



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #32
OCTOBER 2018



AUTHORS WERE CHALLENGED TO WRITE STORIES IN WHICH A CHARACTER (NOT NECESSARILY THE MAIN CHARACTER, BUT ONE IMPORTANT TO THE STORY) ALMOST DIES...

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FIRST PLACE

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Heart Emoji at the End of the World

by Shauna O'Meara

They don't tell you how fast the end can arrive when you commission the bunker. How a twenty-story office building can implode in thundering seconds. How you might not even make it out of the supplies basement, much less ascend the emergency stairwell to level three to collect your bag, keys and the office goldfish on route to Employee-only Parking.

*

The floors have mercifully stopped falling. All that remains is the settling into place, the final death-throes of View Global shuddering through the basement and into my ribcage. All around me, on me, is rubble. Fine, glassy grit through to concrete rocks.

"Help," I wheeze. Chalk burns my mouth, clots my spit. My legs hurt.

Dusty sheets scrape beneath my arms: the paper I was fetching for the copier.
Saved by office supplies.

That's another thing they don't warn you: the end can come while you are doing something so ordinary you may think it can't possibly be The Moment.

Sure, “tensions had escalated” but there’d been no sign attack was imminent: just the standard blustering of leaders, withdrawal of ambassadors, and war machines parading before the twenty-four hour news-cycle.

I had assumed we’d have plenty of warning with all those cameras watching; that there would be time to get affairs in order, farewell work, farewell neighbors, and give the plants a last good-luck watering before moving to shelter. I’d assumed I’d see the world end from a place of safety, my eyes welling at the news stations winking out one by one with the great cities. I had assumed I would make it.

“Ahh!” My legs are compressed by jagged weight. My reaching hand touches twisted metal and wiring. There is a cut on my scalp: an achy patch of stickiness in my hair.

The building quiets to its last pops, opening space for other sounds. Someone moans off to my right. Female. In pain.

“Hello?” I call.

My phone is in my jeans. I dig it out. Say a prayer.

The screen is cracked but working. The artificial light renders ghostly drifting palls of dust, a rubble-strewn cavity made apical by an oblique slab of ceiling. There is a spreading stain on the floor: water seeping in from somewhere.

The woman is hidden beyond a contortion of pipes and shattered concrete. Maybe she is under it.

“I can’t see you. Say something.”

No reply.

I shine the phone on my legs. Struts, wires, and a great slab of concrete like the door Indiana Jones groped under for his hat. I try to elbow forward, but pain lances my thigh, pins me in place like a moth. “Ooow!”

Crushing fear. “Help! I’m trapped!”

My only answer is a whimper from beyond the debris. But the woman makes no other attempt to communicate, just a long moan that hangs in the air, chilling me to the core.

The building falls silent. The dust drifts, indifferent.

I dial 911.

Everyone is dialing 911. I can't even leave a message. *Is anyone there to leave a message with?*

So I try Daniel. It seems the right thing to do. How bizarre that something as trivial as courtesy should be important now.

*

A man with polished hair and a tigershark smile had met us in the showroom, his arm swinging back like a gate to welcome us onto the floor: *come right this way, we have so many bunkers; what do you good folks have in mind?* A real-estate agent of sorts with the fire-and-brimstone urgency of a doomsday prepper, his clothes had walked a weird line between salesman and weekend militia.

Within ten minutes, the model we'd *had in mind* walking through the sliding glass doors had been discarded because of course we wanted the extra lead-reinforcement that was—*wouldn't you know it?*—currently on special, and *look, Tash honey, we can have a freezer; it won't all be living on cans.*

There had been so much to consider. Did we want a silo configuration for strength or a box for space or—*best of both worlds, folks*—the patented honeycomb? Did we want an extra room? Were we having a child while we were away? A straight-faced question, as if we were off on honeymoon. Generator options. Closed sewage systems. Food preservation. What about off-grid renewable power?—*great for depopulated wastelands, but a dead give-away to roaming bandits, so what do you folks want to do?*

This last question had demanded we bet on the way things would end. But we'd been promised so many ends in recent months, from biological attack to foreign invasion to all-out nuclear war, it was hard to decide.

Ultimately, we'd opted for concealment. No visible power. So no freezer. With extra storage space for cans and candles.

*

Lying in the dark, I realize the biggest bet we had made that day was not how the world would end, but that we would still be together.

The phone connects on the third try. Signal jagged and warped: just building interference or the whale-song of bent phone towers and burnt out satellite dishes?

“Ta-zzz. Tash?-zz.” Fritzing sounds. The phone cuts.

No, no, no, no.

My breathing quickens, shaky panting echoing and amplified throughout the space. I have a sudden notion that oxygen is no longer the indefatigable resource I once knew. That I am a cave-diver too far from the surface, gauge plunging toward zero.

I wrestle my fear until my panting subdues. My leg throbs in time with my heart.

My phone buzzes in my hand: Tash?

Text. Beautiful text.

Yes! Thank God! My phone has a single bar. It cycles on *sending* for what seems like minutes.

“Come on. Come on,” I beg the screen. The phone transmits: *Message sent 2:34pm*. I exhale a ragged breath.

Where are you? I'm headed to the bunker. Confirmation the damage is widespread.

He'll be driving from his studio in the outer valley. He will pass the city on his way to the mountain and see that View Global is gone, a blade of steel and glass missing from the skyline. Maybe there's no skyline at all.

View. I'm under the building.

There is no reply. I shake the phone; wave it around for better reception. "No! Don't cut off!"

In the blue phone-light, the cavern closes in. Is the air thinner? It seems thinner. The stain has crossed the floor, tamping the dust into thick, grey sludge. Thread by wicking thread, the water explores my clothing, pushes its chill into the space around my heart. I shiver as the woman I can't see groans again.

I am going to die down here.

I try 911 a second time. Futile. I howl for help.

Buzzing in my hand: There are roadblocks city-bound. No one is getting in.

Or out. He doesn't have to say it. No one is entering to find me and I won't be getting out.

A warm tear meanders down my cheek. That's why I texted. To tell you not to hold the bunker open for me.

As I watch the sending function cycle and finally transmit, my words strike me as being like that part of the relationship, the really shitty bit near the end, where you don't care anymore. Where you say things like *don't wait up for me*. And *dinner's in the freezer*.

*

When we had embarked on our trial separation, I had brought up the matter of our belongings: splitting the cars, furniture and mementos. The discussion had descended into accusation and tears and so we had let the subject drop until if and when there was ever a divorce.

I guess it's odd, then, that amidst talk of mitosing our union, our sharing of the bunker was never in question. Were we just not that selfish? Did neither of us hate the other enough to cast them out into nuclear winter?

Or did a part of us hope that, should we ever have need of the bunker, all the little annoyances would have burned away with the fires of the world, stripping us back to the bare, human essentials? *One of those had to be love, right?*

Did we think the end of the world would bring us closer? Like those people who have a baby to mend a marriage.

*

I'd still be annoyed if someone left the toilet seat up in a bunker. Does that make me intolerant or just consistent?

I don't know what to say, Tash. Tell me what to say?

Daniel in two sentences. Start with what you see.

He sends me a picture taken through the windscreen of our old Jag. The glass is badly cracked: a six-point, frame-to-frame asterisk that would not in normal circumstances be allowed on a road. The dark green hood is dusted with debris and pitted all over, as if with hail. The state of the car spikes me with painful nostalgia: remembered road trips, and sunsets at the lookout; the immaculate finish and sun-flash chrome turning heads wherever we went.

Beyond the hood are four lanes of bumper-to-bumper scorched and damaged cars, most with windows broken or spidered, their panels dented. Too few of the vehicles have belongings packed inside and there is only one with stuff strapped to the roof: these people were caught off guard too.

Fir trees angle every which way across the road, mangy with singed and hanging branches, their tops decapitated. The sky is a jaundiced smear, snaked with grey smoke and contrails.

Damn. Can you see the city from there?

Only where it was.

Jesus. What does that even mean? My hands jitter as I type: SHOW ME.

There is a long pause while he takes the picture, debates whether to take the picture, waits for the picture to upload, to send; I don't know.

The delay is enough to make me doubt. Do I *really* want to see what's above me? Will I be able to tell it's hopeless from a still? *Probably not.* I had thought our wedding photos looked lovely so I guess I lack the eye.

Daniel sends a photo taken obliquely through the driver's window. Ruined shopfronts and folded billboards stand in the foreground and, beyond them, a billowing thunderhead of smoke, miles wide and high and so solid it could almost be a landmark. No skyscrapers are visible. There is not a single helicopter or blue-and-red emergency light in the image.

No one is coming.

Panic scrambles free. My throat tightens like a drawstring; sobbing stricken notes as I gulp for air. The sound reaches the woman. Her distress harmonizes with mine.

I'm so scared, Dan. What do I do?

The water is pooling, taking on reflections now. My clothes are sodden. I've never been so cold in my life.

Is your GPS on so people can find you?

I imagine a sea of red dots—a city of transmitting phones—on some monitor somewhere. A Herculean task to pair live phone with live person.

But I turn on my GPS with shaking hands, add my dot.

Okay.

The woman is still moaning: desolate sounds. Her voice is thicker now, like it is too near the water, like it is filling with syrup. My skin lifts with gooseflesh.

So c-cold.

Why did we break up, Daniel? The text is away before I even comprehend what I've written.

You're asking this now?

There is a crack and a crash as something above finds new equilibrium. Dust trickles from the ceiling, alights on the water like gnats.

There is no rule book for this moment. What to ask. What to say. Do I ask what movies he's bummed about missing? Is one of the great tragedies of the end of the world not finding out what happens in *One To Rule*? Do the undead win? Is Greyston on the throne? It might be. It took up enough of our lives that small stuff. Whole conversations at work. Arguments on Twitter. Season predictions. Maybe such things were the big stuff all along and we just never realized.

I don't think I have time left for small talk, Daniel.

But I don't want to argue. Not now.

Does it have to be an argument? Please.

Why? How will that help anything?

Because it's ordinary. I just want an ordinary conversation. To take my mind off things. *Because I think you'll tell me the truth this time.* Don't you want closure?

I wonder if he will answer.

The woman subsides to whimpers. Water bubbles faintly with each cry and the part of me terrified by the sound wants to say, "Please stop." But that would be intruding and I don't want to be that person who shushes instead of comforts. "Are you okay?"

No reply. Not from her or the phone.

I bellow again for help, even though it's futile. I try to slither forward, sideways, backward, but get only pain.

Please don't leave me, Daniel. In the text is an echo of my barefooted self standing on a timber veranda in the early morning chill, watching him pack the Jag. Only I hadn't said the words aloud back then. I had just let him leave. A part of me had been glad.

