. "Say it, okay? Just say it?"

"Please," Gloria says. "Please."

"Thomas, I'm not coming home!" instructs the voice. "I know what you've done!"

"Thomas," she begins.

"Look at the fucking camera!"

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Gloria looks up, her eyes red and her cheeks tearstained. She takes a big sniff. This is where I recognize the beginning of what was shown to me. “Thomas,” she begins.

I want to scream out to her, no Gloria, don’t!

“I’m not coming home.”

The other voice is silent. They know they’re getting a perfect take.

Gloria looks into the lens. The pause here almost kills me. The sadness in her eyes, she’s just pleading for me to do something. Her eyes glance quickly at the pistol then back to the camera. A clue I should have picked up on the first hundred times I saw it. Finally she says that closing line that’s robbed me of sleep since I first heard it. “I know what you’ve done.” But her face says something different. She looks like she’s asking a question. She has no idea what it is she’s being forced to say. She doesn’t have the first idea.

Here’s where she leans forward. I always thought that this was where she would reach out and turn the camera off, but with the full view of the scene I can see what she’s really doing. She’s anticipating. She’s imagining the impending bullet that she knows must be coming, now that she’s fulfilled her use. She’s instinctively crouching away. It’s futile. I see the painted index finger in the corner begin to squeeze and I slam the fleshy part of my palms over each of the laptop’s speakers. The crack of the gunshot is mostly muffled this way. Angela in the bed next to me stirs but doesn’t awaken. But with my hands blocking the sound and my eyes wired open in shock there is nothing to block the sight. The bullet is too fast to see, but the distortions in Gloria’s head are immediately apparent. There’s suddenly blood, a lot of blood, as she slumps forward and off the chair, out of frame. The video freezes. It has reached the end of the file.

Twenty-Five

Every nerve in my body shouts for me to slam the laptop shut but my arms won't move. My fingers won't articulate. I simply push it away from me slowly with the palms of my hands on the speakers, dragging the bedding it's laying on with it. There's no thought or calculation, just a primal urge to be away from the screen. My jaw aches. I'm aware of it hanging at the most unnatural angle, but I can't flinch it. My expression is set in concrete. It is horror, pure horror, and my dry throat is silent. Bug-eyed I glance at Angela. She's still sound asleep, her fine fingers curled into precious balls underneath her chin as she rests. Fingers that have pulled triggers. Hands that have killed.

I slide myself away from her, almost falling out the side of the bed. I'm breathing erratically and I'm coating myself in cold, cold sweat. I lower myself down to the floor and feel the hard, coarse carpet against my exposed skin. I'm right by the pile of Angela's belongings, all still anonymously concealed in bags and cases and heaped into the corner. They used to look curious, but now they are outright sinister. What other surprises could lay in store within those canvas and leather bags? I stare at them, imaging the terrible shapes that could fit into their spaces. The zips all look fused in place, welded shut. My curiosity to their contents has evaporated, replaced by fear. The concept of even opening one of them completely foreign, like digging up a grave.

Then one piece catches my eye. I've not seen it before. It's a small white cylinder, like a roll for mailing a poster or a print no bigger than an open magazine. Perhaps it's because it's the smallest piece there but I decide to open it. Maybe I see less potential for terror in a smaller container. I pop the white plastic end off the tube and slowly, with a trembling hand, reach into it. I slide it out by my fingertips and it unrolls. What I see is something out of a nightmare. It is my wedding portrait.

I recognize the familiar greenery of the background immediately, a split second before I focus properly and notice what

has been changed. The lump of cold jumps in my stomach and I catch what might be vomit on its way up my throat. I'm there, as before, suited up and smiling with the bride. But Gloria is not there. Where her face should be, Angela's now sits. Angela's face from another photograph has been carefully cut out and glued atop my wife's head. Even though it has been done very precisely it is still immediately obvious that it's been altered. Angela's face is at the wrong angle, and a little too close to the lens. The amount of light on her fair skin is different from the rest of the picture. That's not all that has been adulterated, I notice as my eyes scan the frame. The wedding dress has been altered as well. I can't tell if it's by ink or paint or what, but what was once a white gown now seems slightly pink. Staring at it I see that someone has meticulously coloured the darker details of the dress, where it folds and flows, with bright red. The effect is like lipstick on a tooth. It's just enough to tie Angela's ruby lipped portrait with the rest of the photograph that it has invaded.

I curl my fingernails under the pasted on face and begin picking at it. I can't bring myself to tear or destroy the picture now. I just want to restore it. I work slowly and carefully, just as Angela must have done to create this in the first place. As her head begins to come away I peek underneath and see that my battle is already lost. Gloria's face is not lying underneath waiting to be uncovered. It's been scratched out, probably with car keys or with long red fingernails. I pause, my hands not sure what to do next. Is it worse to have a photo showing Angela as my bride, or a headless Gloria? I drop the whole thing to the floor, the beginnings of silent tears welling in my bewildered eyes, before I can decide one way or the other.

Before the sobs can begin I scramble to my feet and push my body towards the door on my weak and unsteady ankles. I'm not ready for Angela to be awake within this house. I take as much care as I can muster opening and closing the door quietly despite my fumbling wrists. Feeling the noise I'm about to make rise up in me like steam I jump through the next door I see, simply to put more wood between her and I. I go to slam the door to make it quick and catch it with my foot before it shuts to keep it silent. It hurts a little but I don't pay it much mind. Taking out my foot I shut the door and then try to cover my mouth like I covered the computer

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speakers. The wail that comes up and out of my mouth sounds like a stylus against a pane of glass. I sink to my knees as the air within me races out, my eyes shut tight enough to look like they've never been there. The tears against the back of my hands are warm. That's the only thing that tells them apart from rain.

It's while I'm down here that I realize where I am. I don't have to open my eyes. When you live in a house for some time you subconsciously pick up on the little things that are different from room to room that you can't see. The quality and quantity of dust, the sound of the floor as you walk over it and how long the afternoon heat lingers after the sun has disappeared. These are never the same in any two places of the home. There are smells too. The wood of the furniture and the nature of the carpet all contribute. After no more than a minute down on the floor, even with my wet eyes closed tight, I realize that I am in the nursery. Funny how when you're running so fast from something behind you that you forget to worry about what might be behind the next door ahead.

When my eyes open I can't be sure if it's the film of tears over my vision, something wrong in my head, or perhaps even really happening, but I see the room's furniture in two places at once. The crib and chairs in a superstate, both where they should be and where they were moved to in the video. It's blurry but I see both at the same time. There's the chair that Gloria sat on, in the corner of the room where it is and also in the middle where it was. The little wardrobe faces itself from opposite walls. The crib is pushed to the back of the room, as it was when it was filmed, and concurrently takes pride of place in the centre of the room where it has always been. It's right where Gloria slumped after the gunshot, and from this angle, this close to the floor, I can see underneath the crib. See the dark little stain of blood that a neat hole in the head would leave on the carpet. The rest of the room might appear fuzzy, but that stain is crystal clear. With the crib over it you'd never see it standing up, nor from anywhere other than a crumbled heap on the floor.

