

## Omniscience

When he woke he was greeted by a darkness so total he was left with only touch. On either side his fingers found satin. Above, and reaching past his head to where a headboard should be, more satin. Sometimes when he slept he dreamed he'd awakened into death, or into something worse than death, states of torture, or worse, where dying alone became an eternity, a hell in life. He'd had the dream before, waking in a cold sweat to the impatient commands of his wife: "Wake up, you're having a nightmare, wake up." But there was no voice this time, and it was no dream. He slapped his face, and again hard, in the hope of emerging from the quiet nightmare he'd entered, only to hear the muted sound of it, lifeless, without echo, its only evidence a smarting jaw. The bedcovers weighed heavily on his chest, so heavily it inhibited breathing. He pushed at the sides with his hands, against the satin, encountering an impenetrable wall, then, in a panicked moment tried to toss off the bedclothes, but there was not enough room to free them from his body. He reached above him, placing his hands flat on the satin there and pushed with all his might, but was not strong enough to make it move. He scooted down until his feet encountered a fourth wall. He kicked at it with all his might. But it was every bit as solid as the walls, the floor upon which he lay.

His mind raced as he tried to catch up to his need with small quick breaths. What had happened? Why was he here? Was there air coming from anywhere? He felt no drafts, no refreshment of any kind. Who had done this to him? It had been some kind of horrible mistake. Requiring, his panic told him, a cool head, thought, reason. Air. He needed air, the stuffiness a threat as it had never been before. His lungs demanded more while his mind did its best to stop the need for air. If only he could make his mind

settle into meditation, slow his heartbeat, his breathing. Could he control anything in this state of desperation?

Perhaps it was a test, a puzzle, his to solve, a joke, a prank, help me, help me, help me, he screamed into the vacuum that was his mind. No. Relax, he told himself, wait this out in a state of calm, and it will come right. The universe comes right, had always come right eventually—Stop! Have faith in those that did this, it was a test, it would come right. But the thought of whoever did this scared him, then made him angry, which made him want to breathe more quickly, and to cry out in panic. His hands tried the perimeter again with the same result. His thoughts attacked him, a pack of dogs tearing at carrion. Be brave in death, he said. He called on religion, on the image of religious martyrs, but his thoughts could not contain them. They flew past him, bats from a cave.

He'd change position; it was lying on his back that was the problem. He turned on his side and put his hands between his thighs, the position he'd used to keep warm while camping with his son. He pulled his knees up as close to his face as possible, willing himself to slow his breathing, tamp his panic into a space as narrow and flat as a sheet of paper. Have faith in life he told himself, lying on his side where he could see nothing, hear nothing, and smell nothing but the musty fabric around him. Die with courage, he told himself, die with courage, repeating it as a mantra, making his hands, his thighs, relax, until he thought he felt a peace envelop him that took his breath away, enough of it away to feel as a stone must at the bottom of a pond, waiting to be discovered and skipped across its surface. He refused thought with the hope that the right idea would visit him, the revelation, the light that would allow him peace. Light. Anything that would make sense. Die with courage, die with courage, he told himself, as if willing himself into dream, his hands, his thighs clammy from the heat his body generated against his will. He closed his eyes. He opened them. Perhaps he was dreaming. He was awake either way. Or asleep either way. Be quiet he told himself, a futile hope that the faintest sound might prove a miracle.