*

They don't tell you how fast the end can arrive when you commission the bunker. They don't tell you that about a lot of things.

That's as true for marriage as it is for apocalypses.

*

There is 18% charge remaining. I check my apps to ensure nothing is draining power in the background. I haven't much bbbattery. Please say something.

The cold makes my thumb jitter on the *b*. He will notice. He will fret more. I correct my spelling before pressing *send*.

*

We used to have silent dinners. Texting work, other people, Facebook, Twitter: anything to have a meal together without conversing across the table.

How fitting that our phones are all that link us now.

*

Commitment.

It's an accusation he's flung before, undefined as monkey-poo. A vague buzzword. It might hold truth, but not the whole truth.

Okay. And? I need more than that.

What do you want me to say? We had different definitions of that so we fell apart.

I was committed!

You were THERE, Tash. It's not the same thing. Now can we drop it? I don't want to end on who did what and when. It's not important.

It is. Look, pretend I'm not on the other end. *Please don't pretend I'm not on the other end.* Pretend it's your diary and everything is going up in nuclear fire and no one will ever read it.

Tash!

What?

This is not the time for joking.

It's the last and only time for it.

My back burns with immobility, my thighs with compression. My feet are numb blocks that could be anywhere; I half expect them to bob past like icebergs. The water ripples in languid circles as I try to shift position.

You were always somewhere else, even when you were beside me.

We both had our lives, Dan. So I was absent-minded.

It was more than that, Tash. You didn't want ties. Not to me or anyone.

But we got married! This line checkmates his argument, but I don't press *send*. I can't. My finger stalls above the button.

We got married. Nothing is more committed than that, surely. So why can't I use it as my argument?

The sunken copier papers fan out around me. Fine debris has settled on their white faces with the obscure shadowiness of photographs emerging from developer brine. In my mind they solidify into wedding photos. Daniel beaming with all his teeth and... me... photograph-perfect, dying inside.

I had walked the aisle like someone beginning a life sentence. Not so much a joyous union as an inevitable one. Our parents had expected it. He had expected it. All our friends had expected it. Not in a pushy way—I could have said no—just

a natural, lazy progression of dating and being thought of as Daniel-and-Tash and liking each other enough to make it a regular and exclusive thing.

I hadn't wanted a house. Rentals were easier dissolved. No kids either: kids were not. When I think about it, the few choices I *had* fought for in our marriage had been in the expectation of it ending. Even when things seemed good.

Man, I was even working as a temp when the ceiling fell in.

My phone chimes: Tash? Are you okay? I'm sorry. It's not your fault. We were just two different people.

Different people: one who never watched The News; one who convinced us to walk into a showroom and commission a bunker. Because people like me have a special knack for changing winds. We seek them out.

It was my idea to buy the bunker together. That was a commitment. *Practically* a home.

I almost hear his bitter laugh. You do realize people buy bunkers for times when there are no other options? I didn't want to be your last option, Tash.

My phone beeps a battery warning. The water is lapping about my elbows. The shivers are coming in waves now. My jaw chatters; my throat emits involuntary grunts of cold.

The other woman has fallen silent.

My last option? Was that how I saw him? Somehow it had never felt like that at the time. I had loved him, but amidst all the mind-clutter and *other stuff* I had parked him like an old Jag and expected him to be there when I needed.

I really was awful, wasn't I?

Oh Tash...

He actually adds the ellipsis and I hear him saying my name in that quietly exasperated way of his. *Tash... you're being unreasonable. Tash... I asked you to pay the gas. Tash... I was talking to you; okay, so what did I just say?*

*

A memory surfaces: us picking out bunker décor, flicking through endless webpages for items we could bear to be surrounded by, things we might die surrounded by. Adornments for a tomb: daisy-patterned coffee cups and a kanji-daubed teapot in place of mummified cats, and hearts in jars.

“Oh Tash...” he’d said. “What’s the point of curtains?”

“You chose the carpet. I choose the curtains. That’s how it’s done.”

“But there are no windows in a bunker, my darling.”

A minor argument, but more informative than we’d realized at the time. A sign I was going through the motions of what was *expected in a marriage* without fully engaging.

Marriage: carpet plus curtains. Check. Move on.

*

Something is buzzing distantly. On. Off. *Burrrr*. Silence. *Burrrr*. Silence. *Electrical shorting?*

The new sound occupies the void left by the woman. I call to her. “Hey, are y-you still there? Say s-s-something.”

Groan. Cry. Let me know you are still alive.

The air is thinner; it’s not my imagination. My breathing digs deeper now, works hard to draw enough oxygen. *Like breathing syrup...*

Tash? Are you still there?

You weren’t a last option, you know. I’m sorry I made you feel like that.

Another battery warning. The phone-light dims, throwing the space into shadow: curtains drawing to block out the sun.

Carpet and curtains. Floors and windows. Daniel and Tash. Sinking roots and flying free.

Do you remember how I wanted drapes for the bunker even though there were no windows? The ice is in my marrow; aching my bones. I take ages typing now, ages to remove the shiver-induced duplicates and misspellings.

You made me draw squares and hung curtains over them.

Yes. Do you see?

You needed the hope of windows, even if they didn't exist?

My eyes well. I didn't want to forget freedom. It was never a lack of love.

There is a long pause. I held tight because I feared you'd walk. I thought you no longer wanted me.

I needed independence, Dan. But I wouldn't have left. And I hadn't. He had been the one to walk in the end, to suggest the trial-separation to *clear our heads*. I just hadn't fought him on it.

I did love you, Daniel. I still do. *In my wild, untetherable way.*

I love you too.

The burring is closer. The ceiling shivers. Pebbles plink into the water, sending out circles that cross and cross again, cobalt arcs in the phone-light.

Someone is shooting, Tash. There might be breaks okay. Nine little words, so matter-of-fact in text—

OMG stay safe! A dumb thing to say, really. The world is ending and I am still writing OMG like it is high-school: *OMG, did you see Gary's girlfriend?*

The delay is long. Long enough for the ceiling to press down, for the air to turn from syrup to molasses, for water to creep up my ribcage. Now when I shift, the waves are wider; they slosh softly as they touch the walls. The staccato burr from above continues; the hourglass-trickle and plink of dust and pebbles. I cry for help over and over, but my voice is reedy and faint even to my own ears.

Another 911 attempt sucks away more charge. I should rest the battery, but am too scared to turn the phone off in case it dies.

My shivers are full-body quakes now. Drowsiness is setting in. I wriggle in the water, making my back scream: *Stay awake!*

The phone chimes again, bringing me a new photo. He's closer to the city now. The tower of black is thinning, twisted spars materializing from the gloom. One was once View Global but I can't guess which.

There are red and blue lights in the smoke.

I am so fixated on the rescue lights I nearly miss the people in the foreground. Two adults and a young child, shell-shocked and filthy, hand-in-hand-in-hand as they race along the sidewalk: the kind of family Daniel had always wanted.

An idea I'd never entertained.

God, I had denied his nature as much as he'd denied mine.

It's getting bad out here, Tash. Tanks and roadblocks. I don't know if we are going to make it through.

We?

A word with atomic weight, the power to destroy worlds.

There's someone in the car with you. Failure to mention such an important detail makes the omission female. He doesn't have a lady boss, a secretary, someone he might have run from the workplace with, bellowed "get in my car" to.

There is a pause. And I know in that way women do.

You were the one who wanted a trial separation instead of a divorce. The one who wouldn't sign the papers. Who wouldn't split things. Wouldn't open the window for me.

And he accuses *me* of not committing to things.

We were having a late lunch.

So he'd been caught off guard in an ordinary moment too.

Were you at Candelos?

No. Jamie Sumner's. I wouldn't take anyone else to Candelos. That was our place.

I wonder if Candelos is still standing. If anyone will ever eat there again. Ever order the salmon fettucine marinara.

My phone warns me again, the light dims more. Critical now.

I'm not surprised he found someone else.

It was the same with our old cat. When she had died, he had wanted to visit the shelter right away, not because he didn't care about her passing, but because he could not see life without a cat.

I had told him I wasn't ready to replace her memory. But in retrospect, I hadn't wanted the hassle. Another tether. Something living I might have to stay for or wrestle for custody over.

Are you there? There's been a gap from my end. True to form, he's fretting in the void, filling in the blanks.

You should have signed the divorce papers. That would have been the decent thing to do before taking up with someone else.

We have only been serious a month. I was going to tell you but this happened.

You're going to use the apocalypse as an excuse?

It's so ludicrous, I actually start giggling.

I want a ppphoto. This time, I leave the typos in to show him my suffering.

The photo will chew power, maybe even the last of it. But I need to know who she is, who he chose to replace his old cat.

Is she prettier than me? The thought flickers through my mind, natural and idiotic.

Is it weird that such a thought should still be the first one? Like we are still living normal lives, like I might bump into her at brunch; as if we won't soon be living in darkness, guided by voice and touch and the intermittent light of candles-for-special-occasions?

Shouldn't the question now be, is she warmer than me? Is she softer than me? Is her voice sexier than mine? Do her lips say the right things?

Is she the kind of girl who will take care of you as you deserve, Daniel? The kind of girl you can set me free for?

I don't have one.

Just takke one, Danniell.

I flinch as she enters my phone, turning my subterranean prison yellow-grey with her face, the fire and contrails and damaged vehicles beyond her. She is dirt-smudged, with a cut across one cheek. She is trying to smile in that awkward way people do when they are being polite in inappropriate circumstances. As a woman, she is probably wondering why he would do this to an ex, even one who asked for it, and there is apology in the grimace she directs toward the camera.

I like her, despite myself. She looks like someone who will appreciate his carpet and laugh and shake her head at the curtains I picked. A woman looking to grow roots instead of wings.

We might have gotten along over cocktails, conspired in restaurant bathrooms:
Daniel loves it when you touch him here. I might have gone to their wedding.

The battery is running on fumes. An exclamation point pronounces impending darkness.

The burring is getting nearer. Taking form. *Jackhammers. Someone is coming.*

“Help! Please!”

But they are a long way off. And I am so very cold.

*

They don’t tell you how fast the end can arrive when you commission the bunker. That’s as true for marriage as it is for apocalypses.

But you do have a choice over how you will meet that end.

*

I’m hhappy for yyyou, Daniel.

And because he won’t know if I’m being sarcastic, I add a heart emoji. A heart emoji at the end of the world because, even now, I wouldn’t want him to take the wrong idea to the grave.

Hey, what’s up with your typing? Are you okay?

Just ccold. Love you forever, Dani—

It’s almost pretty, the dying moment of my phone; the last of the light. A vivid cycling of blue pixels and a decrescendo of notes. A digital *uh oh*, far too whimsical for this space.