I screw up my eyes and wipe them with the back of my hands and the room goes back to normal. I wonder if all's not right in my mind. I look again and the stain is still there. It exists, nothing that can be done about that. I'm cold, alone and in the room where my wife was murdered. It doesn't seem real. But there it

was, the visual proof, right in front of my eyes, on that goddamned computer screen. Still, I'm at a loss as for how to feel. I swallow my spit and try to calm down. I try to settle and let my emotions work it out. What on earth am I feeling? After a couple of minutes I'm still just a storm of wiry instinct and unruly energy without a focus. All I do is twitch and stare wide-eyed at my wife's blood. Of all the things to think of I wonder about the bullet. Did it go through Gloria's head or lodge inside? Which regions of the brain did it destroy immediately, and which regions bled out afterwards? Did it kill Gloria instantly? I don't mull these questions out of concern for my wife's final moments. I'm thinking purely physically, genuinely curious.

Did she hear the gunshot? Did she feel herself die, or would it have all been over too quickly? I play the video of her death back in my mind, concentrating on her eyes for any hint of a conscious response. I see nothing but a suspicious blank expression. I want to call it a look of surprise, to lend it some personality, but I know that it's just the cold default gaze of a human face without a brain. That's all I can call it, that thousand-mile stare into the unknown. To call that face Gloria's would be an impossible burden on my mind.

What did she think of in those last split seconds? Could the bullet have mercifully cut through her memory, editing out her surroundings, her ability to fear, in those last moments? Had she survived how would she have been changed? With the site of her physical being rearranged and vandalized was she a completely different person in that last instant? Could she have died a non-believer? Did she die preferring English breakfast to earl gray? Did she think of me? Did she still love me? Did she know who I was? Or did her mind just spark like a cleaved electric appliance, no humanity at all anymore?

The door I'm leaning against opens inwards and jabs me in the ribs. I yelp in surprise and roll forward as it's pushed. I look up to Angela's silhouette in the doorway. After the dim of the nursery I can't see her face against the bright light of the hallway, but I can tell what my face looks like. It's pulled tight across my skull. It's a fear response. There are no tears, not anymore, just dewy and alert eyes ready to run at the first sight of danger. My throat is too dry to

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speak, my mind too shocked to form words. I'm resisting the sudden urge to piss in my boxers.

"Tommy?" she coos, as if calling to a child. "Tom?"

I open my mouth, thinking I might speak, but instead I just bare my teeth like a cornered animal. The cold air hisses between my wet teeth as I breathe deep. My petrified body loading up on oxygen, preparing to fight, flee or fall to pieces. My eyes adjust swiftly. She's holding something. My mind sees a gun, but I realize it's something else. It's a rolled up piece of paper.

"You found this, I see," she says holding up the adulterated wedding photograph. Her voice is cool, calm and steady. Reassuring, yet I flinch at every syllable. "And the videos," she continues. "I guess you saw them too."

I nod my stiffened neck, never breaking my stare.

"I was going to tell you," she says, "soon."

I hold my ground as she advances cautiously. More and more the visual details are fleshed out as she gets closer and I grow accustomed to the bright light behind her.

"This too," she says, and I'm confused for a second until I see her point to her head. I let my eyes follow her fingers and focus there on her pale face. She's done her makeup since getting out of bed. Her lips are as red and as glossy as the lines of highly oxygenated blood that must be crossing my eyes by now. And her hair, she's done something there too.

No, she's done more than just something. Her blonde flowing hair is gone, completely replaced by what I assume to be a wig. A red wig, shoulder length, with dramatic lines and a deliberate fringe cut. If she only wore some oversized dark glasses she could pass for....

"The girl," I stutter, "at the bar."

There's a hint of a smile at the tips of her red lips, and she says cheekily with just a hint of a trashy accent, just enough to transport herself back to that character; "Yeah. How was I?"

I feel completely fooled. How could I not have seen?

"You're not very good with faces, are you?" asks Angela, now back to her normal speaking voice. Or at least it's the speaking voice she uses when she's being Angela. "You didn't recognize me from church. You didn't recognize me in the bar. You never recognized me all these days we've been face to face for hours. All

it took was a change of hair colour, a different take on makeup and perhaps some eyewear.”

I nod, agreeing with how pathetic it all sounds laid out in front of me. It's true I've never been good at remembering faces. People fade into the crowd too easily for me to tell them apart. How many times have I reintroduced myself to the same old acquaintances? But even still I can't believe I've been duped this way. That's the prevailing emotion. The question of “why?” hasn't yet taken centre stage in my thoughts.

“I'm glad you found out, though,” she continues. “I was dreading having to break this news myself. I mean, would you have even believed me?” She chuckles.

“You killed?” I ask, unable to finish the sentence.

“Gloria? Yes, of course.”

I try to respond but feel myself start to hyperventilate.

“Come on now, Thomas. You can't start getting sentimental now. Did you transfer the cash?”

“But...”

“Did you?” she asks again, a hint of impatience in her voice.

I nod my head. “Half's in now, the other half is pending.”

“On what?”

“Just future dated transfers. A week, week and a half from now. Just so it didn't all go at once.”

“That's slick, Tom,” she says, relieved. “I thought you might have been about to short-change me.”

“But...” I stammer again.

“What? Your wife?” Angela asks with scorn. “Honestly, Tom, how does this change anything? She was gone to you already, right? These past weeks, everything you've said about your love and faith and everything. It was all wrong for you, didn't we agree?” She doesn't wait for my answer, and just as well. “You yourself just signed over the money we'll need to start paring back the population on an unimaginable scale. Had Gloria been alive you'd have killed her indirectly yourself at some point. So you can't go blaming me. I did what had to be done. You should be thanking me. Praising me!”

I stare at her, stock still, my mouth agape. How can it be that I have nothing to say to this? For God's sake, do I agree?

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“Because everybody’s got to die, Tom. Everybody but the baby and I,” she says. “And you too,” she adds almost as an afterthought. “Gloria had to be the first, you see? So that I could get to you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, Tom. You’re the perfect candidate. I’d been seeing you in that church, mouthing along with the hymns. You didn’t know what you were believing. To some people that would be a weakness, but to you it was a strength. If I’d tried this act on any of those other dogmatic bastards there they wouldn’t have budged an inch. This idea would be too revolutionary for them. They’d call me crazy. But you, I knew you’d get it. Well, maybe not straight away. That’s why I had to be a little covert. That encounter in the bar, the drugged cocktail and all that. I had to take you all the way to the bottom and build you back up again. So you’d see, Tom, so you’d understand me. I know you’ll forgive me. You know it was necessary. I mean, now that we’re here I’m sure you can’t imagine going back.”

I’m suddenly aware that it’s more than likely that she’s got that handgun somewhere in that pile of luggage of hers. “I’d hate to think that you had any doubts, after all we’ve been over,” she continues. “Because the second that money hits those accounts the wheels will be put in motion. First thing we need to do is leave the country. I am, after all, fleeing a murder rap.”

I can feel myself start to melt to her ideas. Well really, what choice do I have? I know that Gloria can’t be allowed to have died in vain. Angela and I will have to give it everything we’ve got, to succeed in her and everybody’s name. If anything, as my fear and surprise fades, my wife’s death is starting to feel like the final push of encouragement I needed. “Okay,” I say through my choked-up throat.

“Okay,” she replies, and I can see a touch of relief in her eyes as she sees me begin to come around.

“One thing,” I say. “You said everyone has to die?”

“Yeah, of course,” she says, walking to my side. “As many people as possible.”