But nothing happened, absolutely nothing, as if darkness were an event. He slowed his breathing almost to nothing; would his thoughts stop for lack of oxygen? He could feel panic trying to burst forth, an obscene bloom at the center of his mind. Perhaps he should let it go, give into the need for oxygen,

[Type text]

[Type text]

[Type text]

speed up the progress of his own death. Perhaps this was a dream within a dream within a dream, requiring multiple awakenings. But no, the arthritis in his hand told him this was life, the last glimmer of it he'd have, before the glimmer that was merely a thought in the dark extinguished. He implored, he begged, he prayed; he pulled the universe even tighter around him. Lying on his side, he tried to imagine a vast room behind him, one he could find in a dream perhaps, where the windows were open, the curtains billowing from spring air in sunshine, the sheets blowing on the line; if he could only sleep, a dream could come to him—even a nightmare would help—one he might step into so he could step back out of it into life, into anywhere but here. “Help,” he shouted with his eyes closed, “help,” but his voice was now a whimper. He thought he spied, in the great distance, the tiniest crack of light, but when he opened his eyes it was gone. He put his hand in front of his face: nothing, and was that a faint he felt coming on? A giddiness, as though he'd slept for the briefest moment, as he had once driving on the thruway, waking in a panic. Pay attention, but the minute he tried he felt the need to inhale deeply, wanting to sink into unconsciousness. How long had he been here? Days? Hours? Minutes? Was there an exit he hadn't found, hadn't thought to find? He should turn himself around, face the other direction, and so doing, poke at every inch of his confinement for a hint of escape. But the space was too tight and the effort took so much out of him he felt faint again. The absurd thought that he should put his head between his knees, a thought like a dream that took him away from himself, the return so cruel he wept for someone to hear.

Thoughts raced, until he could find nothing but chaos and a kind of peace that descended on him, a poisonous gas, a hissing in his ear as if the space were deflating, shrinking slowly to his size and shape. It's here, it's here, a voice, not his own intoned, the voice of extinguishment, the last he'd hear. Just take me, then, just take me. His lungs hurt now from trying to inhale; his every cell hurt from trying not to breathe—he couldn't help it, he gasped for breath; the cloud of sleep threatened to overtake him. Was that a face he saw? No. Nothing but darkness. A small circle of light? No, his eyes had been closed, and even the faint sound of thunder had been impossible.

But no, that *had* been a sound.

As best he could he stopped his raging fight for oxygen. Only the sound of his nervous system greeted him, a kind of sizzling whine he could not control. Was this the end? It had to be. Gasping in short breaths he listened as best he could for it to stop, trying his best to sort out the whine from the sound of silence itself. Half awake, half asleep, holding onto the very edge of consciousness he listened, and thought he heard a lower rumble, an engine, the growl of an engine it was. Above his head it had to be—was it moving? Was it the sound of something near? Who could hear a shout over that sound?—it had to be a roar somewhere—of an engine. “Help,” he cried, but it was only a whisper, and as he lay there inhaling the last gasps of oxygen he imagined the machine above him—an earth mover it had to be—moving above his head, burying him deeper and deeper, the earth above him gaining in volume, condensing the space around him until there was none left him, not even a breath’s worth, only the sound of the machine. He closed his eyes, but at that moment he was suddenly bathed in an intense light, and a rush of air forced its way into his lungs, as if they had been inundated with molten metal, and a roar of sound so intense his hands flew to his ears to stop it from boiling him away.

“Get out,” a voice said, and he knew at that moment he’d crossed over into hell. The light was so intense he had to cover his eyes with his hands, the roar of the engine so loud he knew it to be the beginning of eternity. But even with all the light he could see nothing, the light wholly within him, as if it were no more than the pain internalized within the impassive dark. But it was more than that, it was pain itself, the pain of a lifetime distilled into his last moments, a nodule of energy roaming his body, pressing only the sensitivities where it had the most horrific effect, inviting him to rid his soul of screams and oxygen. This was it, then wasn’t it, the moment all life moved toward, the moment when the nodule hovered, stopped mid-thigh and, with a steady sawing moved deeper into the bone.

Invisible hands held him down. Paralyzed, he watched what he took to be the lid above him fly off into the heavens and a light like that of a hundred suns shine down on him. He could do nothing in his impotence but endure it, until eternity dwelled in every second, and there’d be no end, and the hands within him held his arms and legs, his chest and lungs still. He screamed within himself, but the sawing

only increased in intensity, the hands that held him becoming infinitely strong, until the universe became a matter of will, beyond the nodule that sawed its way to the very core of his life...