Pure darkness.

The trickle and slop of water. Leaching-cold.

So sleepy. Nowhere to lay my head but the water.

The jackhammers really are a long way off, distant as circling helicopters. It's almost worse to hear the digging, to feel the gentle patter of ceiling in my hair, to have come so close to rescue.

I don't think they will get here in time.

But who knows? Maybe they will break through a wall, find a crooked stair, find the cavern, find me, and set me free—

Maybe Daniel and his new love will reach the bunker. Will find the cans I arranged alphabetically, the box of Hershey's I hid amongst the essentials as a surprise for him.

I wish them happiness.

But the new woman's grimace is seared into my mind, the fire and smoke framing her golden hair. Maybe they only make it another few miles. Maybe there is a downed bridge, a roadblock, another explosion, a hail of bullets. Maybe mine is the better end.

Maybe no one will hide in the bunker. Maybe it will be found and cleaned out in some future peacetime, long after the Hershey's have passed their use-by date.

Maybe one day there will be a sign out the front: *For sale or lease, one living space, formerly a bunker. Imagine the life you might have.*

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SECOND PLACE

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My Song for Majabin

by T. L. Sherwood

Majabin is only eleven. It is almost planting time when I first learn her name. A few years ago, before they went into the hills, foreigners came to our village. They burned the fields and told us we couldn't grow the flowers anymore. Burlap sacks of seed were handed out. Men who had never tilled our soil nor felt our rains told us to grow these new crops instead. Those of us who tried were disappointed, first with the yield, then with the prices the market paid.

Zuhayr has been my husband for eight years now. He and others learned to plant the new seeds around the perimeter to hide the poppies which thrive in our soil and provide enough income to survive.

For some in the village, games of chance hold more hope for survival than growing crops. Zuhayr joins them for a few throws of the dice every so often. I do not mind as he rarely loses, though when he does he is ferocious.

After a windfall, he is cheerful as he tells us about the games. "Subhi was going to roll a seven. I just knew he would," Zuhayr says. He pauses and takes a long drink of sweet tea. The children, and even I, hold our breath waiting to hear the outcome. "But the dice decided my cousin should roll a four!" he declares

dramatically, slaps his hand on thigh then bursts into laughter. The children eagerly join him.

“One hundred to four hundred then all the way down to seventy. Ah, such is the whim of the die.” He shakes his head slowly.

“And Hanif?” I ask when he isn’t mentioned in the story. Because of his repeated losses, Hanif is often a character in my husband’s tales. He has one wife, one daughter and very little else.

“Hanif owes three thousand now.” While the amount changes, it increases more often than not.

“It is a good thing we don’t need it.” This is how I end the conversations when he talks of the games. I want our children to understand that gambling is a pastime for those who may stand the loss.

On a cloudy day, foreigners return to the village. A few days later, Zuhayr takes me outside so the children cannot hear. I know the last of the new crops haven’t sold well and the return of the military men to the area has made everyone anxious. Clashes between people that should be smoothed over with calm words are not. The presence of guns puts pride and violence into the minds of ordinarily sane men. I fear Zuhayr has called me outside to tell me that the recent stress in the village has resulted in the death of my friend Jalyn at the hands of her husband.

“I talked to the elders today,” he begins, looking not at me, but at the light from a fire in the distance. “They say I should take Majabin as a wife.”

“Majabin?” I ask. I am confused.

“Majabin. Hanif’s daughter.”

“The girl? She is a child, not a wife!”

“There is no other way he can pay his debts.”

“But she is too young, Zuhayr. Be reasonable.”

Zuhayr stands and walks inside. My argument is ignored. The elders of the village are more powerful than guns in tribal affairs.

I make the calming tea for myself that evening. I remain outside and look at the stars. I think angrily of Hanif and how he can't walk away from the tables. I try, but cannot imagine my own father being so weak nor so cruel. I curse the uniformed men who stroll through our village. I fear I will soon be burdened with another child, one that is not my own.

*

Majabin comes to our home. There is little ceremony for the marriage. She wakes easily and plants as diligently as any of us who work the soil. Eagerly, Majabin helps with the meals and laundry. In the fields, I work near her. I tell her what to expect when the time comes, her duty as a wife. I tell her so she will not be as startled as I had been.

My two children are quick to befriend her. Faiz is as tall and as lanky as I imagine Zuhayr was at that age. He chases Majabin with a snake he catches near the well. She runs away; I see her smile. My daughter Kali is a cautious child. I often think she arrived too soon and is not prepared for the harshness of life. I often hear her and Majabin whispering in the dark about Majabin's old home.

Night after night I pleasure Zuhayr—exhaust him—so he won't go to her later on. This is successful until I grow heavy with my fifth child. Subhi, Zuhayr's cousin and my friend Jalyn's husband, notices first.

"If you were my wife, it wouldn't be so long between babes," Subhi proclaims loudly while we are standing near the well. Jalyn and I exchange glances. She looks away in sadness. I remain silent.

Majabin asks about my changing body. I tell her things do not always end the way we would like. I tell her about the two I left nameless, each one's breath gone before a new morning could arrive. She asks and I take her to the graves near the edge of our property where the albizzia grows. A small ribbon pinned there two days later shows me she cares. I am touched by her action.

Zuhayr asks about my condition in the morning. He is upset that there will be another child soon and curses me. When I cry, he is sorry. He kisses me. He says he will pray for an answer, then leaves for the gaming tables.

My children and my husband's new wife play a chasing game outside. Majabin tells Kali and Faiz a story about a gluttonous goat. The story makes them laugh. We eat our dinner quietly, without Zuhayr. After my children fall asleep, I ask Majabin to follow me out to where I am making an extra potent calming tea for Zuhayr that evening.

When I first came to this village, Zuhayr and I often fought loudly at night. One morning after I had been slapped many times, Jalyn called me over to her house. She told me the secret of a happy union is as simple as sleep and sleep is easy to find in calming tea. She took some opium that she kept hidden and explained that if all the tea one makes for meals is sweet, a man finding a glass of sweet, calming tea near his bedside will not think it any different than the brew he drinks during the day. She showed me the amounts to use and told me to insist that Zuhayr drink it when his mood was foul. She told me that enmity in one family's home is never secret in the tribe and that ill-will reverberated easier than happiness.

I want to explain this to Majabin, but she is tired. I give her one mug of the tea and tell her it is for Zuhayr only and that she must insist he drink it if he comes to her room in the night. After she leaves, I cradle the other mug I made for him and look out at the stars. It is peaceful. I wish I could capture the stillness of the night. A cool breeze blows. I go inside and kiss my children goodnight.

*

Loud, crashing sounds pierce my dreams. I roll over, wishing them away until I realize they are real. I wake to the woeful, wounded sobbing that no child should know. I rush past my own children, toward the sound.

Zuhayr growls. The high treble coils into a howl. He has lost at the dice game. Always before, his losing has been maddening to just me. No matter the hour, he'd spread my legs and thrust until his hardness came, then the release—brusque, brutal, painful. Objections made the ordeal worse. I learned to stay

quiet, for after, in the morning, Zuhayr would be sorry and offer chocolate. Majabin does not know this. She is pugnacious with screams and slaps.

“Leave her be, you worthless dog!” I shout. Zuhayr looks up at me.

“Mommy!” Kali screams in the next room.

“Kali! Stay there! Stay quiet!” I hear her sobbing. I walk toward the cot. “I should kick you in the snout and cut off your cowardly tail!”

It is then that I see the blade he uses to harvest the new crops. It is freshly sharpened and resting on the floor. He grabs it and comes toward me.

“You will die!” he threatens. I know he will not kill me. Though his knife glints in the light of the moon, I know he will regain his senses.

There is a sickening sound. Hardened clay against dark hair. Zuhayr’s eyes look afraid, and even though he frightens me, I want to comfort him. His eyes scatter, looking but not seeing. The earthen jar Majabin threw at him is shattered. The pieces fall to the floor, then he falls and I am knocked down, his body drapes partially over mine.

I don’t know how long I sleep or if it is sleep. I am roused by Zuhayr’s snoring. When I open my eyes, I can make out Majabin’s form hunched over on the cot. She is weeping. I call to her softly. She doesn’t respond. It is then that I see the mug in her hands.

“Majabin! No! Spit it out! Majabin! Right now!”

Her breathing is so slow. I pull myself up from under Zuhayr’s leaden body. I go to the cot and hold the shivering Majabin in my arms, just as her mother would.

As I rock her, I sing. I curse the world for the madness it had brought. I curse the rains that have not come. I curse the soldiers that have. Tears sting my eyes, then my cheeks. I pray for her to be all right, knowing that praying for her death might be kinder. I kiss the top of her little girl head. I sing the song of Majabin into the dawn.

THIRD PLACE

Writer, poet and English teacher. Jakob enjoys writing suspense, science fiction, magical realism, speculative fiction and poetry. He's inspired by incredible and bizarre true stories, folklore, and he's currently working on his debut novel.

One in a Thousand

by Jakob Ryce

Three jumpers over five days. Terri had witnessed one of them – a young man who had caught his girlfriend in an affair. But he didn't exactly *jump*, he drove his car straight over the cliff.

Graff's Point had become a popular site over the years, boasting the highest coastal chalk cliff in Victoria. If you were a tourist you were guaranteed one of four things: spectacular views of the bay, whale watching, a photo with a fur seal, or you might witness a *felo-de-se*: a suicide. And the numbers had been increasing. Perhaps death had a ripple effect—suicide by osmosis, as if some unseen force were calling them to the scarp. And albeit it was somewhat *in vogue*—it remained a disturbing human endeavor; you don't see squirrels lining up to jump from mortal heights or dogs fashioning nooses.

But it wasn't so much the triggers we were interested in—our job was to catch the bullet before it left the gun, at least between our proverbial teeth. We came here to save people. I had saved twenty three souls since starting the Graff's Point Chaplaincy Team and had lost only one during my watch: a woman with terminal cancer.

I picked up my pace, heading up the embankment towards Graff's Point. Terri had radioed in a *code red*, which usually meant A: a potential jumper or B: an atypical tourist. The wind was fierce. Sometimes it was so strong I often wondered why people didn't just blow back up onto the landing like cloth puppets.

I could see the woman now—but she wasn't a woman, she was a teenager, I guessed about sixteen. She wore a pink cardigan which she tugged at the sleeves with tight fists and strapped to her shoulders was a floral blue backpack. She was alone.

"Hello there," I said.