“I thought, well I don’t know,” I start. “Even if that’s possible, if it’s just us left what good is that?”

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She smiles at me, like I'm a kid learning to talk. "Think about it, Tom. Think about the ratio. If we get the population down to a small enough figure then everyone will have God back in their lives. That's what we've been talking about, and it's the moderate view. The one we're going to try and convince other people of. But if you extrapolate that theory just a little, you can see the benefits of going further immediately."

"What?" I ask. "Less people equals more God?"

"More or less," Angela answers. "It depends on how you define God, of course."

"Do I know how you define God?" I suddenly think out loud.

"Well, I've always thought that reality could just be some simulation, like a computer program. And we're all just walking around inside it, like little parts of that program. All of us competing for resources, and as we've grown the computer program begins to get stretched and unable to process certain things."

I think of the patient database at work, filling up with names and numbers. I think of my laptop trying to play too many instances of my wife's final moments on video, each tearstained frame jostling for the physical resources to continue to the next.

"The first things to go would be the higher level functions, right?" she goes on, lifting me from where I kneel on the carpet. "The miraculous stuff, the stuff that we'd attribute to a God. But now that we're getting to a level of technological understanding it's more likely to me that the miracles were simply actions that the program used to be able to carry out for us. But as we grew in number we've locked up the system."

I imagine the point where my laptop freezes up and won't go any further. It still clicks and whirrs but I see no change on the screen.

"So we need to do what our own computer programs don't. We need to start shutting parts of ourselves. Freeing up the resources."

"Do you believe this?" I ask.

"Could do," she answers. "It certainly seems plausible, don't you think?"

"Then who's running the program? I mean, what's outside of that?"

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“Does it matter?” she asks. “We’ll never understand it from just going over it in our minds. If it’s a spiritual network or an electronic one, or something we could never comprehend, does it matter?”

“Shouldn’t we be sure?” I say. “I mean, we were just talking about God, now computer simulation, and you’re saying you don’t believe one way or the other. Don’t you think we should be, I don’t know, a little more certain before we go off killing everybody?”

“No,” she says in that calm way of hers. “It won’t make a bit of difference what we believe. Fundamentally we’re talking about the exact same problem. Whichever theory on reality is true doesn’t matter. It’s clear to me that it’s one or the other.”

“Don’t you believe in one more?” I ask

“No,” she says. “Does that matter?”

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t,” she says, doing the thinking for me once again. “What matters right now is the ratio. The ratio between the resources available and the people using them. Because the closer we get to evening that ratio, the closer we will get to God, whichever form He takes.”

“And it’s important to reach that before the child is born?” I ask, looking at her belly, imagining the growth within. The tiny fusion of our essences, our spirals and helixes entwined.

“Yes. As many people need to die in the next eight months as we can manage,” Angela says. “Ideally I’d want even the two of us to be dead too, but that’s not practical.”

“Us?” I ask with a sudden shock.

“We could let go after the child has been born and grown. Enough to take care of themselves”

“What? Wait. Us?”

“Of course, Tom. With our child the only human left, that ratio, it would be one-to-one. You know what that would mean?” I don’t respond. “It means that our child would be equal to God. Our child would be God.”

Her eyes are so earnest, so full of hope.

“Imagine a human with the entire universe’s spiritual resources at their fingertips. We can never reach that point ourselves, but we can make it happen for our baby. And we will.”

She's ecstatic, almost to the point of laughing. "Thomas, you said you wouldn't fear death if you knew that your life had served some greater purpose, right? This is it!"

"I don't know," I manage to force out of my lips.

"Sure you do!" she retorts happily. "There's no other path, don't you see? I will bring God into the world, and you will be its father. Would you rather have a lesser existence, is that it? Would you rather just peter out and die like everyone else? Your death would be the greatest thing to ever happen to humankind! And who knows? The world afterwards, with our child as its master, might serve as some afterlife for those who've gone before."

I search in her eyes for some sense of disbelief but see nothing.

"Thomas, we've come this far. Can you really go back to real life now? You've started the ball rolling, Tom. You've said yes to the death of the world," she reminds me.

"I have," I confirm, my head bowed.

"You have nothing to fear. God's chosen people have never had it easy," she says. "The opposite is true as well."

Twenty-Six

We hug like men would shake hands at the conclusion of a deal. I finally exhale all the way and feel a weight come off my chest.

“All the same,” I say, “I really need to get out of this room.”

“That’s okay.” She leads me by the hand out into the hallway and shuts the door for me. I doubt I’ll ever open it again. We stand there, outside of the room, just staring at each other.

“What now?” I ask.

“I guess we should get moving on leaving the country. Have you got a passport?”

“Yeah, I do. But I’ve got no idea why. I’ve never used it. When I applied for it I just thought that some day I would need it.”

“One day you’d fly away?” she asks with a grin.

“Yeah, plus I needed the ID for bars when I was young.”

“Has it expired?”

“Shouldn’t think so,” I say. “I’ll check.”

Back in the bedroom I step around Angela’s pile of luggage to get to the drawers where my passport should be. I notice the white picture tube on the floor. I scan the bags for any obvious outline of a gun but see nothing.

“I’m sorry about the photograph,” says Angela from behind me. I shrug my shoulders. What could I really say? “It’s just that I thought it would do you good not to see your wife’s face while I was around.” If only she knew that I kept the video that was sent to me, and how often I stared at that. “That was the only photograph I could find so I took it.”

“It’s okay,” I say, hoping for a change in subject. The passport isn’t in the top drawer. I move on to the second.

“Then when I had it with me it felt weird, so I put my own face on it. It’s not as crazy as it must look.” I glance into the wall mirror and see her behind me pull the red wig off her head, letting her messy blonde hair fall down her back. “It was just for me, you

know, to steel my resolve. To remind me of what I was working for.”

“For a relationship with me?”

“No,” she says unromantically. “For you.”

I’ve given up being surprised by what comes out of this woman’s mouth. “Found it,” I say, turning and holding up the passport.

“Is it good?”

I scan the first page. “Got two years left on it.”

“Great,” she smiles. “Give it here. I’ll go down to the travel agents and get us some flights.”

“Where?” I ask.

“Middle east somewhere,” she answers. “That’s where the nuclear weapons trail is hottest. We can meet up with some contacts there. But we can’t fly direct. We’ll need to travel for a couple of days in the opposite direction, just so as not to leave a trail.”

“No one will be looking for us yet,” I say.

“No-one’s found your wife’s body yet either, but everything could change in a heartbeat,” she says. “We can’t be too careful.”

I hadn’t thought of Gloria in terms of physical evidence until this moment. “Where?” I begin to ask.

“Far away,” Angela snaps back, in a voice that signals an end to that conversation. I hand the passport to her. Holding the little booklet that way in my hand makes the little scar on my wrist twinge. She turns to leave the room.

“Won’t I need to be at the travel agents myself?” I ask.

“Maybe later,” she answers from the doorway. “I’m just checking out our options right now.” She turns the corner and leaves the room, then takes a playful step backwards and turns her head around the doorframe to ask, “Anywhere you’d particularly like to go? Before the middle east, that is.”

I shake my head. “Up to you,” I say. “I can’t think of anywhere.”

“Okay,” she smiles. I hear her footsteps fade down the hallway and the click of the door as she leaves the house.

