

Wedlock

They were drinking at the apartment. Every Wednesday the carpenter bought his wife a bottle of red wine. They had a real good time together on the weekdays, contrary to other married couples he saw around the complex. Last week, after the power cut out, he called the landlord to have the circuit breaker inspected. The landlord glared at the voltage meter, scratching his grey beard, complaining about his own spouse locking the bedroom door to watch Netflix alone every night. *Not my wife*, thought the carpenter, pouring two glasses of wine in the living room, because bringing home a bottle of Pinot Noir showed devotion to his better half.

She set down a plate of French bread with Brie and they relaxed on the couch, sipping wine and watching their favorite reality TV shows together. His wife yawned, stretched, and sprawled out on the cushions in light-blue pajama pants and an oversized Mickey Mouse T-shirt, grinning as she laid her legs across his dusted blue jeans. Rubbing her inner thigh, he glanced at her wedding ring, white gold shining in the clean light of their apartment. They talked about the workday. His construction site. Her third grade science class. And after a few more glasses of wine, some late-night televangelist started preaching about brimstone and hellfire through the television screen. The carpenter yawned, grabbed the remote control, and muted the preacher. “Hold on,” said his wife, “let’s hear what the preacher has to say.”

“Too late,” said the carpenter. “It’s past the Lord’s bedtime.” He felt comfortable about his wife’s religious views. They discussed that stuff years ago—before marriage—during the early days of their relationship. She was agnostic and he liked the sound of that word, how each syllable carried the weight of a deep thinker, unlike atheist, which

rang too hollow for his ears. Either way, they both agreed the existence of a supernatural being was a stretch of the imagination. “Just wait,” he added, setting the remote control on the coffee table. “God and these preachers will be long gone by the end of our lives. Extinct as the dinosaurs.”

“What makes you say that?” asked his wife, but it wasn’t really a question. Every once in a while she would straighten her back, cross her arms, and suddenly nod as if she were very interested in what he had to say. The more he talked the more ‘interested’ she would act. “I mean, how can you know for sure whether God is real or not?” She asked again, sipping her glass of red. He glanced at his yellow hard hat dangling on the coat rack by the front door.

“Because I read about it in the *National Geographic*. Okay, honey?”

“Just because you read about something doesn’t mean it’s true.” She sounded like his over-intellectual liberal arts teachers from high school. *Well*, he thought, chewing on a slice of bread, *I’m not falling for this again*. He grabbed the remote control and pressed the power button. “Look, honey,” he stared at the blank television screen. “For all I know, some old guy with a long grey beard destined us to share this wine tonight.” He wiped the crumbs off his mouth and stretched in his wife-beater. “I’m just trying to stay out of the way of his almighty plans.” He leaned back and rested his heavy arms on the couch pillows.

“You shouldn’t joke about those things.”

“Why not?” He laughed under his breath.

“I don’t know,” she said, blinking at the half-empty plate. “What if it all happens to be true?”

He rolled his neck along his shoulder blades—feeling the cartilage crack as though loosening up to give and take a few jabs in a boxing match. “You’re smarter than to believe that stuff, honey. There are scientific theories that explain all that nonsense.” *And there were*, he thought, glancing at her bag full of schoolbooks on the kitchen counter.

“Don’t you mean universal phenomenon?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I mean, Kate.” He glared at shadows in the hallway leading to their bedroom. “The Big Bang, evolution—they explain everything if you actually look up the evidence like I did.”

She pulled her knees up to her breasts and leaned against the opposite arm of the couch. “But,” she said, touching her wedding ring. “What if those scientific terms—like gravity for instance—are just made-up words that try to explain how God works?”

“Interesting point, Kate, but I’m not buying it.”

“I wasn’t making a point. I was asking you a question.”

“Would you be quiet and let me think for a minute?”

“Maybe think in terms of science decrypting the divine.”

He looked her dead in the eye and tried to remember those biology lectures he slept through before football practice. “You’re telling me that big word—*mitochondria*—and all of the science behind that term, actually stands for some holy wizard casting spells across the universe?”

“Not at all,” she said from the edge of the couch. “I’m saying *mitochondria* were around for millions of years before scientists gave a name to it. Like Adam naming the animals in Eden. Just because scientists make a discovery doesn’t mean they created it.”