His mind became effort itself until he rose in a grey updraft, a hawk riding a bilious thermal toward a surface never broken, never seen, its skin to be breached only to reveal the same experience, again and again. *Lift him higher*, a voice intoned, and higher he rose, through a smoke, thicker and thicker, that brought him, coughing and choking, back to himself, where voices mixed with the confusion of submissive misery.

“Lift him up higher,” he heard someone say, as he found himself retching into an aluminum bowl.

“We’re here with you,” a woman’s voice said, as strong hands eased him back into his half-sitting, half-lying position. His head, throat and chest were sore, filled with numbness and nausea, and it was only after another bout of unproductive heaving that it occurred to him where he was, and his wife’s face came into cloudy focus before him. His head hurt deep within the dizziness, as his thoughts swarmed among themselves.

“Everything went as it was supposed to,” his wife said. “The aftereffects of the anesthetic will wear off in a matter of hours.”

He lay back and looked around him. His son, his silent son, sat by him on the other side of the bed from his wife. When sickness overtook him again, his son lifted him up, helping him toward the vessel his wife held. The dry-heaves were a good sign, his son told him.

His life returned to him little by little, like a grey November day. As the nausea lessened and the effects of the drug wore thinner the pain increased, to the point where even to move one part of his body was to provoke new trauma. For the first time having the courage to survey what was left of him he took in his lower half, the large wrapping lying outside the covers where once there had been a leg. His left leg.

“There’s no turning back now,” he said. His wife responded with her taut smile.

“How you feeling, Dad?”

*Not good* was the unvoiced answer. It didn't take much imagination to know what was coming. A lot of oxycodone, whatever it was called, until the thing healed. Before the stump closed up—however they had phrased it. His mind had tended to wander during the doctor's description of the aftermath. It would be harder on his wife than on him, he remembered telling the doctor. "The crutches will hurt under the arms," his son the footballer had told him.

Even given a few days to let his situation settle in, it was hard to see anything but misery in the future, although when the drug was kept flowing freely, urged through its channels by the pressure of his thumb, he existed in a demi-state between drugged consciousness and sleep, where thoughts of the future could easily be postponed by the luxury—if you could call it that—of having no choice but to lie back and take life as it came.

"My marathon-running days are over," he'd say. Even through pain, he felt it important to maintain levity. That he had weighed three-twenty before surgery was the source of the joke. The blacker side of his life always had its humor, no matter how grim. His wife wasn't one for jokes; even when he asked pointed or inane questions he couldn't count on a response.

"So, how long before the hors d'oeuvres arrive?"

He always asked this when hunger set in. And it was always ignored, but not today.

"In a while" was his wife's answer, a better-natured reply than usual, delivered straight-faced by a woman who had all but given up on the hope of behavior modification, she the Jack Spratt of the relationship urging her spouse toward a healthy diet as futile an endeavor as her constant harping on the need for exercise. Even walking had rubbed him the wrong way, the friction on his thighs from chafing his own good enough reason, never voiced, to yield to the inertia of his favorite recliner. Now, past the age of some resilient victim of the current conflicts in the Middle East—*conflicts*, what better euphemism?—now twice a soldier's age and twice the weight, the idea of some magic prosthetic device seemed unlikely. But looked at on the bright side, there'd be no more harping about exercise, *Stir your stumps* a phrase he was unlikely to hear applied to his own sedentary condition in the future. Indeed, it had disappeared with the news of the need for surgery.

The worst part, though, was not the pain (though it was no holiday) but all the stuff that remained unsaid. Jack Spratt sat there in her cloud of silent rumination over the future, for though she was kind enough never to mention it, he knew, everyone knew, that it was she who'd bear the brunt of his surgery, of his immobility, his boorishness, his refusal to change, his descent into—call it what you will—his depression, his presence as a bollard in the living room, a stanchion in the middle of the marriage, the family.