I shake my hands and feet, lifting them up off the ground. I try to limber up, like a swimmer about to take to the pool. I should feel different but I don’t. I just found out my wife is dead, and I’ve

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accepted it as part of my day with no more to-do than if I'd been told that my bus was late. It scares me to feel this way. No, that's not accurate. I want it to scare me, I feel it should, but it doesn't. Instead I'm numb. I'm trying to make myself available to this fear but it won't come. Guilt, too, is absent. I can make myself feel the emotions I believe that I should be experiencing, but I have to consciously awaken them. Without my coaxing they do not arise. Only now am I coming around to the idea that I might not care. I can't care. There's going to be a lot more like this, if we do it right.

What I tell myself is that there's no going back. The pathways I've been down in my mind cannot be erased. I can't go back to believing that the world will work itself out. I have agreed every step of the way with what Angela has told me, or with what Angela has made me tell myself. That is a fact. Gloria's death was a necessary part of this journey, and the fact that she is dead means that the plan must be seen through. The old me would rationalize it like this, but the me sitting here now with these thoughts buzzing around in my head has no need for rationalization. Everything feels, for the first time in my life, as it should be. Should it scare me to feel okay after all this, and knowing what is still to come? Probably, but it doesn't.

If anything there is the creeping sense of joy, of a certain religious delight. I remember now with fondness the abortions my girlfriends went through. With happiness the miscarriages that tore my wife apart. I kiss away any ill feelings I had of Father George with a steering column in his skull, and I dance around the caskets of all the funerals in my memories. Yeah, we're all going down, and for once, us humans, our deaths will mean something.

I begin to think that maybe I should have suggested somewhere for Angela and I to go. Just for a little holiday before the main event. Someplace third world, with a lax police force and lots of empty space, just to get some practice in myself. The occasional murder here and there, just to test these new limits of mine before we step up to the big stuff. The international stuff and the weapons of mass destruction. I can't believe I'm thinking this way. Wait, that's wrong too. I can't believe I've never felt this way before. That's better.

I'm on my knees and searching through Angela's bags. I open each zip and feel around inside. I don't need to be too

thorough. What I'm looking for is not small. When my fingers do find its cold metal form the feeling in my nerves is something almost sexual. I resist the urge to pull it out of the bag. Just knowing that the gun is there is good enough for now. I zip up the bag and leave everything just the way that I found it, but I keep kneeling there on the bedroom floor beside it for a time while I calm down.

The blood is really pumping through my body now and I've never felt more alive. I'm such a ball of nerves that when I hear the telephone begin to ring I almost go off. I spin my head to the doorway as if to catch an intruder in the house. There's no mistaking it this time, the rhythmic chirping from the kitchen. As I step quietly through the house towards it my mind is a blank. No panic this time at who might be calling. No reason to fear a thing.

I have the receiver to my face for a couple of seconds before I say hello, just to show myself how calm I am.

"Thomas," says the old man down the line. "How are you?"

My father in law again. How long since our last conversation? A day? A week? It feels like a hundred years, at least. "Good," I answer.

"That's good," the old man says. "Any word from Gloria?"

Ah, that old lie, I think to myself. You bought that whole, didn't you? Well, other than that your daughter is actually dead with a hole in the head there's nothing to report. I can't say that, even now. "No," I answer. I know I'm being overly cold to this guy but I just can't figure out how to play this yet.

"Oh, well," he begins to talk before I cut him off.

"Actually," I interrupt, "Gloria's gone."

He stops for a second then says, "Yes, you told us."

"No," I say, still not sure where my words are leading me. That video image, so burnt into my eyes, plays in my mind. Her teary plea to me through the frames, before the new footage of the gun and the blood enter the scene. That's where she's gone, old man. She's dead, that's all I know. Her earthly body disposed of somewhere out of sight. Where she's "gone" is a question for another man, at another time.

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I don't go on, and I hear Gloria's father's breath down the phone as he waits for me to speak. It's the breathing of someone who's not too sure what's going on. The breathing of someone bracing themselves for something.

"She's left me," I finally say, my voice barely more than a whisper. Angela put so much imagination into this lie it seems a shame to waste it now. I'm prepping myself to answer his questions with all of our answers. Yes, I cheated. She found out. I don't know where she is. I've been too ashamed to leave the house. I have a whole bank full of story left with which to throw this guy off with.

But he doesn't ask a thing. The silence from his end seems never ending until I hear the faintest of sobs across the wire. He's crying. The noise rises, and I can hear his nose as he sniffs, his whole face joining in. It's the crying of an old man and I realize that I'm not familiar with it. It's so far removed from the tears of a child with a skinned knee or those of a confused teen that it hardly seems fair to call this act by the same name. It's a sound that truly gives its owner away to the moment. Past hurts and fears mingle with the present. A lifetime of pain unseen, usually dealt with, departmentalized, buried and discarded is let to float on the surface. I can't see his face but by the sound I know. The tears find their way through the labyrinth of creased and brittle skin. A lifetime of scars, wrinkles, laughter and frowns come alive like a system of streams servicing the one river. I can see the bitter blue eyelids, clenched closed over pearly eyes, and white hair left to fall upon the forehead. What he cries for doesn't matter. His daughter's failed love? Would the pain of his offspring invoke this much suffering in the old guy? God, what if I'd told him the truth? No, had I said that then I wouldn't have heard these tears. I'd have heard anger, a brute and base instinct of protection and revenge. All in all though, this sound is more terrifying.

I see myself, when I was at my worst, crying on the couch in a crumpled heap of grief. That was back before Angela arrived, when I truly thought that Gloria had left me. Did I cry like this, like an old man cries? I would have given him a damn good run for his money. But why? Why did I do that?

It's not the gun, it's not the bound hands. It's her eyes that I remember the most vividly from the video. There again are the

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tears I'm talking about. Those earnest tears, not given as a signal that all's not okay or you're not getting your way. No, let forth only as a personal release. As too much woe backs up behind the dam.

But through a video you don't feel it the same. Not like now, with her father's cries in my ear. Now I hear what she must have felt. Now I hear how I must have sounded when she left. And why? Love. It's the only answer. Love and fear. Like Gloria with a gun to her head, forced to deny me. Like me in the big cold house alone. So why can't I feel that now?

My murderous euphoria drops away from me like a stone. It was a false high, something I'd been tricked into feeling. A thin shell about my being that couldn't withstand being examined for a heartbeat. I try to stand but my knees tremble. I feel the cries of my father in law come into me, start me going. They feel out within me this ball of pain I'd buried so deep. Gloria! I sob back down the receiver. No words still, just two men crying for their love. I miss her so much.

Then he says, "I'm sorry, my son," and I cry even harder, because I feel that sorrow. I feel it right against my skin again. He doesn't scold me, he doesn't ask a single question. "We'll talk later, okay?" he says after a while longer.

I say yes, although I don't know if I mean it. The line clicks dead and I hold my breath for what seems like hours. Is it the old man's reaction that surprises me? Or is it mine?

When I stand up and walk around I find myself in the same empty home of weeks ago. Before Angela. Before everything changed. Before all this, all this talk. My home again, where Gloria and I had plans. Plans to live, plans to have a family. A hole the size and shape of her spirit lies right in the middle of every floor. It is a blue and cold house again. Except for the maroon of her blood and the dark of our tears where they've fallen on the carpet, as if never to dry.