She glanced over. Her eyes were hidden behind a pair of giant sunglasses that didn't fit her face. She froze a moment before turning her gaze back towards the precipice, and in doing so seemed to steel her resolve. I stood several meters away, my hands plunged deep into my pockets—a gesture of trust. "Magnificent view isn't it?" Under normal circumstances this would be a polite remark from one tourist to another, and perhaps these *were* normal circumstances—I hadn't decided yet.

For a long time there was only the sound of the whipping wind until she looked at me sidelong and said: "How long do you think it would take before I hit the ground?"

A: a potential jumper.

She shuffled her feet forward, now she was no more than 2 inches from the ledge: a 162 meter drop. I clenched my jaw and swallowed.

Not today, please not today.

If I felt any terror I couldn't show it. If a person had reached the end of their rope then *you*—the emergency worker, the Good Samaritan, the Counsellor—were their frayed end; their lifeline. I made my mouth into a hard line, adopting a more serious expression. "About four to five seconds depending on your body weight," I said.

“What about the wind?” she said.

I wanted to explain my puppet theory but didn’t think it was very scientific. “I’d say... someone of your small frame might gain a few seconds.”

She didn’t reply, she was too busy biting her bottom lip, contemplating the drop. She removed her sunglasses. She had pretty blue-grey eyes that spoke volumes, but of desperation *not* death. I felt my breath loosen, my body relax. This girl was not going to jump.

But that didn’t mean my job was done.

“Do you know what the biggest problem with jumping is?”

She glanced up. “What?”

“One in a thousand survive.”

In all truth, I was yet to meet a survivor. A fall from this height would turn your bones to pulp, and the higher you fell the heavier you weighed.

She wrinkled her brow and shook her head. “That’s bullshit. No one could survive that.”

“Oh... you’d be surprised... one in a thousand,” I repeated, inching towards her.

Her gaze followed my feet nervously. “That’s far enough.”

I stopped. “OK, OK,” I said, showing my palms. “What’s your name?”

“Eve,” she said. “So are you... beach patrol or something?”

I gave a genuine smile. “No, but I am a type of life saver. I’m Father Mathiew, or Leon if you prefer. Local clergy at your service.”

“Ha, you’re a priest. *Great*. Come to hear my last confession have ya father?”

“Not your *last* I hope... plenty more sins to come,” I said, attempting a light tone.

“Right.”

“Actually, I was hoping we might continue this conversation over coffee and cake. My shout.”

She looked away again, out at the maiden voyage running through her head.

Keep her talking.

That was how you saved them – you kept them talking. I took another step closer. “What’s troubling you Eve?”

“Oh you know... *life*,” she said.

It was then I noticed the fresh bruises along her neck, scarlet stains that ran down to her collar bone.

Keep it light.

“I’ve never seen someone pack a bag for heaven before,” I joked.

Her bottom lip quivered and tears pricked her eyes, welled up and spilled down her cheeks. She was swaying dangerously close to the edge of the bluff.

I wasn’t talking. “I was a terrible minister,” I blurted out. “Sometimes, I can’t believe I was ordained.”

She didn’t reply, just frowned, parted her lips and then closed them.

“During my seminary training I worked two jobs,” I continued, “an orderly at night at the local hospital and a cafe over the weekends. Sometimes I was so tired I’d fall asleep during confession.”

“Seriously?”

I nodded. “Gave a whole new meaning to *sleeping on the job*. People would wait to be absolved and when I didn’t reply they’d continue confessing, until they finally heard me snoring.”

There was a gleam in her eyes, she shook her head and smirked. “Worst priest ever.”

“Oh, I wasn’t ordained back then, I was still a deacon, and not a very good one at that ... I was late all the time, forgot complete passages of scripture, improvised my sermons...” I laughed. “I once had a woman confess her sin was impatience, so I absolved her immediately.”

She gave a light chuckle. “I bet you need a lot of patience for *this* job,” she said, and her gaze drifted back towards the deep-blue waters of the bay that stretched into a perfect crescent.

I recognized the guilt in her tone: I’m a burden. But they were never a burden and always a test. “Not so much patience but persistence. Every time a person jumps from this rock face they take a bit of us with them.”

She closed her posture. “Why do you think so many people come here to die?” she asked.

It was not a question I entertained. Some questions were better left unanswered. Perhaps it was the natural splendor of the place, the way the ocean locked with the horizon, like the warm glow that seeps around a doorframe – inviting in the weary traveler. Perhaps Eve expected a verse wrapped in a proverb, but I’d been semi-retired since my wife had died and rarely quoted scripture unless in a sermon. Perhaps I was the *worst priest ever* and it was the *man* who saved people.

“I don’t know Eve, each have their reasons. But what I *do* know is that we’re all flawed creatures. No one is infallible but we *are* redeemable,” I continued, choosing my words carefully. “Whether you believe it or not, heaven is right here, *now*... not out there somewhere. It all depends on what eyes we choose to see with.” She studied me as if my words might denote a lack of faith – as if the afterlife had become an afterthought. “It’s the small miracles, the tiny sparks amidst a sea of darkness,” I said, closing the space between us. “That’s what you should hold on to... *hope*, it’s as vital as the air in our lungs. It’s what keeps us going.” I extended my hand and she studied it the way someone might study a stray dog before leaning in for a pat, then finally, she placed her slender hand in

mine. I felt a wave of relief wash over me as I led her away from the ledge and over to a park bench. There we sat in silence until finally she rested her head on my shoulder and began to sob. I gently stroked her hair and could feel warm tears painting the back of my neck.

“I’m a terrible person,” she murmured.

“No. No you’re not,” I said.

She lifted her head and wiped her face. Her eyes were as raw as two beets. “Worst girl ever,” she said, attempting a smile.

“Never,” I assured. “That’s just a lie in your head. You need to hold on to your truth, whatever that may be.” And as I spoke there was a sound, like a muffled bird upon the wind. For some reason I thought of my oldest boy Brandon, now married with children of his own.

She looped her skinny arms through her backpack and stood facing me, the waning afternoon sun catching her hair like silk. “Thank you Leon,” she said.

“What about that cup of coffee?”

“Thanks but... I’m OK.”

I leveled my eyes. “Do you have somewhere to go?”

A frail smile. “I do,” she said and turned to leave, then as if forgetting a set of keys, she paused. “I just wanted to be a mother, that’s all I wanted ... my *own* tiny spark,” she said.

I didn’t reply. An abortion? It was just one more reason that brought girls like Eve to Graff’s Point. I didn’t pursue the thought, just watched until her pink sweater and blue bag disappeared down the beaten path and released a long breath.

Another soul saved.

*

The next morning a text came through. It was Terri: Leon, I think you better get down here. I'm on the beach.

I didn't bother showering, just threw on some threads and left the house in a whirlwind. When I arrived I found Terri standing on the shore, her yellow rain jacket stood sharp against the bleached coastline. She was always the first on the scene—and to think she once stood teetering on that very cliff herself. How far she'd come.

The wind was brutal, tossing shrapnel and sand into the air. I shielded my eyes, spitting out grit while I walked. I could already see the misshapen body as I approached and my heart immediately sank.

A pink sweater.

Some of the knitting had frayed from the shoulder—but this girl wore a pair of black capris pants. Eve wore a denim skirt.

Someone else? Someone else.

And then I saw the blue backpack. She was still wearing her backpack. I felt a sudden wash of nausea come over me. I stooped forward and gazed out towards the spiteful sea. It was like God had formed a fist in the waves.

“Leon?” I heard Terri say. “Is it the girl?”

My eyes were a mix of tears and salt from the driving spindrift. I scooped up some courage and gazed back down at the body. She was flat on her stomach and her limbs were unnaturally splayed. I could tell her neck was broken due to the strange crook of her head, and her auburn hair, which covered most of her face, was now coarse and strewn with sand and bits of seaweed.

I gave a somber nod and knelt down, carefully removing the hair from her face. Her milky blue eyes were wide open, frozen. The gleam was long gone and she held a sudden, terrified look, as if she'd changed her mind a moment too late. It was true that the brain received signals at about one meter per second, so she may have hit the ground before she could really process what was happening.

People who had survived jumping from bridges often reported regretting it as soon as their feet left the railing.

I said a silent prayer before gently closing both her eyes—eyes that I had painfully misread.

I should've seen this, should've known.

On closer inspection I could see she had ruptured her skull on some sedimentary rock. Her hair was stained and matted with thick blood that had congealed from the cold, and a trickle of dried blood marked her pale lips.

“She’s been out here overnight,” I said. “She must’ve returned,” I felt my throat constrict, “just hours after she left me,” I shook my head wearily. “I don’t understand... she seemed OK.”

Terri didn’t answer, she had her head down; we both did. Four jumpers in six days. It was too much for anyone to bear. “So young... silly silly girl,” Terri finally said, her eyes capped in tears.

I carefully lifted the girl’s head. One side of her face was peppered with bits of shell and there was fresh dirt under her fingernails; dark like peat or compost. It struck me as odd. Had she survived impact and tried crawling? It was too horrible to imagine.

“Do you think it’s possible she somehow—”

“Listen,” Terri said, raising her hand. “Do you hear that?”

I listened, but all I could hear was the battering wind off the bay, the distant grumble of a seal, the orchestral clash of waves.

“You can’t hear that?”

“Hear *what* exactly?”

Terri frowned, her hand hung in the air like a conductor’s baton ready to strike.

“*There*,” she said.

I closed my eyes and focused: the rolling waves, the effervescent fizz of sand sliding back, the agitated sea air pushing in around my ears—but in between... yes... something else. Perhaps a gull on the breeze? No. The sound was closer – a smothered, suffocating wail.

Terri shot me a look. “What *is* that?”

Just then, a revelation.

“Oh dear God.” I glanced at the backpack and back to Terri and she covered her mouth with her hand. I unzipped the bag and a familiar sound instantly filled my ears. I could’ve slapped myself for not realizing it sooner. It was the crying of a newborn; a baby – somehow miraculously alive, cocooned inside the backpack. I reached in with both hands and carefully folded the infant into my arms. A boy, all salmon skin and wrapped in a football jersey—he couldn’t have been more than a month old. He was breathing. I gently touched his skin, he was surprisingly warm.

“He’s OK, he’s alright...”

Terri began to cry, repeating: “Oh God, dear God... a baby.”

She wanted me to hand him over right there, but I needed a moment. Here was a wonder, a small miracle – a spark of light against an immovable black tide that seemed to suck everything in. Here was Eve’s tiny spark; the hope I told her to hold on to. His miniature fingers clasped around my hand. I smiled. “Hello there little man,” I said and realized my eyes were leaking. Then all at once he ceased his wailing and gazed up at me with soft dark eyes. I held him close to my chest and waded out into the foam. My heart was leaping in my chest and I felt each tear being plucked away by the shifting blow as I rocked the child in my arms.

