

Black Cards

When he heard the phone ring, it was already too late. The ground was rushing toward his ears, and in a moment he wouldn't be able to hear anything anymore. That was what he wanted, wasn't it? The silence before now had been deafening. For days and days he had heard nothing. Before, his hearing had become so sensitive that he could detect the sounds of insect legs moving behind the fridge, of dust settling on window sill. He had waited so long for some noise, some sign that he wasn't alone he often wondered if he could really hear those bugs, his only friends, or if he had made them up just to feel less alone.

The sounds of insect legs, wings, even antennae had become oddly comforting. He could remember the days when such sounds turned over in him a slight disgust, a reflex to kill or willfully ignore. He felt sorry now for those moments. If he could miss things where he was going he might even miss the tiny noises that had massaged his solitude and the creatures that made them. He never thought he would consider missing bugs. Of all things, bugs!

He would miss a lot of other things, many he had already started missing when he stopped leaving the house, others even before that. His longing had brought him to this point, but now he wondered if there was something waiting for him after death - if death was just an extension of all that he was feeling in his last conscious moment. He could be entering an eternity of longing, of the ache that

brought him to throw himself down to death's flat embrace. Or. Hope - because now the phone was ringing. Ringing! Someone was out there, trying to find him.

That sound, that bright purr of metal clanging and curling into the air was changing him. He felt suddenly uplifted. Perhaps he could even alter his trajectory? Could this new spirit he felt lift him away from the ground? Back up and up towards the window he just left? The thought came as a comfort; it surrounded his face like a pillow, ready to protect him from the approaching asphalt. He thought he felt himself begin to smile, a physical sensation hard to recognize. His face, for so long, had felt so heavy, his head and neck and limbs dragging slowly down, microsecond by microsecond, in the direction they were now speeding. It was hard to tell if his feelings were real. As his lips spread over his teeth, they prepared to separate in an instant, to let in all the air rushing around him. His cheeks rose to meet his eyes, his eyelids closed tighter, but not to hide from the world rushing past, but rather bask in its memory and its light. Was it real that smile, that hope? The pillow softened against his face, the ring of the phone floated through his ears and he felt that if death were an extension of this feeling it would not be so bad, would be, in fact, what he had hoped for if it was not nothing he had hoped for, not just an end to feeling, to the pain of living alone.

But then, he thought, surely, there is no god or master plan, no life after this one he had just thrown away, or else that god, that plan would not allow for this irony, this last laugh at his expense, that just when he had given up hope, had physically thrown whatever hope was left in him at the ground to be absorbed forever, he would hear the bright ring of the telephone. It occurred to him it was not

a sound of hope at all, but the sound of ridicule. For what hope was left for him? He was about to die. Perhaps, if he had been stronger, if he had been able to create that hope within himself he would have been rewarded with this phone call. But now, now he was simply being mocked. If there were a god, the one on the other end of the line was a satirist.

He imagined a game of gods, like a board game, in which dark shadowy figures loomed and strategized and tested their luck until the only piece left on the board was him. And then they walked away and left the board to rot, abandoning him. Alone. There were no other pieces to interact with, no cards to be drawn, not even a god to move him at whim. His only company were the insects crawling across the board, who, like in his apartment, came out of the shadows when everything else was gone, finally ready to reign.

His imagination had often run away from him after everyone else was gone. It always started as a comfort - to remember the feel of a hand in his, or eyes that met his gaze, and stir that memory to life. He would imagine simple things. The sound of wind became laughter, became a party in his living room. Friends and strangers whirled and mingled, made noise and conversation. He tried to join, made comments, made jokes, but they didn't respond. He could only listen and sigh. The feel of concrete beneath his feet became the race he had run so long ago, crowds on the side cheering on the moving throng around him, he stumbled purposely so he would feel another runner crash into him, but his body parted their movements like a rock in a stream. Always they moved around him, too fast to reach. His own arm tucked under his chest in his sleep became his partner's, and as he shifted under the

sheets searching for the warmth of that body he could only find empty pockets of air.

Those were only the sad imaginings. The ones that made him feel at best on the verge of tears and at worst as if he were sinking into a hole inside himself. And that's often where the mad imaginations began. He would be falling inside that hole and there would be no end, he would fall and fall and nothing would stop until he was flying over some vast space. Sometimes it would be an endless field of graves, tiny fingers sticking out of the ground every few feet; other times it was an ocean filled with the dust of so many bodies burned that it had thickened to a watery mud of galvanized ash. His feet skimmed the surface and he screamed, his voice lost in the stormy air that propelled him forward.