That feeling in the pit of my stomach stops me right in the doorway again. It's an odd feeling. Under some circumstances my mind could almost convince me that what I'm feeling is a perfectly normal gut ache.

But it's not.

It's a void yet it's a mass.

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I don't seem to be breathing properly, almost like I've forgotten how.

Like I'm forcing an invisible weight off my chest with every inhalation.

If I close my eyes I feel like I'm falling, or like I'm in a fast car that's just passed over a peak in the road. It almost feels like excitement.

Like the proxy killing high I was on less than half an hour ago.

But it's not. It's something else. I'd know it miles away. Hello, I almost say to myself.

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There's no use hiding my teary face from Angela when she returns home. I'm on the couch in an oh-so-familiar position. She at first looks concerned, but when she starts towards me and I don't open up her eyes switch to distrusting instantly. Her face tries to hide it but her eyes never could. "What's wrong?" she asks, sounding like less of a caregiver and more of an accountant. I don't speak yet. "I think you should get up off that couch, Tom," she says with concern.

My eyes linger on the spot where the wedding portrait should be. "I'm fine," I say softly.

"Come on," she says, tension in her words. "We've got things to sort out."

"Yeah?"

"Well, of course!" she says, trying to brush away this situation between us. I've still got my arms folded and won't meet her eyes. She smiles, hoping to brighten the mood. It won't work. I'm adamant of that. "We've got a choice to make, Tom. South East Asia or the Pacific?" I shrug. I'm back here, an immovable sad blob on the couch. She was sure that she'd gotten past all this by now. This must be making her mad something awful. She takes a cautious step closer and bends down to my level. "Is everything okay, Tom?" she asks in that coquettish way of hers. Predictable, I think. Turn on the sex as a last resort.

"I was just thinking about Gloria," I say.

Angela screws up her forehead in deliberate confusion and leans back. "Why's that?" she asks.

"She was my wife," I answer. "And she is dead."

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“But haven’t you grieved enough, man? You’ve been in this house for weeks since she’s been gone, just coming to terms with it.”

“I didn’t know she was dead until today.”

“So? You’ve grieved enough for her, and you grieved enough about death itself. Doesn’t that work out?” Angela says with a playful smile forced upon her lips.

“I didn’t know that you’d killed her,” I say, shooting my gaze Angela’s way for a split second.

She tries to soften that frown of hers but can’t do much about it. “Come on, Tom. You know it had to happen. There’s no point dwelling on this. Not now.”

I take a deep sigh then speak. “I guess I said that, didn’t I? And I guess that yes, I’ve forgiven you for murdering my wife. But don’t expect me to move so fast, Angela.”

“Fast is what it’s about!” she cries, one hand on her belly. “A matter of months, Tom! That’s all we’ve got to get this right. Don’t you forget! We’re going to create a God!”

Her palm caresses where the baby is growing. I watch her hand turn, circle and spiral across her womb. “I’m still a human, Angela.”

“You’re ready,” says she.

“For killing the planet? I don’t know if I am.”

“This is no time for doubt, Thomas! Everything’s already started! If you’d wanted out you missed your chance.”

“What chance? You’ve been leading me since we met!”

“It’s what you wanted. What you needed!”

“And now, what? We’re going to kill every person in the world? Us two suburbanites? We’re going to do it all in eight months?”

“That’s the plan, Tom,” she says coolly.

“Are you for real? Do you even have the faintest idea what you’re saying?” I’m beginning to shriek, but if that’s the way it’s going to come out of my throat right now then I have no choice but to shriek. “Do you understand the timeframes involved? It’s impossible!”

“No, Tom, no.”

“Do you even believe what you’re saying? Is this all just some fucking messiah fantasy? Some play in your mind, where you

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and I go up against the world, sure to fail, but saying to each other ‘oh, at least we’re trying something?’ Shit, Angela, have you even been out of the house long enough just now to even drive to a travel agent?”

“You don’t believe me, Tom?” she asks with all seriousness.

“I don’t know! Just like you don’t know what kind of God you’re looking for. Just like I don’t know what I feel about this. I’m a man, for fuck’s sake! And whatever that means, that’s what I want to be. If it’s going to mean loving my wife’s murderer and killing a shit load of people then that’s fine, I just have to know! And I don’t! I don’t know.”

“But Tom,” she says, trying to calm me now, “it’s just like we talked.”

“Is there even this network of people around the world, or whatever you call it? Is there anyone else? Where’s the proof, Angela? Christ, if any other door-to-door salesman came knocking and gave me this much unsubstantiated bullshit and then asked for my life savings they wouldn’t get past ‘Hello!’”

“This is different, Tom. You know that.”

“Do I? I don’t think that I do.” I’m coming back down finally. Either that or just running out of breath. The oxygen burning up in my veins. My throat hurts. The room goes quiet with me. Angela just stares at me. She’s got her doe-eyes on. I’m trying not to let them get to me when her face screws up suddenly, like she’s been hit with a bad smell.

“What’s that?” she asks

“What?”

“That sound,” she says, pulling herself up to height and turning her head around, trying to catch a direction. I pause my breathing and listen too. Faintly, faintly I hear something. Something small, inarticulate. Angela takes a step towards the door and listens again. Then another. Then another. Then she breaks into a walk as she sees it. The phone receiver, lying on the ground where I left it, still off the hook, beeping away subtly to tell me that the call is over. I watch from the lounge as she reaches it and picks it up, then looks back to me with the dirtiest of looks. The look of a guard dog. Her hissing voice matches it perfectly. “Who the fuck

have you been talking to?” I hold my tongue. “Tell me, Tom. Tell me you’re not fucking this up.”

“It’s okay,” I say, as much to myself as to her.

“The cops? Tom, have you called the fucking cops?”

“No,” I spit.

“Then who?”

“Gloria’s dad,” I say, pushing the syllables out of my mouth so fast that they almost back up against my teeth. “He called me.”

“Does he know?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“Positive?”

“Yeah.”

She stares into my eyes, like she’s staring through them. The windows to the soul. She’s looking for a shred of a lie in there.

“It’s the truth,” I say. “I said she left me. Like you told me she had.”

“Did he buy it?” Angela asks.

“I,” I begin. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“He just cried,” I say. “He didn’t say anything or ask me anything. He didn’t ask if it was my fault or what had happened.”

“He just cried?” she asks, incredulous.

“He cried, like I used to cry. For Gloria.”

Angela’s face is softer now. It’s one of understanding. Whether she’s putting it on or not only she knows. “That would have upset you, I guess.”

“Yeah,” I sniff, a tear still hanging around in the corner of my eye. “I love her. I loved her. I don’t know.”

“Enough of that,” she says. “You stay here and think about what it is the two of us are doing. You’ve been shaken up, okay? You just need some time to come back around to where you were this morning. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, resigned.

“So I’m going to go back to the travel agents. I’m going to tell them Pacific Islands somewhere, okay?”

“Fine.”

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“Just for a couple of days, you know, before we get down to business. But I think that the sun would do you good, Tom. I really do. You’ve been cooped up in here too long.”

“I have,” I say.