I looked up and took in a stuttering breath. The morning had brought strings of white stratus which crisscrossed against a gradient of blue, obscuring darker clouds beyond. The scent of rain hung in the air.

“Thank you,” I whispered to the sky, “thank you, thank you.”

It wasn't possible, wasn't possible at all but here he was. I thought of the boy's mother flayed out on the beach like some mistaken catch. All that was left of her were broken bones—*no*, all that was left of her was right here, nestled in my arms. I knew the story: teenage mother, broken family, abusive father, abusive boyfriend, abusive everything... and then the last act: child services.

The world was a divided place, too many adrift, each without a compass and no lighthouse to guide them. Maybe Eve was tired of being divided, like a demarcated piece of property. Perhaps she just wanted to feel whole—broken but complete for once in her short, delicate life. *He* was her wholeness. Who was I to judge, who was *anyone* to judge? Who was God to judge? I imagined Eve saying.

The infant studied me with a puzzled expression, was probably wondering why this strange man had a white bush growing out of his face. "You're safe now... you're safe," I whispered.

*

We watched as the police and paramedics trudged up the coast towards us. Watched as they zipped up Eve into their own blue bag. I sat with the child in the ambulance as one of the paramedics wrapped him in a small blanket, administered formula, rattled off questions. I rode all the way to the hospital and every healthy cry was music to my ears.

And in that moment I knew, he was my cross to bear and I would be happy to carry it. I thought of Eve. I had failed her. I contemplated my sin: vanity. And I thought of a passage from Psalms:

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knitted me together in my mother's womb.

One day I will tell him how beautiful she was. Eve, his mother, the first mother. One day I will tell him, he was one in a thousand.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Richard Zwicker is an English teacher living in Vermont, USA, with his wife and beagle. His short stories have appeared in *Penumbra*, *Perihelion Science Fiction*, *Mythic*, and other semi-pro markets.

Dead Stop

by Richard Zwicker

This is the city-state. Here Athenians, like all citizens, wrestle with time. You can weigh time down with actions, but then it will slip away even faster. You can grind it to a halt with thought, but tomorrow arrives just the same, while your thoughts slip away. The third option is to go about your business as best you can. Whatever you choose, occasionally time will toss you into the Augean stables before Hercules has cleaned them, and you'll need help getting out. That's where I come in. My name is Phokus. I wear a tunic.

I was sitting behind my detective stand in the Agora, hoping to drum up some business, but I encountered more peddlers than customers. Not wanting to completely waste my time, I pulled out a scroll and caught up on my Aristotle. The debate between who was better, Aristotle or Plato, raged on, but since my ex-wife left me for a Spartan, I'd had my fill of the Platonic.

A rough hand on my shoulder interrupted my reading. I looked up and recognized the bearded face of Neophytus. Once a muscular Eretrian slave, he won his freedom because after his owner died, nobody would take him. His name meant "newly planted," but because of his weakness for wine, "newly potted" was more apt.

“Phokus, how is business?” he asked, bowing low and teetering. “Has someone hired you to find spelling mistakes in that scroll?”

“The road to the truth is lined with many sheets of papyrus,” I said, not eager to argue the relevance of “Posterior Analytics” with an ass like Neophytus. “What brings you to my humble detective stand?”

Neophytus frowned, the lines on his face screaming *dissolution* through his facial hair. “I was given a message for you of a personal nature, but out of consideration for your privacy, I put it in the back of my mind where I wouldn’t dwell on it.”

This statement made no sense unless one considered Neophytus’s priorities. I handed him three shekels.

He took them. “Money compromises us all.” He bowed again. “Your father is dying and wishes to see you at once.”

“My father died three years ago.”

“Not your stepfather. It was Spertias I spoke to, on the Hill of the Nymphs.”

Spertias and I had a distant relationship, largely because he had never admitted to being my father. My mother insisted there had been no one else at the time, and though they never married, I believed her. Spertias countered with puerile questions for me, such as, “How do you know? Were you there?” The man my mother eventually married became my father in every other way. What could Spertias possibly say to me now? Curiosity insisted I find out.

The Hill of the Nymphs was a short walk west of the Agora. I found Spertias lying supine, the slope placing his bald head higher than his dirty, sandaled feet. A bristly beard covered only a few of his many wrinkles.

“If you’re ill, shouldn’t you be at home?” I asked. Home for Spertias was a small room in the back of an inn.

“Why should I pay for the next month’s rent if I’m dying? Besides, the owner has been nagging me for the room.”

Knowing Spertias, the nagging was also for the back rent. “What’s wrong with you?”

He raised a fist. “I’m old! Life is a death sentence. But that’s all right. I look forward to the underworld. Quiet, no blinding sun in your eyes, no demands. If anyone asks me, *What are you going to do for the rest of eternity?* I can tell them, *Nothing!*” Despite the talk of death, his voice rang out strong as ever.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

He laughed, his body shaking until he choked. “When it’s too late, you ask! You can have sexual congress with the Trojan Horse for all I care! May a splinter impale your manhood!”

The only time Spertias reached out to me was when he wanted something, but he always gift-wrapped it in abuse. I just had to wait him out. “Are you in any pain?”

His face softened. “It’s the old problem. I’ve never been able to balance my humors.”

I’d heard that lament before. With Spertias, choler had always crowded out the phlegmatic, melancholic, and sanguine. “So, if there’s nothing I can do...”

His hand shot out and clamped my ankle, like one of the mouths of Scylla. “Now that you mention it, there is. I’ll be gone in a day or two, but it gets cold at night. Athens is full of miscreants who don’t respect the dying. If you could just offer me some shelter for the short time I have left.” When I said nothing, he added, “I will admit there is a possibility that I *am* your father. And I would be happy to say that...” he waved his hand in the air... “all this will soon be yours. Except I don’t *have* anything, but don’t you always say it is the thought that counts?”

In my business, thoughts always counted. And though there was a time when I’d longed to know him better, now the thought of spending quality end time with my supposed father roiled my senses into a choleric soup. But eventually, I too would await my last stroll with Hermes. So I helped him walk to my home. Once we got going, I was surprised and a little alarmed to see a spring in his step.

Lodged in my home, Spertias made few demands on me, and each day I left for work he assured me he'd try to be dead by the time I got back. After three days, however, he seemed more robust than Zeus and Poseidon on a double date.

"This is infuriating," he said as we sat my dinner table. "Is it possible Hermes doesn't know where you live?"

"I've never known him to get lost."

"The problem is the gods do what they want. What hope is there for people like me to be good when I have such flawed role models? Listen, I need you to throw me off a cliff."

"I'll pass on that," I said.

"Where's your filial devotion?"

"It doesn't extend to patricide."

Two more days passed, but Spertias didn't. To express his disappointment in me, he started breaking cups and throwing pans on the floor. When people passed by my window, he yelled what an ungrateful son I was. In the interest of sanity, I decided to call his bluff... and took him to one.

*

I looked over the cliff to see a drop of fifty body lengths. There was no question that a fall would be fatal. But when push came to shove, I couldn't do it, but I didn't need to because, without warning, Spertias leaped over the edge. His wail shook my insides so much that I also fell, but backward, onto the safe ground. He landed with a sickening thud. I lay still for a moment, then heard, "Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, that hurt!" I picked myself up and inched toward the edge of the cliff. Below, to my astonishment, I saw Spertias upright, jumping up and down in pain. Nobody could have survived that fall unless the gods had intervened. But who, and why?

I retreated down the path that circled the hill until I reached my father.

“This is outrageous!” he said, still hopping. “Hermes, the god of thieves, has stolen my death.”

“Why would he do that?”

“You’re a detective. Figure it out!”

“Are you hiring me? You don’t have any money.”

He shrugged. “I’ll owe it to you.”

I thought, *you sure will*. “Why do you want so badly to die?”

He frowned, then his mouth hung open. “I never had control of my life. Each day happened, and I reacted, ranted, made excuses. But I never initiated or even planned. Will you help me control my death?”

His sincerity made me feel sad. “I will try.”

Seeking the help of a specialist, I went to the temple of Apollo, where Dorkas, a seer, practiced her art. The line to see her stretched to the street.

It was a long wait.

When I stepped into Dorkas’s room, it was so dark that I could see little more than the outline of her robe. Pungent incense burned, making it hard to breathe.

“What would you ask Dorkas?” a voice like crackling fire asked.

“When will my father Spertias die?” I asked.

I was expecting an answer like *On a day like any other* or *Not before or after his time*. I received something quite different: “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? I thought the future was like a rolled-out scroll for you.”

“In most cases that is so, but no one has died in the past five days. It’s as if the underworld has been closed for remodeling.”

“That’s ridiculous. Nothing changes in the underworld.”

“I can tell you only what I see. If you think the line to talk to me is long, the line to the underworld is longer.”

“Can you tell me why?”

I saw a slight smile. “I can make up something.”

“Forget it.”

Hades was many things, but he was not a shirker of his duties. Nobody wanted to die, except my father, but if humans had suddenly become immortal, Greece would overpopulate and everyone would starve... and still not die. Then again, maybe we’d become like the gods and no longer need to eat, or do anything. I’d long believed that our responses to our limitations made us, in some respects, superior to the gods. What if those limitations vanished? There was no way I could reach Hades, but as it was summer, there was one goddess who might be able to explain what was happening: Persephone.

Athens had its own cult of Persephone. Its members spent most of their time talking to plants. I found its leader, a big bearded man with oppressive cheer, at Persephone’s temple. He greeted me with an embarrassing hug. When I gasped that I wanted to talk to Persephone, he said no one could do that directly, except Hades and Demeter, and him, of course. He’d be happy to forward my message. I told him I wanted to know why Hades wasn’t accepting anyone into the underworld.

His face creased. “Persephone doesn’t like to talk about the underworld during her months above ground.”

I grew impatient. “When Hades abducted her, her mother Demeter threatened to keep everything from growing until she was returned. Now nobody is dying. It could be just as catastrophic. Anything she knows would be appreciated.”

The man nodded. “I will ask.”

He appeared to go into a trance, which lasted for many drops of a water clock. He then smiled and said, “She says to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.”

When I returned home, Spertias was not happy with me. “You need to go to the source,” he said.

“I’ve done some work for Zeus, but I have no connections with Hades. No one does, until they die.”

“Then you need to go to the underworld and straighten this out.”

“You’re the one that wants to get there so bad. Why don’t you go?”

He thought. “I will... if you take me.” When I didn’t respond, he added, “If the situation was reversed, I’d do it for you.”

“You’ve never done ANYTHING for me!”

He shrugged. “The situation was never reversed.”

It never would be, but he was my father, and something had to be done.

“I will take you.”