And other times, his mad daydreams were joined with the fleeting glee of hysteria. Like when he imagined they had all come back. The moving of a machine somewhere, long left operating on its own, mimicked the sound of moving limbs and he would see them marching toward him. They did not move like the zombies of film with their arms outstretched or their bodies dragging, but much like soldiers, organized and comprehensive, a unit with purpose but no room for him. Indeed, not even an eye or ear for him as the multitude marched right by and out into the horizon for as far as he could see in the dusty air. He longed to join them and some days he did. He would march beside the army of the dead that filled his dreamy eyes and imagine they were all headed somewhere together, to rest, to work, to live. He would walk until his feet were blistered and his mouth so parched that each breath

tore at his throat as if he were swallowing splinters of bone. Exhausted, he would collapse and watch the army disappear.

Those moments were not the moments in which he wished for death. In those moments he at least felt alive. Though he sometimes got lost in the mirage his mind created he knew he was alive through the pain in his feet or the pangs in his heart. It was the other days he longed for death. The days he felt so alone, so numb that he wondered if he was still alive at all. He wondered if he had already died, if he had passed with the rest of them or even dreamed the whole thing in a deadly sleep. Was this death, this dream of an apocalypse, this solitary existence that threatened to stretch ever further into nothing? He wanted to know for once and for all, to test it out, to throw himself at death's embrace. And at the same time, he wanted nothing less. For if this was death or if it was life it was still all that he had; it was everything to lose.

Now he had lost it whatever it was. Now that he could see, or rather, hear that it was something to be lost.

He had heard a phone once before. That was in the beginning, on one of his long walks, when he used to bother looking. He had been walking in circles for hours. The light was getting low when he heard the ring. At first he thought he imagined the sound. He had been chasing ghosts all day in shadows and whispers, so the soft ring of a phone was just another piece of daydream until he noticed it was growing a little less faint with every step he took. He slowed to concentrate and sure enough as he moved forward the sound became brighter and brighter. He picked up

his pace, began to move too quickly for walking, he was running, racing toward that sound, trying to reach the phone before whomever was on the other end hung up.

Exhausted, panting he reached a phone booth. A phone booth! He didn't even know those existed anymore. But there it was beside some broken concrete and a somewhat naked looking telephone pole. He is feet crunched broken glass as he reached for the receiver.

"Hello?"

No response.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

"Hello?"

He listened for breathing, for the crackle of a bad connection, for wind, for air, for anything.

"Hello, hello, hello?"

The silence on the other side of the phone was tinny.

He fell to the ground, the receiver still in his hand.

"Hello? Hello? Helloooooo." His voice trailed. His breathing was heavy. He realized he was crying. His lungs felt so full, his heart felt so real again. He trembled.

"Is anybody there? Is anybody there?"

There was no answer. So he waited. He waited until he fell asleep and then woke back up again. And when he woke he found himself slumped on broken glass with the phone receiver cradled under neck, pushing hard against his chin. He could

feel the streaks where his tears had first ran a trail through the dust on his face and then dried like the fingers of a ghostly caress.

"Hello?" He managed to choke out one more time. The only answer was the continuing echo of silence. So he got up and walked back into the empty streets that were only his once again.

He listened, now, as a phone rang again. What would he say if he answered? Would he try again? He hadn't uttered a word in so long. He could imagine himself tempted to pick up the phone and say nothing, to listen but not to speak. He could imagine not wanting to put that other person's existence to the test. He would want only to hold the phone and imagine the breath on the other side, escaping into the same air as his, perhaps some day crossing whatever expanse separated them and entering his own lungs. To share a breath with someone other than the insects and lizards that scurried around him, other than the shadows that followed him, that might bring him peace before he hit the ground. He wondered again if his hope could lift him, if faith could break a fall.

He'd had it in the beginning - faith. He'd carried it on his back like a burden. It drove him through the streets, it moved heaps of stones from which shadows fled, looking for bodies and breaths. It carried water to the voices he heard, spilling onto them, quenching only dust. It pushed him to the lights he saw at night on the distant horizon, to which, no matter how far he ran, remained there on the horizon, waiting for him. And it brought him back, most importantly, again and again to the home he had built amongst the rubble, to the fire pit where he cooked the stores of food it helped him find. But faith needed him as he needed it. When he stopped feeding it,

by not feeding himself, it fled his body like blood from a wound. It stained the ground around him too. He lay there darkened in its pool night after night until he finally felt he could abandon it and leave it behind him. And now, now it was back, with a new vibrancy, curling through his ears with every tinge of music it created.