Twenty-Seven

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” she asks again, standing half in and half out of the front door. I nod like it’s not even a big deal. We should be over all this by now, I’m telling her. Of course I’ll be fine. “I’ll only been gone a little while,” she continues. Her voice is calm but far away. It’s her eyes that are at the centre, bold and focused on mine, scanning for that one hiccup, that one signal that all is not okay.

“I’m sure,” I say, my façade holding. “Go! I’m excited, okay? This’ll be great.” She gives me an approving look before going to shut the door, then thinks twice and turns back around. “What’s up?” I ask, seconds before she strides confidently to where I’m standing in the kitchen and kisses her lips to mine. When she pulls back away she’s looking at me, smiling, and it looks sincere.

“Won’t be long now,” she says.

“I know,” I say to Angela, as I’ve decided to keep calling her, regardless of what her name might really be.

She gives a little noise, a giggle I guess. A playful little thing that couples in love do. “See you soon,” she says before disappearing out the door.

I’d usually stand here in the kitchen and try to catch a glimpse of Angela’s car as she speeds away, but not this time. I get out of that room before it’s even an option. I walk out calmly and swiftly like a nice and controlled evacuation. I’m not sure if I’m headed for the lounge, the bedroom or the nursery. I only get halfway through the dining room before the thought grows so strong in my head that I can’t take another step without addressing it.

What the fuck am I doing?

Do I seriously believe that Angela and I can succeed? That we’ll even take two steps before we fail? Do I even believe that the simple act of attempting to reconnect with God, or create a God, or conquer death, no matter what the odds are against us, is worth it just to satisfy some deeper desire? So that it can never be said that I just sat on my hands and let death come to me? Really? Am I to be

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the one man in history for whom this life isn't good enough? The one who demands some changes? And who am I? Some great leader or visionary? Hell no! I'm a fucking coward. Scared of death, scared of life and stuck in a horrible limbo. I'm a cornered animal. Red eyes, weeping gums and my hide stretched across my skinny ribs.

Life is a tease and immortality is a mirage. Men have wasted lifetimes looking for it in the past and found only words and the memories of others. How many men have struggled to get out that witty, insightful famous last saying to echo through the centuries only to choke on their spit? Even if your deeds, tales or legend were to be told for the rest of time you wouldn't know it at the instant of death. You're still a scared little man at the gates when you go, no matter how big your words have been. Even the ancient tales that have lived for thousands of years will only live as long as there are humans alive to read them. Their authors are by now the dust of many hundreds of people, decomposed, recycled and reused. In those days while humanity was still young and barbaric it was the writers and poets putting pen to paper that found some degree of legacy. These days, with humanity old and bloated and every pair of hands against a keyboard, perhaps the opposite is true, and it's the killers, barbarians and thieves that are noteworthy. They who are more likely to be remembered, more likely to find that little shred of immortality.

If Angela and I fail in killing enough people to reach God, or to create a state of Eden in which to give birth to our own, there's still a threshold of taken lives where we would go down in history. It's as close as anyone else has gotten to immortality. Would that be good enough?

No. Being remembered or not doesn't matter a bit to someone who's dead. I don't expect to float around like some spirit, or sit in a heaven, looking down and being happy when people mention my name. I don't subscribe to the school of otherwise intelligent people who when faced with the concept of death develop a mental fistula and begin to spout pseudo-theological nonsense. Feeling your departed looking over you, knowing that they've gone to a better place or believing that somewhere, somehow you'll see them again. There's none of that. None of this wishy-washy, bet-each-way, made up crap. Call a spade a spade! Life, memory,

emotions, everything about a human being is tied up in the physical body like a bundle of flesh. It too will rot like anything left too long in the back of the fridge. There are no puppet strings above you, reaching all the way up to heaven. No orifice expressly for the speedy and safe departure of the soul and all its baggage.

If there is a soul then it doesn't sit on a cloud and smile down on the earth it left behind. Smiling is a physical act. Happiness is a chemical reaction. The whole spectrum of human experience is limited to the behaviour of the particles within and around us, all understandable in part if not all at once. Still, the basic rules of physics don't disintegrate when the questions get too hard or the answers too displeasing.

Love, happiness, and the buzz you get from a cup of coffee. Companionship, desire, and bittersweet grief. Identity, dreams, perception, pain, and memory. There is nothing more magical to these than the biomechanical wonder of your body, and when it shuts down so do they. Existence is a blessing, but it is nothing if not fleeting.

The one question that refuses to go away is the one of the beginning. That's where it all breaks down for me. How did it all begin, and why? Can I really expect to know these answers, or find them out in my lifetime? Because they feel so cruel from my perspective, as if they've been put there as the ultimate plot twists in my story of life, destined to be discovered before the final curtain. But I know in my head that this is incorrect. Still, sometimes you can't help but feel cheated.

But from this question seeps all manner of doubt. Ghosts, the power of crystals, ley lines, the unseen bond between identical twins. Religion in all its forms. A God you can talk to. Where do you draw the line between what you believe, what you shun and that which you simply fail to comprehend?

I draw it right where I see it. It's shifting all the time.

And what is at the heart of the smallest of things? The building blocks of the building blocks of the building blocks? For centuries we've smashed them to pieces to find what each is made of, just to uncover another riddle of a Russian doll for the next generation to unravel. Would knowing how matter and energy truly operate on the tiniest scale change a thing? We humans would still be the same great hulking, clumsy, wet and fleshy Rube Goldberg

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devices, destined to break down as time and the elements pick us apart. Just because there are parts of the world that we can't look into doesn't mean that fantastic secrets lie in hiding there. No miracle cures. There is no realizable goal to our curiosity, no great end. No missing piece of a puzzle that when discovered will solve every woe of existence. Nothing that will click into place like a key in a lock and suddenly the whole world makes sense.

And the whole world, the universe and all of reality and creation and time, dreams and history and human experience, it all goes. The second you're dead it's all gone. It's never been.

Even if it were possible, immortality is no solution, especially not for a human. I imagine how hundreds, perhaps thousands of years on end would feel within the same body. Even if kept in perfect condition, against age, disease and injury, wouldn't the limits of the form grow maddening over time? The problem is fundamental. It is not with us as much as it is with what we are made of. God's clay is flawed, his atoms restless, his universe hangs on by an unseen thread. You build a tower on a fault line when you make man out of matter. Even if we could take on other forms, electronically mimic our brains, upload ourselves into some custom reality, we are still forever rooted in this one. We'd just be getting high with electronic stimulation rather than chemical. And why not? There's no saving us. The house is already on fire. Even if, as Angela suggested, we already live in such a simulated world, things are no better. The universe is the universe is the universe, no matter how it's made, and it will let life rise and perish within it like soft earth being ploughed over again and again. There is no changing this.

Angela and I had no hope, I realize now. If there's a God that will listen then the number of other humans isn't the problem. We as a people would not make up one iota of a percentage of His universe. We hardly warrant the attention that we demand. Maybe if we could destroy a few billion stars? The thought is beautiful for a split second. Even so, what then? Ask the Lord to change the basic laws of being? Make the universe a kinder place to the living? Without death there can be no birth! Life is a cycle, and I am a fool to think of myself as its end product. I am meant to expect special attention.

Culling the planet won't bring God back. He's never been. The ages of myth and religion were not evidence of a real God interacting with us. Their tales and legends are just the wishful musings of a race just as lost as we are now. The last living human would not be God's equal. Man is the furthest thing from God, and a man alone would not hold the earth as some wonderful gift, a new Eden all to himself to enjoy. A man alone would starve and go crazy....