*

Before I left, I had to tell Iola, a magistrate’s daughter I’d been spending time with since the dissolution of my marriage. As some of my past cases involved exposing corruption among Iola’s father’s peers, I wasn’t welcome in her house, and she being a woman, her father didn’t like me taking her out of that house, and certainly not into mine. He did let me sit next to her on their front steps, or bring her to the Agora. When I picked up Iola at her home, she looked stunning, her dark hair piled on her head, her supple body in a flowing white robe. That this vision of beauty was forced to spend most of her time hidden indoors infuriated me. As always, her father asked me what my intentions were. I told him to spend time with a young woman I cared about. He asked why I couldn’t spend that time in front of his eyes, which were blazing with such anger that I thought his body would explode. I told him walking was good for health. So was distance from his oppressive nurturing style, but I kept that to myself.

Once we had reached a safe distance from her home, I told her I was going to the underworld.

“Are you joking?” she asked.

“No. My father wishes to end his life, but something has happened to Hades. No one has died for five days.”

“Isn’t that good?”

“It’s hard to believe, but if no one dies, the world would overpopulate and starve. Also, do you know what Zeus and Chronos did to their fathers? Castrated and imprisoned them in Tartarus. That’s nothing compared to what I’ll do if I have to live with Spertias for the rest of eternity. I must take him to the underworld and solve the problem.”

“All right. I will go with you.”

I expected that. Iola was always brushing up against the restraints of Athenian society. For women, it was impossible not to.

“It’s too dangerous,” I said.

“Then it’s too dangerous for you,” she said. “What if you don’t come back?”

I didn’t want to think about that, which made me feel selfish. “Then you will meet someone else and make them very happy.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Of course not. But something is wrong. I can ignore it, or try to do something about it. Once you start ignoring things, you’re not really living.” I was interrupted by the rumbling of a speeding horse cart. I commented, “Someone is in a hurry.” The rumbling increased. “Maybe we should get off the street.” But before we could, the cart careened into view and right at us. Iola stood mesmerized. I pulled her away, but not fast enough. The cart, which appeared to be driverless, clipped us, throwing us both to the ground. Her scream has been drilled into my memory.

“Iola!” I yelled.

At first, she didn’t speak and I feared the worst. Miraculously, I seemed to be all right. I raced to Iola and put my hand over her heart. It still beat. I ran my hand over her forehead, not knowing what to do. There was no blood, but mine raced inside my body like a crazed prisoner demanding escape.

“What happened?” she asked, her eyes opening. Though sore, in a few moments, she was walking again. Thanks to the gods, we had escaped serious injury. We decided she would not tell her parents, as they would only blame me. I kissed her goodnight and promised I would do everything in my power to return.

Halfway home, I stopped in my tracks. *No one was dying*. What if we were meant to be killed in the accident? If I solved the problem in the underworld, would Iola and I die? I slept little that night.

*

Spertias and I couldn’t go to the underworld without help. The entrance was rumored to be in southern Greece, near Alepotrypa. To travel there by ourselves would be almost as dangerous as going through the caverns. I had done a favor for Zeus when he’d hired me to find out who had stolen fire. Though I’d never say it to him, he owed me. Just to be on the safe side, though, I figured I’d better do a sacrifice. I didn’t have a bull, but when I heard the runaway horse of the night before was going to be put to death, I convinced its owner to allow me to take care of it.

As we sacrificed the horse, I addressed the sky. “Zeus, for reasons we don’t understand, Hades has stopped accepting dead people into the underworld. This is not a good situation for anyone. We, your humble servants, wish to go to the source and see if we can fix things. Any help you can send our way would be appreciated.”

We waited, and soon an old man appeared. His white hair and beard were askew, and he was gasping.

“Hera was accusing me of seducing a young woman,” he said. “Despite my protestations of innocence, she refused to believe my lies. Your request came at an opportune time.”

“Can you tell us anything about our problem?” I asked, not interested in his Olympian love life.

“I try not to get involved in Hades’s affairs,” said Zeus. “He has his realm and I have mine. Still, this is unusual. I could send Hermes, but perhaps it would be better if you went first. Hades still hasn’t forgiven Hermes for delivering the message that Persephone must live on the surface nine months out of the year. The last I heard, Hades was transporting a particularly disagreeable person to Tartarus. That’s where I would look first.”

“Tartarus?” That was where the most evil people were punished for eternity. “How are we supposed to get there?”

Zeus smiled. Whenever anything good happens, they say, *The gods smiled on you*. But whenever I saw Zeus smile, I got nervous.

“I’ll point you in the right direction and protect you,” he said. “Take any short cuts that present themselves. If you solve the problem, I’ll reward you.”

The next thing we knew, the ground below us opened up and we fell into a dimly lit cavern, though what lit it, I had no idea.

I turned to Spertias. “Let’s walk.”

*

I liked walking because it gave you a sense of the land. If you encountered a hill, your legs felt the rise and fall. After half a day of it, however, I would have gladly sacrificed my knowledge of hills for the power of instant transportation. Another problem was the sameness of the terrain: paces and paces of cavern, about one and a half human lengths high, two lengths wide, carved into jagged rock. Spertias lagged behind me.

“Why didn’t Zeus just transport us to the underworld instead of to the entrance?” asked Spertias. “For that matter why is the underworld so far away? Everyone needs it. Why aren’t there branch locations? Underworld West?”

Before I could offer an answer, I heard footfalls in front of us. Someone was approaching. In the dim light a shaggy, bearded man appeared. His pace was deliberate, as one might expect coming from the underworld. As there was barely room for two people walking abreast, I moved to the left, but he went right through me.

“Who are you?” I asked.

He looked at us as if we were gadflies. “Orpheus,” he sneered.

“Orpheus?” repeated Spertias. “Where’s your lyre?”

“I like to travel light. Besides, everyone I encounter asks me to play a tune.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be leading Eurydice out?” I asked.

“She’s fallen behind. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

“Is this the way to Tartarus?” I asked.

He laughed. “Keep walking. You can’t miss it.” He turned and marched away.

Spertias turned to me. “Didn’t Orpheus leave the underworld a long time ago?”

“If that was Orpheus, I’m Dionysus.”

“I wish you were. I could use a drink.”

We walked on. My ankles hurt from the rocky ground, but I kept placing one foot in front of the other. I had Spertias walk in front of me, and several times I bumped into him, causing us both to stagger, stare at each other, then resume our walk. My drowsy ambulation reminded me of how much I sleepwalked through life. I was roused by a scream, then Spertias leapt backward, crashing into me.

“What happened?” I asked.

“It’s only because of what *didn’t* happen that I’m able to tell you!” He pointed two paces ahead to a hole in the ground, about the length of a man in diameter.

“I thought you liked abysses.”

“Not if they don’t kill me.”

I picked up a rock and dropped it. We never heard it hit bottom. “This is the hole to Tartarus. You jump in and you’re there in a day or two.” As Spertias looked unimpressed, I added, “Zeus told us to take any shortcuts.”

Spertias shook his head. “A sign would be nice.”

Neither of us wanted to be the first to leap in, so we agreed to hold hands. I reminded Spertias that Hades was nothing if not just. Though we didn’t have an exit strategy, if he was in some kind of problem, and we helped, he would reward us. If he wasn’t, perhaps we could convince him of our good intentions. “If that doesn’t work, we have until people start dying again for us to figure something else out.” We approached the edge. “You’ve done this before. Any words of wisdom?”

He gazed over the hole and grimaced. “Don’t look before you leap.”

We stepped off the edge.

*

Falling into a nearly endless abyss can really focus your mind. After a while Spertias and I let go of each other. As our falls remained practically aligned, we could have pushed against each other and perhaps reached the side of the abyss, but there was no reason for that. We were far beyond the point of being able to climb out. As the air whizzed through our ears, I asked, “How are you holding up?”

“Not funny!”

I figured falling into an endless pit was an excellent time to ask the tough questions. “Why did you abandon me and my mother?”

Spertias looked as pensive as possible with his beard flying up in front of his face. "I wanted to do other things: travel, read, think, have fun. And I didn't."

"That's all?" I asked.

"Life has a habit of slipping away. Don't let it happen to you."

As we plummeted, I wondered if I'd let it happen.

Time passed. I thought I saw the bottom of the abyss. I remembered how much pain Spertias had experienced when he jumped off the cliff, and his fall was nothing compared to what we were experiencing. Without warning, I felt something besides windburn. My body started tingling. My hands changed into claws and feathers sprouted. I transformed into a vulture! The same thing happened to Spertias. "Extend your wings!" I shouted. Awkwardly waving them, I halted my fall and slid down to a safe landing. Spertias did the same. Once we touched bottom, we reverted to human form. Spertias patted his body to make sure.

"I guess Zeus really is protecting us," he said.

"Vultures are associated with Ares. My guess is we also have his blessing on this mission."

Tartarus is not a pleasant place. Though not much darker or rockier than the cavern that leads to the underworld, it has a depressing population. We passed Tantalus reaching for a grape vine forever out of his grasp, and Ixion forever spinning on a flamed wheel. Tartarus was the one place the Cyclopes were forced to be a community, though all they could do was complain to each other.

"I wish I could help these poor souls," said Spertias, fighting tears.

"It is not in our power or interest to thwart the will of the gods. We can only work within their dictates."

With so many people in Tartarus and the light so poor, finding Hades wasn't going to be easy. Other than him being tall, dark, and a god of few words, I didn't know what he looked like. I asked among the prisoners, but all I got were stares,

threats, and one suggestion that I go to the underworld. Spertias came up with the simple solution. Over the moans of the damned, he yelled Hades' name. They quieted long enough for us to hear a voice say, "Over here!"

We headed in the direction of the voice until we came to a man chained to a rock. Around his arms and chest he wore barbed armor. On his head set a crown of five extended spikes. His eyes glowed blue, illuminating a trim, dark beard. A metal two-pronged staff lay just out of his reach.

"Are you Hades?" I asked.

He looked at me, then Spertias. "This is one time I'm unhappy to admit it. Did Zeus send you?"

"We are protected by him and Ares."

"They don't like coming here," said Hades. "You are brave to make the journey."

"We had no choice. No one on Earth is dying. How did you get chained to this rock?" I asked.

"Sisyphus!" He spat the word into three distinct syllables. "If anyone deserves a one-way ticket to Tartarus, it is he. But because he crossed Zeus, revealing the location of one of his women, I offered to handle his case personally."

"So personally that you're wearing his chains?" I asked.

Hades eyes dimmed. "I am unpracticed in the art of subterfuge. Sisyphus pretended the chains were insufficient to hold him. He asked me to demonstrate their reliability. I did."

"How could you have fallen for that?" asked Spertias.

Hades shook his armored head. "Justice is blind."

