

## CAUSALITY

It would be so easy. To skip the exit, to just keep cruising down the interstate and never stop, it would hardly take a second thought. Rush hour had long passed, so there wouldn't even be any traffic to deal with. One quick act of defiance, one expression of independence, and he would be free.

Of course, it was never that easy.

Instead, Mick turned on his blinker and drove down the same exit he did every day after work, continuing on his way home. There was no sense in avoiding it. He would have to tell her. Everyone has to face the music eventually. As he pulled into his garage and shut off the engine of his car, he rehearsed in his mind how to break the news to Amber.

When Mick walked in the door, all the lights were off except for the glow of the stove lamp shining out from the kitchen into the hallway. At first he thought maybe Amber had gone out, but then remembered seeing her car in the garage when he arrived. She sometimes went on walks, but never this late in the evening. Mick felt a twinge of alarm in his gut. He called out for his wife.

"Amber? You in here?" No one answered for several seconds, each one dragging on for an eternity. Finally, he heard her voice.

"Yeah," his wife called from the second floor, "I'm in the nursery."

Mick was relieved to hear her respond, but anxious. Something didn't feel right, and as he walked up the stairs, he wondered if maybe she somehow already knew. The door was pulled mostly closed. He pushed it open to see Amber sitting in the nursing chair, holding her belly and rocking back and forth. She was right at about seven months, and though she didn't look ready to

pop yet, she was close. She sang something in a quiet whisper, and though Mick couldn't quite make out the song, he stopped at the door and listened for a moment. Amber had taken to singing to the baby over the last couple of months, and it held Mick in a trance every time she did. He tried to imagine the intimate bond that must exist between her and the baby, that connection she must share with a living being growing inside of her. He found it difficult to wrap his head around the concept, and only when she sang like this did he begin to feel even the slightest inkling of an understanding.

“Hey,” he said.

Amber finally looked up at him. “Oh, I didn't hear you come in. Sorry if I scared you.” The garage was right underneath the nursery. He found it hard to believe she didn't hear the automatic garage door go up and then back down once he was inside.

“You okay?” Mick asked. “Why do you have all the lights off? It's like a dungeon in here.”

Amber only smiled. An odd smile, as if she weren't really smiling at all. She didn't give him an answer.

Mick sighed. “Well listen, I need to tell you something. I don't know how to say it, so I'll just say it. I was let go today.”

Amber continued to look at him. The smile was gone, but she was otherwise unfazed. “What happened?”

“I don't know,” he said. It was a lie, but he didn't want to get into it. “Downsizing, restructuring, who the hell cares? I guess I should have seen it coming.”

“It’s okay,” she answered, then turned away, again staring into nothing. “You’ll find another job.” She continued to rock and began singing once again in that same, haunting whisper. Mick was suddenly irritated by her indifference to the news.

He walked over and kneeled down beside her. “We need to talk about this, okay? I’m unemployed. We’ll need to make some major adjustments to our budget. We won’t have the money now to raise a baby.”

“I know,” Amber answered without looking at him. Not *we’ll figure it out* or *God always provides for us*. Just a simple *I know*. Now Mick was getting worried, and a little upset.

“We’re going to have to do *something*, Amber. We can’t just ignore this and wait for someone else to take care of it.” Mick loved his wife, but never learned to share in her faith. She had a tendency to let things go, expecting God to fix everything for her. He believed in some higher power, but whatever that power was, he figured it would only help people who could help themselves.

God wasn’t going to fly in like Superman and save the day. All of the good things that happened in their lives Amber attributed to God’s benevolence, but Mick wasn’t so sure. Good things happened to people all the time, even bad people. Bad things happened to good people, too. Did God have a hand in all of them, manipulating their daily lives like an omnipotent puppeteer? Mick didn’t think so. No, life was only a random string of causes and effects. Thousands of animals die out, through the millennia slowly morphing into Kerogen, and now we use them to power our cars and planes. The earth spins, winds deflect in opposite directions, and a hurricane forms. A sperm cell and an egg combine, and a human life is formed. Cause and effect. No intervention necessary.

Amber didn’t say anything.

“Did you hear what I said?” Mick asked. She didn’t usually act like this, and it unsettled him more with each passing moment. In the dim light from the bathroom, he saw a single tear slide down her cheek and fall down onto her belly. Otherwise, she only continued to sing.

Mick almost lashed out in anger, but then caught himself. He took a deep breath and stood up to leave. “Fine, okay. You don’t want to talk to me, I get it. I’m sorry I lost my job, I really am. But it still doesn’t change the fact that we have a baby coming.”

“No, we don’t,” Amber said, finally looking up at him again. She closed her eyes and held both arms tightly across her bulging midsection. “She’s gone, Mick.” She was so calm, as if she were reminding him to pick up the dry cleaning on the way home.

Mick stood there, stunned. “Wh... what?”

“I went in for my checkup three weeks ago and they couldn’t find a heartbeat. They ran some tests and told me the baby was stillborn. The doctor said it would be better for me to wait until labor was induced naturally, but if it hadn’t occurred within a month that I should go back in and... they would take care of it. So, here I am.” She chuckled a bit, and gave that same, sad smile.

“Oh Amber,” Mick said, “god, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

Three weeks. She had been carrying around their dead child for three weeks, and she was the only one who knew. He thought of their friends at Church who would tell her how great she looked, about random shoppers at the supermarket who would ask her when she was due, and she would smile and carry on as if it were all completely normal. All this time, she had to endure the terrible burden of pretending everything was fine when she knew she was nothing more than a living coffin for their baby girl.

Mick suddenly felt like he would vomit. He backed up against the door frame, his chest tight, stomach churning.

“Please don’t be mad. I wanted to tell you but I just couldn’t bear it.” Everything she’d gone through, and yet she was still worried about *him*. “Say something Mick. Tell me it’s going to be okay.” She was crying now, the tears falling freely.

It wasn’t going to be okay. Everything had gone wrong. Mick looked at his wife, then his eyes wandered around the room aimlessly. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t even try. Instead, he turned around and walked out of the room.

“Mick!” Amber pleaded behind him. “Mikhail, don’t leave me!” She was sobbing now, gasping for breath between every other word. It hurt more than anything to listen to her, but he was sure he would die if he stayed in that house for even one more second. His wife’s agonizing squalls followed him down the stairs and out into the garage. Mick got in his car, opened the garage door, and backed out of the driveway. He didn’t know where to go and didn’t care. He just needed to go.

He wanted to be angry at someone, to shake his fist at the heavens and curse God, but found he couldn’t. This wasn’t God’s fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. It simply *happened*. Cause and effect. A biological process goes wrong, and three lives are destroyed.

Mick pulled the car to the side of the road and collapsed over the steering wheel. He wished he’d kept driving when he had the chance.