I have to allow myself a brief chuckle at myself as this thought passes through my head. It's exactly the same, I realize. I might as well have been the last person left alive. Weeks alone, eating what I could, sleeping all day and hating the world. What would this new, so-called God do with his domain, this earthly kingdom all to himself? I know exactly what. He'd litter it with damp towels, sheets and empty pizza boxes, and he'd stop bathing. That's not godlike. That's a wretched man, a walking corpse.

I think of that fleck of a child in Angela's womb. I'd always expected that when I was to become a father that I'd shake some of these feelings. The passing of my essence, perpetuating the bloodline, the continuum of life, shouldn't these notions flood my thoughts like petals? Perhaps if the child was to be with Gloria then they would. I'm to be a father, a demigod of sorts I guess, and I feel absolutely dreadful. Still, there's that thread of duty, as if tied to the back of my head it holds me back from the cliff's steep edge. A child is a responsibility, my responsibility, and I must make it good. I don't know what I feel. It seems like a mix of guilt and embarrassment, that I should bring a baby into this cruel world. Maybe when it's born, maybe then things will change. Maybe I find my purpose then. Maybe it takes actually seeing it, the visual proof. Maybe that will lift this awful weight of anxiety in my guts.

Until then nothing is certain. If Angela catches on to my doubts then it's likely that she'll be gone before sunset, and I'll never see my child. Hell, it's just as likely that she'll shoot me. The thought is a little chill but I'm a little surprised by just how calm I remain. I guess that I'll go along with her for now. See the world, and try to make it quick.

I can begin to understand the allure of guns. Of course they're for protection or assault or hunting, but the philosophical ramifications are far greater. In your hand is the one great leveller,

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and you can think of it any way you want. As if it is a television remote control, you simply point it at your target and press to turn of the switch within them. It's that easy, that removed. Other weapons you don't get that with. A knife or a sword or even a dart from a crossbow takes a more clinical way of thinking. You have to think of your target in terms of arteries, organs and gonads. Where to strike to make the victim bleed out. Where to cut so that they can't lift a hand in defence. That means seeing muscles, tendons, nerves, eyeballs. The heart and the brain, where they are, what they do and how you can stop them. All of this is required knowledge with other weapons, but guns can cut right through that.

On the flipside though, when you do think anatomically about how a bullet passes through a body you come face to face with the sheer awesome power that the gun possesses. When you see the target as a bag of flesh and skin, and anticipate the shattering of bone, the rupturing of organs, tubes and vital liquids. Pressure, heat, friction and momentum. Gloria's skull looking like a wrecking ball had struck it. Humans as objects, cut down like trees, which can be moulded into hideous forms.

More than anything, I think as I walk through the bedroom to the bags in the corner, guns embody the human experience. The wilful ignorance and the terrifying truth just fractions of a degree from one another. Both impersonal yet individual, unlike some giant destructive device that reminds you more of a sun than of man. I unzip the bag and let my hand find the cold metal pistol. The feeling I get up my arm is one of power. I relax a little, my head clear for a second. My index finger finds the trigger and gently runs along its length. What a thing of beauty. What a find among the soft and warm clothes that it is packed between.

Except, as I move my hand just a little, my palm comes across something else. Something other than the gun or the fabric of her clothes. It is a plastic bag, and its rustling gives me a start. I stop, still like an animal caught in headlights, then with gathering resolve I hook my little finger around a bunch of it and pull my hand back. My first look at the gun gives me a shudder. I'm seeing the same weapon I saw in the video of my wife's execution, yet it still feels all right to hold. Dangling beneath is the plastic bag, black and opaque and knotted at the top. I lay the gun back down on the case, carefully positioning it so it won't fall, and I hold the plastic bag for

a minute. I don't know what Angela means to be now, but I still feel like I shouldn't be snooping through her stuff. Oh well, I think. Once you've done it once it is all so easy to go and do it again.

Objects as yet unseen, small and few by their looks, dangle in the bag. I detect the faint whiff of ammonia and my curiosity can't be held back. I try to untie the knot but it's too tight and the plastic stretches when I pull at it. In frustration I pull a hole in the side and immediately the contents spill out and onto the floor. Three little rectangles, no bigger than an average coaster, and coloured that familiar light hospital gray. I get down on my knees to see them better and pick up the closest one. Just a little slab of gray plastic. I turn it over to see the other side. There are a couple of unusual indentations on this surface, and the smell is a little stronger.

Then I recognize the scent. It's urine. Just as my eyes fall on the big negative symbol, clear as day in one of the indentations, spelled out in a chemical reaction, I realize that I am holding a pregnancy test.

I drop it like it's on fire and scramble for one of the other two. I flip the next one over where it sits on the carpet. Negative. A long red line with no hint of a cross. The other one has rolled under the bed a little. I claw it back out and check it too. Negative.

I guess these were too damaging to risk being found in the regular rubbish. I feel the room spinning as I register what I'm seeing. The glint of the gun catches my eye and I focus on that to try to keep calm. Just the shape of it seems comforting. Next to it I see a paper bag. A small paper bag from a pharmacy. It must have been brought to the surface when I pulled out the gun. I don't need to open it to know what's inside, but I do it anyway, tearing through the thin paper. It's a box of pills, the oral contraceptive. I feel my nostrils flare as rage rises in me like mercury. I hurl the box at the wall but its meagre weight makes for a pathetic impact. I'm just making myself madder.

How well she had me under control! She applied the chains so well I never even saw them. I prattle on to myself and to her about the boundaries of human existence, my fears, hopes, dreams and memories. As if I'm something special. As if I'm something deep, something precious, too rare to have thrown to the mercy of death and time. All the time I thought that I was feeling

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love for her, some sort of deep bond, a connection beyond my comprehension. I put it down to her guidance, her kind support and her listening to me at my very darkest. For taking an interest, like some guardian angel, in me getting not just better, but the best that I could be. Like I expected of love there was something undefined I felt about it, perhaps something even approaching spiritual that gave me all sorts of hope for our future and an overwhelming sense of wonder when around her. But with the illusion swept away her trick is painfully simple.

Sex, food and offspring. Like any male animal I have been completely dominated by the careful management of these three basic desires. Wants so primal, so instinctive and common to every living thing, from the silverback gorilla to the fucking brine shrimp. Her manipulation was divine, like that of a skilled fly fisherman. Give a little, hold back a while, then give a little more. While I pondered the nature of the stars and the galaxy, thinking myself a pretty aware being, she's gone and taken what she wanted by treating me like the animal I am. Pandering to my biological needs while my mind was elsewhere. Should I commend her for her efforts or be furious for once again being let down by what I am?

What did she want? Me? I don't think so. Perhaps for my trust, my adoration? Would she go to such extremes to get that? Even so, she has to be sensing that what I felt for her is beginning to wear thin.

Was it purely to recruit me for that crazy crusade of hers? I doubt it. I doubt she believed in it herself for a minute either. There's no "network" of "like minded people" that we're going to enlist the help of to realize our "dream". There never was. She just needed an opening line, and if she'd said that she was knocking door to door, talking about god and acting completely alone I'd never have trusted her. Why? Well, who ever heard of anyone believing anything all by themselves?