He asked if we had encountered anyone during our trip to Tartarus, and we described the arrogant shade who said he was Orpheus. That was Sisyphus.

“We need you to get back on the job,” said Spertias. “Maybe we can smash your chain with some rocks.”

“You can try, but I don’t know if it will work,” said Hades.

We did try, and it didn’t work. Hades suggested we use his staff to wedge off the clamp, but that didn’t work either.

“I’ve been here for an eternity, and I still haven’t figured out what that staff does,” said Hades. “I think the problem is we need someone to take my place.”

He looked at Spertias, who backed away. “Oh no. I wasn’t the greatest person in the world, but I don’t deserve to spend eternity in Tartarus.”

“It’s just until I can get Sisyphus back here,” said Hades.

“And how long would that take?” I asked.

“I won’t have an answer until I find him. But I have another idea. I could put Tantalus here. He would consider that a promotion. Unfortunately, I would still need you to take my place while I fetch him.”

Spertias shook his head. “I’ve seen the gods trick too many people.”

So had I, though Hades wasn’t one of the tricksters.

“I’ll do it,” I said. Hades told me to put my hand on the chain. It came alive, releasing the god and winding around my leg. Hades stood, towering over us.

“I am in your debt, though mine are gifts no one wants,” said Hades. “I will be back in a moment.”

It was a long moment, replete with Spertias insisting how touched he was by my gesture and insisting he would remain by my side for as long as it took. I was relieved when I saw Hades leading Tantalus toward us. After Hades released me and secured Tantalus, he looked at Spertias. “Now, I must get back to work. I see you are overdue.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I asked Spertias, as he prepared to leave his body.

“The past few weeks have, in a small way, compensated for my biggest regret: not spending more time with you,” he said. “I am ready to go.” He became a shade and drifted away.

I had more or less known Spertias was the man responsible for my life, but I didn’t feel the bond until he was gone. With my father dead and having no children myself, I was untethered.

“He will get out of Tartarus?” I asked.

“He will,” said Hades. “I will now send you back to the surface.”

“Yes, about that. I...” But Hades cut me off with a wave of his hand, and I appeared back in my homes in Athens, though that was not where I wanted to go. I had to find Iola.

I reached her house just in time to see Hermes enter.

“No!” I screamed. “Hades, how can you do this to me?” But I knew the answer. The gods could do anything except die, and all we could do was live. Though I’d said our limitations were an advantage, it didn’t feel that way when the end came, when all we had were tears. I threw open the door, ready to wrestle Hermes for Iola’s spirit, not caring if he took both of us. Instead, I saw Iola standing alive, grieving over the deceased body of her father. She didn’t notice me, but Hermes did.

He became the second god that week to smile at me. “Hades thanks you for freeing him and would like your help in locating Sisyphus,” he said.

“First things first,” I said, and focused on Iola.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Edoardo Albert's new novel, *Conrad Monk and the Great Heathen Army*, has just been published by Endeavour Quill. Edoardo is online at <http://www.edoardoalbert.com>, on Facebook as EdoardoAlbert.writer, and Twitter@EdoardoAlbert.

The God Star

by Edoardo Albert

“Don’t die here.”

I stopped, the tube of champagne resting on my lips, and looked at the man drifting opposite me, silhouetted by the seething energies of the Ratnayeke Rift.

“Not quite the toast I expected.” I tried a smile. “Maybe, ‘Good luck’ or ‘Cheers’ or,” I remembered his name, “‘Salud’.”

But Monitor Higuain made no smile in return. He was playing with the champagne tube—cargued at ridiculous expense through the nearest Abeysondera portal and then loaded aboard a Shingawa jump ship, with me, for the final journey to the Rift—and I felt an equally ridiculous urge to jam its contents between his thin lips and fire in the bubbles. I had only spent an hour aboard the station, but already I’d decided the outgoing Monitor desperately needed a joy infusion.

Monitor Higuain, keeping his back to the view platform, nevertheless jerked his hand to indicate what he meant. “Six months here and you’re not sure you can leave.”

I looked where he would not, into the Rift, and the Eye staring from it, the star shining where no star should shine.

“You’re not sure anything else is real.”

The briefing had said there was a tendency for Monitors to drift into the Star, losing themselves in its mysteries: be prepared, it had said, to call your predecessor back to sense.

“That goes against all the tenets of physics...” I began.

“Like the God Star,” he said.

I fell silent.

The Monitor smiled wryly. “I said that myself, to the Monitor I was replacing. Six months back, when I arrived on station.”

“Then you’ll remember that follow-up studies show Monitors normally regain their equilibrium between three and nine months after going off station.”

“Those that make it off station.” Monitor Higuain’s mouth twisted. He was making an effort to smile. “Looks like I’ll be one of them.” He looked past me, to the other viewport, thick with the clear light of sensible—in the strict sense of the word—stars. “When does it leave?” The Shingawa hung there, its tracery of beams—material, electromagnetic and potential—shifting slowly over the star fields.

“In six hours; it would have been sooner but the architecture suffered some damage in jump and the crew is making repairs.”

The Monitor nodded. “I see them.” And there was a note of longing in his voice I had not expected. Usually, Monitors at the end of shift shunned human company and had to be weaned slowly back into normal society. Some never made it all the way, but lived in permanent exile, attached to humanity but with their minds forever somewhere on the edges of the Rift.

I nodded to the champagne tube. “You still haven’t drunk it.”

The Monitor focused on the tube.

“Oh. Yes.” He raised it to his lips.

“Why did you tell me not to die here?”

The Monitor squeezed the tube and champagne pulsed along the spout and into his mouth. The gas came back out again and he grimaced. “Sorry. Belching in front of a lady. No manners.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry.”

“Six months here, you forget about manners. You forget... everything.” He stared at me. “If you die here, your soul won’t ever find its way home.”

“That’s...” I began.

“Ridiculous. Yes, I know.” Monitor Higuain belched again. “But don’t. You know, die here.” He pinged the champagne tube towards a disposal port and watched as it was sucked into its maw. “Besides, if too many more Monitors don’t make it off station, they might close the program. I’m going to get my stuff for transfer.”

“What about debriefing me?”

“It’s all in order. I’ve kept the record; I’ve made the observations; I’ve watched; it’s waiting for you.”

“Still, you should...”

“I’m off this station in a few hours. Think I can tell you what I’ve seen these last six months in that time?”

“No. No, of course. Sorry.”

“You won’t be.” The Monitor nodded towards the center of the viewing platform dome. “There’s the chair. It’s yours now.”

I nodded, licking my lips, nervous.

“Why’d you come?” the Monitor asked, suddenly.

“I wanted to see the Star.”

“Me too.” He pointed to the chair.

“May I?”

“Yeah. Be its guest.”

I pushed off towards the chair, fixed in the center of the viewing dome. My first push had been true; I barely needed any corrections to grab the chair as I went past it. Then, it was the work of moments—in time and torque—to swing myself into the chair, to engage the restraints and—*zing*—the feeds connected with the implants at the base of my skull.

I was connected; my senses, my thoughts—in a general sense, there was still no way to specify precise thoughts in storage—and my emotions were now being fed into the data store for the God Star.

Now, I was ready. I looked up—although without gravity up was a notional concept—and saw the God Star...

*

“It’s quite something, isn’t it?”

My eyes, my senses, my thoughts, heart and desires, lost in the God Star, slowly returned to me, to me fixed in the chair beneath the dome, and the Monitor, above me, his form blocking my sight of the Star. I tried to see past him, pushing my head left and right, but he filled my view.

“Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of time to watch. I wanted to see if you could see it.”

“How could I not see it?” I waved my hand, past the blocking shape of Monitor Higuain, to where the God Star filled Rift and thought and heart and mind.

“Not everyone does. Even when they’ve been trained as Monitors, sometimes they get here and see nothing. Like with our instruments; they’re blind to the God Star.”

“B-but how?” Even as I said the words, in some corner of my mind, where I had been briefed, prepped and psyched for my role as Monitor, I knew this; yet, faced with the overwhelming presence of the God Star, I could not but ask. How could anyone remain insensible of it?

“It’s one of its mysteries. Its many mysteries. But you can see, so therefore you can Monitor. Very well.” The Monitor pulled himself closer to where I lay, embraced in the chair and offered up to the Star, and his face filled my gaze and I saw that he was weeping, but gave that no thought, for still I strove to see past him to the God Star.

The Monitor took my head in his hands and kissed me, on forehead, eyes and lips. His touch was cool.

“You are Monitor,” he said. “Watch well.” He pushed himself away—a man suddenly without a title—and, again, the God Star filled my sight and thought and heart.

“Watch for me,” he said as he drifted away, but I gave his words no mind for my thoughts were filled with the Star...

*

Darkness flowed over the dome, shutting out the light of the Star and the storms of the Rift, and in the chair I, Monitor of Station Epsilon, gasped back to myself, my throat as raw and dry as sandpaper and with a slight unaccountable dampness around my groin. Then, I remembered. The dome, on each station, was set to blank in sequence, that each Monitor might recover, eat, sleep, relieve themselves. It was not, I remembered, at all unusual for a Monitor at the start of their tour to wet themselves, so lost did they become in their observations. At least I had not soiled myself. I released the restraints, lifted my head to break the feeds, and was, again, myself: separate, alone, unconnected.

“Time.”

The answer appeared, ghost numbers in the air, and I knew there remained opportunity to speak to the previous Monitor before he left station. Now, I thought, I might know something of what to say and what to ask.

“Monitor Higuain. Location.”

The station answered, floating a schematic in front of me, with the Monitor’s location highlighted.

“What is he doing outside the station?”

“Unknown.”

“Raise him.”

There was a pause.

“Unable.”

“How come?”

“He is not responding.”

“Why?”

“There are no life signs.”

*

I went out into the raw, seething space of the Ratnayeke Rift, with every possible shield and baffle set to maximum and my helmet darked that I might not lose myself in the sight of the Star. But even darked, the light of it filled my eyes and I had to close them once I had set path for Monitor Higuain, and I filled my head with words, remembered poems, images, memories: these alone might hold some defense against the overwhelming light. Even so, path set, I oriented myself so that my back was to the Star and my face turned to the station and, beyond, the speckled black of normal space.

I drifted past Monitor Higuain, and had to stop my motion with impellor puffs, before setting myself to move, ever so gently, back to him. There was no need for urgency. I was not going to save his life.

In my time, I've seen a few hard space casualties. It's not a good death: oxygen starvation meets instant freezing with a side order, in the Rift, of lethal radiation. The faces, and bodies, of the dead retain the pain and terror of this death. But, approaching the Monitor, I could see he was not like this. His arms were crossed across his chest and his face was set into a peaceful smile. There was no difficulty in seeing him. He had gone out into the Rift without a suit.