~

“Dinner is served,” his son announced a week later between his teeth. They were in the same hospital room they'd been in since the day after surgery. The attendant brought in the two thin slices of turkey drenched in their sauce of gluey-grey gravy, accompanied by the cratered mashed potatoes. Thanksgiving in the hospital. Anyone would be envious.

“Quick, the bowl,” he said, a catch line, now that the need to be sick was in the distant past. He was kidding, of course, and teen-age sons are quick to understand such humor. Not that he wasn't hungry, something his son would notice, so he let the food sit there for a moment in order to exude an atmosphere of near disgust.

Conversation with his son Jake rarely reached a florid phase, which suited him just fine, not having a great deal to say on any subject himself, especially if it pertained to anything having to do with gadgets his son played with all day, when he was off the field. Nevertheless, it was a parent's obligation to fill in the void when the trance generated by a tablet screen became too intense.

“So what have you been learning in school?” he asked, always a relevant question as long as you gave it a summer vacation.

“Do you know how long you've been asking me that?”

“As long as you've been in school,” he shot back, “which makes sense the more you think about it.”

After a pause, his son said, “You’re lucky you weren’t in the Civil War.” The assertion had the tentative tone Jake adopted for a challenge.

“We all are,” his father said, “and don’t think I don’t know it.”

“Otherwise I’d have done that for you,” Jake said.

“What, eat my turkey?” That was not what Jake meant, he knew. He’d seen the show, one of them, that went into detail about soldierly life 150 years ago.

“No. Amputate your leg.”

The father put down a forkful of mashed potatoes dripping gravy.

“My son the surgeon,” he said. “So now you’re going into medicine?” He’d apologize in good time, to the son with a 2.3 grade-point average. He should do it now. His phantom leg hurt by way of excuse. Were they running out of drugs?

“Sometimes they had surgeons and sometimes they didn’t,” his son was now saying. “Anyway, they had no anesthetic in those days. Dwell on that for a while.”

He did, noticing for the first time that the gravy was beginning to congeal.

“That woulda gotten you outa your chair and into some gym shorts.”

“What would have?”

“The thought of me—or Dr. Thornley—amputating your leg without the benefit of anesthetic.”

How many men would have had to hold me down for that, he thought.

“I’d have been much younger,” he said. By way of what, he wasn’t quite sure. His son’s expression told him he was thinking the same thing—that it would have hurt no less, being younger. Hard to imagine that kind of pain. Much more than now, of that you could be sure.

“Suppose you were given the choice,” his son said, stay thin or face the chance of that.”

“I’ll take my chances in the here and now,” he answered, not able to keep his mind focused on imagining the reality of such an ordeal.

“Consider yourself lucky,” Jake said.

“Oh yeah, lucky! You want to be where I am?”



Jake could sure be annoying at times. But, lying there, he knew he was lucky. Part of his leg had been dead—it had even begun to give off an unpleasant odor. And he had not had to give up his life for it. And the hour or two between the countdown—10-9-8-7—and waking up puking his guts up in recovery—between the two there was nothing. Nothing at all. Small price to pay.

For the first time since the operation he pictured what it must have looked like. An incision followed by yes, a saw. He'd never seen a bone saw if that was what it was called. All he could picture was the rusty hacksaw dangling from a peg in his cellar. It *was* a miracle, come to think of it, that they could do something like that without you feeling or remembering a thing.

“Have them take this away, will you, Jake?” He pushed the tray in his son's direction. He still wanted the food on the plate—that was the sad part—but it was necessary to respect what Jake had said, reduce the portion a bit by refusing to eat all of it.

Jake rose to kiss him goodbye, a rarity. Rare enough for him to hold Jake's face against his own for a long time before he left. And he hadn't bothered to correct him, either. Anesthetic *had* been available during the Civil War. To some, anyway. Likely not to everyone. Blessings were everywhere, if you only stopped to notice them.