No, if anything this crusade was just toying with me, just proving how much she had me under her thumb. "I'd kill the planet for you." Not many girls get to hear that spoken to them.

I'm also guessing that the fifteen thousand dollars will more than pay for whatever she had to go through to dispose of my wife's body. I know that half of that money has yet to make the transfer. That's probably why she's getting skittish now. She

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knows I could still can those payments. The thought crosses my mind but I shrug it off. It's too late to start scrambling back my losses. Have the money. I'm offering it up. I won't lose another shred of dignity by fighting you to the end.

Oh, Gloria, I'm so sorry.

I have the pistol in my hand now. I don't know if Angela's coming back or not, but if she were to come through the door right now would I have what it takes to plug her? Twice, three times in the chest, I reckon. I want that sucking noise as the lung deflates through a film of blood and spittle. I want to see the jet of red as the bullet daintily nicks the wall of the aorta. I want the quick snap back as the projectile flattens itself against the finely stacked vertebrae. In the guts perhaps, like a speeding mechanical seppuku? Perhaps the legs? Perhaps I could immobilize her first, drag it out a little? I want to see the bullets hit her everywhere. Everywhere except the head. I want her nervous centre alive and kicking for as much of it as possible.

But the gun is heavy in my hand. I want to draw it up, level with my eyes to sight it, but it won't move. It's no longer a gun, it's a relic. Like the lone body part found, my only link to her now. My eyes are fixed on the photograph, pushed to one side on the floor of the room, the wedding photograph. It doesn't matter what Angela has done to it. I can see it for what it is. It's me, and it is Gloria, and it is the closest thing I've come to love. The wrath seeps from my blood. It's not going to do me any good. And besides, what would Gloria think of it? Not much. Would she forgive Angela? Is it possible to forgive such an act? I don't know. But I know that to take it into my own hands, to kill her myself, I'd be betraying the ideals of my wife one more time. It doesn't matter what I believe, I would cheapen the faith she revelled in if I killed in her name.

I drop the gun to the floor and stagger out of the room, away from it, away from the negative results and from the baggage that is taking over the floor. Past the door to the nursery, blackened in my mind. I can see flames in my mind's eye lick the wood and wallpaper. Perhaps Angela will torch the place afterwards. That would be smart, I guess. The evidence of us will be turned to dust one day or another. Make it fast if you want to get away with it. Ash has no memory. Dust tells no stories.

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The cold and sleek bathroom, all shine and clean like a surgical theatre. My hands reach for the vanity door. You see, with a gun it doesn't matter which way you look at killing. It could be point and click and the target is dead, or you could follow cause and effect through in minute detail. It doesn't matter which with a gun because, in truth, it doesn't matter at all. Death is death. Nonexistence is nonexistence. There may not be a switch inside that turns the life on and off, but that doesn't matter. Whether you die by the flick of a switch or by the butchering of a flesh and fluid body, the result is the same. You go. You leave it all. You don't leave it behind, no. That implies that you move forward. You simply leave. Whether you were a body of meat or a computer software construct it makes no difference. Without perception, without identity, without self-awareness, you are not and never have been. Nothing about this is negotiable.

And you know what? I'm becoming okay with this idea. The steel blade is a little blunter than I'd perhaps like, but it'll do. Because there is no final judgment, no pick and choose between heaven and hell for eternity. Existence isn't about making the right decisions or living a good life, nor necessarily enjoying it. It's nothing. Man is just a pebble on a hillside that gets to choose which way it rolls for a while. It doesn't matter, nothing does.

It seems that it can still break skin with it easily enough. The problem lies in what it means to be an aware human in an indifferent universe. The problem is these chemical impulses, these emotions, these evolutionary triggers for self-preserving action. They've reached the limit. They were honed and adapted over the millions of generations to facilitate life in its simplest form. To give rise to a structure of society, family, a support structure for the little ape-lings as they made it on this dark earth. If only our brains had stayed small! Now we born in this age have the intelligence, the knowledge to stare into the cosmos and see just how terrifyingly small we are. To examine the body and see just how fragile we are. To look for where God should be, and try our best to make His excuses for Him when he isn't there. And we feel it, we feel this terror and the misery and the sadness, and it's all that we can do.

Well, it's not all that we can do. There is always the off switch.

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And once you know what you know, is it really that terrifying?

Once you're a disgrace, your life in tatters, is it any less appealing? When misery is the only other option, which do you take?

All in one motion this time. Pierce and rip down.

There's no going back, is what I tell myself. I think of those magazine lists. Fifty things to do before you die. Regrets? Not one. Those, along with the fifty great memories, they all sit still like broken down rail cars in the neurons of the brain the second you go, then they all fall away.

All in one motion this time. No mistakes this time.

It spills out like gravy, warm and viscous. There's more than I expected. The pain hasn't quite registered. Instead I feel the tingle of anticipation. I'm probably in shock. That would be typical, wouldn't it? The most significant moment of my life and I'm not even sound of mind for it.

That doesn't matter, Thomas. Quick, switch hands. Do the other arm. The blade is slippery between my fingers. Slick with red blood. Red like her lipstick. I feel woozy, like three shots of over proof rum just hit home. I'll just pass the razor to myself. But my arm is heavy. The blade clatters to the ground. Better be careful, I think, not to stand on that. I smile a punch-drunk smile. I've done enough.

I hardly feel my head hit the floor, but I must have fallen like a chair kicked over. I can begin to feel the pain from the wound. Shocking pain, but I'm already a few steps back from it, observing it more than experiencing it. I feel like I've just woken up. The warmth of the covers and my gentle sleepiness wash over me. My peripheral vision is blurred and gray. What a phenomenon, I think. Oxygen loss? Must be.

I think perhaps I should be doing something, like singing my favourite song. I try to remember a song to sing but only glimpse words and snatches of melodies. I feel my eyelashes facing stiffer and stiffer resistance from the air. Eventually I'm going to just have to leave them closed.

When I do, I see vivid memories of me in the field, leading a charge of armoured knights on horseback. I can still hear their hooves smack the earth in unison. Those were good times, I think.

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With a start my mind snaps back into focus and I remember what's going on. I should be paying attention, I say to myself. This is important. But, really, is it? I'm not going to perceive the moment I pass. I'm not going to have the slightest idea what is what in a matter of moments. Why sweat it now?

The pain in my arm is different and it gets my attention. The combination of the stinging and the warm ooze is so curious. As I focus on that sensation I feel it move. It's no longer in my arm. It's no longer anywhere. It just is, as if hovering within me. Within me. What does that mean? What is me? I see no boundaries. There is no space. Just everything. And this buzzing in my ears. Except it's not in my ears. Where my ears are I don't know, but there is buzzing.

Then suddenly light. Do my eyes sting? I'm not seeing this with my eyes.

And what is this feeling now?

In my guts, I guess. I mean, that's where it used to live. Now it's just, it's just, here.

Like a weight you carry around in you. A void, a mass, a black hole, whatever. A weight and a feeling at the centre of your being. But not. Now it is all around.

And it's beautiful. It's light, like a helium balloon. Like bliss, like euphoria. Like love. I'm guessing here, but, whatever I've tried to fill myself up with in my life, this was the result I was looking for. Peace.

I'm so glad to have finally found you. Will you be with me all the way? Or is this just....

End