“My point exactly,” he cracked his neck. “You agree that *mitochondria* evolved over millions of years, but the Bible claims God created the world in seven days.” He cornered her in the boxing ring and delivered the haymaker with one of her own pointed questions. “You honestly believe the world was created in seven days, honey?” Her head sank into the couch pillows, defeated, watching dust settle in the stifled living room, both hands cupped around the wine glass like a prayer he bought for her blessing. And yet she defied him. He finished her off with the knockout blow—the answer to the question she could not parry. “The world was not created in seven days, Kate.”

“What’s the difference between the Bible and *The Origin of Species*?” she said, rising up from the couch. “Both books are filled with made-up words that try to solve the mystery of being alive. Darwinism isn’t any different from Genesis! Both were conceived by people just like you and me trying to figure out the meaning of things from different times and places in the world. Tell me, what difference does it make who’s right and who’s wrong? Everyone is wrong! It’s all the same. Nobody knows what God looks like, or if God even looks like anything at all! Nobody knows the meaning of life and the question only leads to more and more arguments and hatred and war!”

She stood slightly above him, hardly five-and-a-half feet tall, staring fierce with wild blue eyes he fell in love with years ago, and somehow he thought about hitting her across the face even though he loved her to death and would never let himself do such a thing. His wife never used to argue until she started teaching at that elementary school across the street from their apartment complex. Now she behaved as if he were some third grade student in her little science class, which was far more important than his own labor at the construction site, building three-story motels from ground up in the heat of

July, woodchips and gravel flying up from the chainsaws, jackhammers, and power drills grinding through humid layers of sawdust. “Sit down,” he said. “Stop being ridiculous.”

“How am I being ridiculous? You act like science answers the God question when really the Enlightenment only led to two world wars. Not to mention the invention of nuclear weapons to blow up everything.”

“So you’re saying the human race was better off when we were peasants burning witches to brighten up the Dark Ages?”

“I’m saying humans use science to dominate and destroy each other which isn’t very rational or scientific at all! In fact, it’s irrational! It’s insane!”

“Would you please stop screaming at me and just be quiet, please?”

“It’s like we pretend we created the universe whenever a new scientist comes along and makes some grandiose discovery. Little do we know, God *actually* might have created the universe and we’re just tapping into divinity whenever we take the next giant leap for mankind, except instead of gardening Eden we’re melting glaciers with sarin chemicals and hydrogen bombs dropped from knowledge that’s forbidden for a reason— forbidden because we don’t know what the hell we’re doing with it! Don’t you see?”

“I’ve had enough, honey,” said the carpenter, “have some sense, won’t you? We wouldn’t be holding this conversation without science and that’s a fact. There wouldn’t be lights... There wouldn’t be power... Hell there wouldn’t even be a couch for you and me to sit on and watch our favorite TV shows, alright? Now can’t you calm down and let us enjoy a nice peaceful evening together for once?”

“I’m just saying you can’t disprove the existence of God because of some crazy preacher on late night television. That’s all.” She finished the rest of her wine, sat down on the couch, and reached for the bottle on the coffee table.

“Allow me.” He pushed her hand away and his forearm knocked into the neck of the bottle, which toppled over the edge of the table. The wine bottle bounced on the floor and rolled into a spilt mess. They both watched as red wine funneled out of the bottle and stained the white carpet.

“Stay there, Kate.” He snatched up the bottle, hurried into the kitchen, and polished off the last few drops of wine before tossing it into the waste-bin. His eyes darted to her bag full of schoolbooks on the counter, and he took a deep breath before peering inside. There were half-a-dozen sheets of stickers—gold stars she awarded her brightest students. She tried to describe her science class to him several months ago, before the circuit breaker started cutting out the power to their apartment, but the kids had too many names and he quit paying attention. Then, under the shimmering sheet of gold star stickers, he pulled out a crinkled wad of notebook paper scribbled with bright red ink, as though his wife had buried a dark secret from some forbidden love affair. Some artsy bleeding heart English teacher from the all-important elementary school, reciting Shakespeare during her lunch hours, skull in hand, as though humanity depended upon the perfect pronouncement of every syllable, and he imagined Kate blushing at the lunch table, telling him to stop but laughing and loving every second of Romeo’s romantic rehearsal. Well, if he ever caught his wife cheating on him with a flower boy, then he would break that poet’s face open right there in the middle of the cafeteria for all of her bright and shiny gold star students to see. Tensing up, he unfolded the scrap paper only to

find a poem written in his wife's chicken-scrawl handwriting. Bright red ink like blood stained through a bandage:

“620” by Emily Dickinson

Much Madness is Divinest Sense—
 To a discerning Eye—
 Much Sense—the starkest Madness
 ‘Tis the Majority
 In this, as all, prevail—
 Assent—and you are sane—
 Demur—you’re straightway dangerous—
 And handled with a Chain—

He flung the piece of paper across the kitchen like his fingers touched a hot stove. Shaking his head, he grabbed stain-remover and ripped off a handful of paper towels. He returned to the living room, lunged to his knees, and started dabbing up the spilled wine on the carpet. His wife's eyes knifed into his spine, as though he made a mess at school and needed to pay a visit to the principal's office.

“I’m sorry, Kate.”

“I just had the carpet cleaned last week.”

“Well, don’t blame me.” He lifted the soaked paper towel and looked up at her.

“Blame God.”

She bolted off the couch, stormed down the hallway, and slammed the bedroom door behind her. He heard her fumbling with the lock and the doorknob and he gazed at the drying carpet stain. He couldn’t get all the redness out with stain-remover. What remained was a dash of pink that soaked through the carpet padding. It reminded him of scar tissue that never healed on his hand, when he tried to open a beer bottle with his fist and shattered the glass into his flesh. He never got stitches and lost feeling in the right

side of his hand. The doctor said he suffered nerve damage, and he regretted smashing that beer bottle with his fist, but also understood the rest of his body would be just as numb in fifty or sixty years, buried underground in a casket, so he might as well get used to the deadness instead of wishing he could feel again.

To make amends with his wife he decided to scrub all the dirty dishes and place them into the washer. Then he grabbed a container of Clorox-wipes and thought he might as well clean the kitchen sink, oven, and the coffee table while he was at it. Next he dusted the television, pictures on the walls, even the refrigerator. After that he plugged in the roaring vacuum and slung it around the carpet, which was already spotless save for that damned scratch of pink. He knew the stain wouldn't suck out of the carpet no matter how many times he heaved the vacuum over it. After ripping out the cord and killing the noise of the vacuum, he was just about to take out the trash when he heard his wife crying in the bedroom alone.

He moved down the hallway and the power started flickering on and off, dimming and lighting up his shadow running over the walls. "Goddamn that landlord!" he yelled, reaching for the bedroom door. Lights flashed as he rattled the doorknob a dozen times—nearly thought he'd rip the locked door off the hinges. "Jesus, Kate. What's the matter?"

"Do you believe in God?"

"Why's it matter?" He looked at the door, as if he were speaking to it. "I mean, what the hell's gotten over you all of a sudden?"

"Let's pretend God does exist," she said, clearing her throat, "and that he meant for us to be together from the very start of it all."

"What's this have to do with anything?"

“Would you believe then?”

“Kate,” he ruffled his hands through his hair and stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know what you’re trying to say.” He slumped against the corner of the door and the circuit breaker fried. The power blacked out and darkness flooded the hallway.

“Answer me.” She clicked on a flashlight. Soft beams of light split through the doorframe, sliding shadows down the hallway over the stain on the living room carpet.

“Christ,” he said, blinking at the bright creases of light. “Okay. I don’t believe in God.” He waited for an answer. Footsteps crept across the bedroom floor, wavering pale light through the doorframe. He leaned against the door and listened real hard. She set something metallic on the nightstand. *Her wedding ring?* Drawers opened and closed. Blood beat against his eardrums as he glanced at his bare ring finger, white gold missing in the deadness of the living room. He heard a click and soft beams of light lapsed in the void behind the bedroom door. The whole apartment drained empty, silent, and lifeless only for the sound of another breath. “Kate?” His eyes dilated in the dark. “Kate, can’t you hear me?” The door unlocked. It creaked open. He shivered at the death of God breathing down his neck. “I’m starting to believe,” he said, “Jesus, Kate.”