Taking hold of him—his body was stiff so it made maneuvering him easier—I headed back to the station. Beyond the tracery of the station's radiation baffles and shields I could see the Shingawa, its feeder scoops sparking as it fed matter to the drives: it was powering up for departure. No reason to delay it. Its sole returning passenger was not taking his birth.

“Monitor Dellapina to Shingawa *Dhoni*, Monitor Higuain will not be returning with you. You are free to depart.”

There was silence for a while, then comms, crackly and faint, as it always was this close to the Rift. “Acknowledged.”

Comms flicked off again, and I thought there would be no further comment, but as I was nearing the station, a fresh comm came through, in a different voice.

“We don't take too many back. I hope you'll be one of them when we return for you, Monitor Dellapina.”

“I will be.”

“*Dhoni*, out.”

I did not acknowledge. I was attempting to get Monitor Higuain's body into the lock, while the saturation levels in my suit began to flash through to amber and, in some cases, critical levels. It is no easy matter to manipulate a rigid corpse into a lock while wearing a full-screen suit. In the end, I went into the lock first,

then pulled him in after me, head first. If his features had not been frozen as hard as the rest of his body, I'd have said they turned to disappointment as I reeled him in, out of the light of the Star.

Strapped to a gurney—he was going to start defrosting pretty soon now he was back in the station—I nudged Monitor Higuain along to the cold store. Lashing him to a rack, I counted through the others: six, of the thirty-odd monitors to serve on the station. It was worse on some of the others. Station Gamma was pretty much a one-way trip.

We still did not know why.

I tagged Monitor Higuain, called his entry into the records, thought of going back to the dome then, for once, decided against. I needed to sleep.

*

I was not asleep when they came to me. I know this. They came, the Monitors of Station Epsilon, those that I had counted clipped to gurneys in the cold store, those who had gone home, they all came to me, presences I could not see but no less real. I was not scared, nor even surprised. Where else would they be? They waited with me, until sleep took me, and I was glad for their company.

*

What is the God Star? A light shining in the darkness, a presence where nothing can exist, a stitch in the Rift that is tearing the universe apart.

What is the God Star? A ghost, a mirage: a phantom of hope conjured from our collective fear in the face of the Rift.

What is the God Star? We don't know. Invisible to every instrument, it shines only in sight, stitching the Rift together, holding it tight against the seething energy that boils beyond it.

There are universes and universes, and in the birthing of some, others die. Beyond the Rift, a bubble universe waits to pop: its beginning and our ending synonymous.

What is the God Star? Every Monitor records it differently: in song, in poetry and pictures, in words and signs and silent contemplation.

I stare.

In my chair—and it is my chair now, alone until the next Monitor comes in six months time—I stare at the God Star, the thin tendrils of my feeds sufficient to hold me in place, although I am locked and strapped as well, trying to hold it all in memory, that it might burn into my mind's eye when my physical eyes turn away from it. But I cannot hold it. Like a dream that seems more vivid than waking yet slips away, when I break the feeds and release the restraints and leave the dome to feed and sleep and defecate, it fades and I am, always, surprised anew when I next take shift in the chair and look upon the God Star.

What is the God Star? A stitch of light holding back the dark. A well so deep that we can never draw down its depths.

What is the God Star?

The question has haunted us since first we saw it, when Aravinda Ratnayake, contemplating the Rift and seeing it through the equations, went mad with despair and cast himself into the Rift, only to find a light where no light should be, and hope where there was none.

He was the first Monitor. He still watches, blank eyes staring up at the star from beneath the dome of Station Alpha. Do the dead dream? I suspect that if they sleep in the God Star's light, they might.

So, after a few weeks, I start moving the gurneys from the cold store out into the dome before my observation shift, keeping them there with me through my stint; silent witnesses: Higuain, Li Po, Sikander, Adesukibe, Ishimura, Drogba, the ones who stayed. And, while they remained body and soul upon the station, I slowly realized that all the other monitors had left some of themselves behind too. In the light, under the dome, I could feel them, their presence, watching... helping.

Helping?

What does the God Star do? It shines where no star should shine. It stitches the Rift together and holds our universe in being.

It lives. It lives as light and we, its watchers, its monitors, enter its light and lay our service upon it.

What do I see when I look upon the God Star?

I see a person holding together the rip in space and time that would tear us apart. I see its—his—agony; I see his resolve.

And I would help.

Slowly, they tell me. My predecessors. The Monitors before me; those still here whole and those in part. They show me how to help, as they helped too.

Of course, I am mad. I realize this. In my off-watches, sweating, shaking, curled up and naked, hidden deep within the station, I know I am mad. The feeds must tell the story, they must know, surely, the Watchers, they who monitor the Monitors. Curled, fetal, I believe they will send a replacement, take me away from this place.

But they say nothing. No one comes. And where, once, six months yawned as an unbridgeable chasm of loneliness, now it is almost crossed and the Shingawa will be heading towards my station, carrying the next Monitor, nervous, excited, expectant.

Of course, he, almost certainly a man this time, will at some level expect to be the one to solve the mystery of the God Star—I know, I did. But it is beyond me.

They don't expect me to come back.

I know that.

The Watchers have read my reports. They have seen my feeds. They have watched me laboriously move the gurneys in and out of the cold store each day. From the scuff marks and scratches on them, I am not the first.

I don't expect to come back.

But when the Shingawa docks with the station and hails me, I am waiting.

Beneath the light of the God Star, under the Rift, there is still what is right, what is appropriate.

*

“Don't die here.”

The new Monitor, Naqib, looks at me with the same mixture of surprise and suspicion with which I must have surveyed Monitor Higuain. But, unlike me, he says nothing.

“Don't stay here if you ever want to go home.”

Monitor Naqib nods. “Is that your briefing, Monitor?”

I turn away. My records—my notes, papers, poems—are ready. There is not much of them: little to show for six months on station. I am ready.

“The Shingawa is ready,” says Monitor Naqib.

I nod. A new protocol. Shortened handovers. No champagne. They need not have worried. I will leave aboard the Shingawa.

And as I step aboard the shuttle that will carry me to the Shingawa, I hear my soul whisper its goodbye. Of course, it is staying on station.

I go forth, a hollow thing, and I do not look back.

Later, when Monitor Naqib straps himself into the chair for the first time, my soul is there, with him, with the others.

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HONORABLE MENTION

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Whom the Lion Seeks

by Annie Lampman

After ten years locked up, Ezra thought he'd put the curse behind him. There were days, weeks even, when he'd no longer thought about of the sizzle of hair under a flame's slightest touch, no longer dreamed about things burning down around him. But wasn't that always how it happened? Right when you thought you'd made peace with a thing, right when you thought you were better, moving on with life, that's when it would hit you again square in the face saying, what do you think of me now?

Several years back they'd had an opening on the prison work crew, so he'd signed up. The labor had done him good. Distraction from the dark reaches of his own mind. But then the depths of the decade-long drought hit, dry years accumulating into the worst fire conditions anyone had ever seen, and they converted the work crew into a North Idaho prison fire unit. When Ezra had protested, the guards shrugged their shoulders. Take it or leave it, they told him. And he gladly would have left it—chosen to stay in his cell forever over facing flames again—if it hadn't been for his window's southern exposure, heat bearing down, burning him alive just as surely as fire. Maybe it'd been the universe's way

of saying he needed to face it. He'd been reading books about healing past traumas. They said you could never move on if you didn't deal with the past—"no healing without dealing." And he needed to move on.

After training for weeks, Ezra, with a good "safety record," was appointed fire crew boss. By the beginning of June, grass fractured underfoot and the Clearwater River—usually visible from the prison yard—had slipped completely out of sight, its rock banks left chalked white and exposed, the river valley a cauldron of shimmering heat waves. And one mountain storm was all it'd taken—lightning strikes by the hundreds, all that dry ground, all those drought-starved trees like tinder.

Spotter planes flew from dawn to dusk calling in one fire after another after another. The calls for inmate fire crews came in just as fast. One trip after the next until it was routine: the storms, the urgent fire calls, the unending drives to smoke, sweat, and char—the long familiar smells of Ezra's nightmares.

He closed his eyes and tried to breathe through his nose into his lower stomach. That's what the books said to do when the past came flooding back: Breathe deep. Exhale. He leaned his head against the prison van's window glass, his stomach churning as the driver took the corners too sharply, rushing the crew to the newest blaze. The nausea always came on as soon as they started climbing out of the valley—the road cornered like a snake winding its way up the mountainside, banking vehicles toward cliff edges as if to throw them off its back.

Eighteen and strung out, Ezra had been driving too fast through the dark. At first the man walking the roadside had just been a blur through the windshield, but then Ezra had recognized him with a quick stutter to his heart—like the thrumming of a woodland grouse you felt first in your throat and then inside your own chest like a second faulty beat. His father, after all those years, appearing out of nowhere. Motor roaring, tires spinning and catching, the car seemed to hover in the air a second before impact—shoulder gravel crunching beneath the tires like broken glass, the man's pale face in the headlights. Except it hadn't been Ezra's father after all. It'd been a drunk out-of-work logger who looked like some version of Ezra, of his father, of what they'd all become.

The van driver took another corner hard and they all lurched sideways in their seats. Ezra's fists clenched tight. The books said to think of something light to replace the darkness, something good, something right now: "be positive in the present." Ezra breathed in but flashed on Patrick as he always did—the only truly good thing he'd ever known in his life. Memories that only led further down into the dark. He worked to relax his shoulder tension, released and refilled his lungs, but the only "present" thing he could find to concentrate on was the sour, stale-smoke stench of his crew in the van's oven-like heat.

The newest fire was up Isabella Creek drainage near Aquarius Campground. A two-and-a-half-hour drive to timbered mountains that stretched all the way to Montana. Forest Service crews that stayed all summer at the work center just a mile up from campground, perched right on the North Fork's banks—waters running ice green and frothing all year long.

Ezra unfurled his fists, catching the only positive safe memory he had, pulling it out like a polished rock kept in a pocket, even if a distant memory wasn't exactly being "positive in the present." He was a child again, tube-floating the St. Joe River, face held underwater, eyes wide open watching trout nest against rocks, whipping river silt into a cloud when his shadowed silhouette caught them dozing. Young fingerlings nibbled bubbles clustered on his arm in quick nosings, the smooth flick of their bodies through water an effortless glide. A whole world going about its business underneath him as if he didn't exist, his presence real only in drifting shadow as he spun without weight or direction, cast loose.

But then, like always, it became the two of them again—Ezra and Patrick—like a tape circling back and playing the images most worn in: the two of them along the Joe playing pirate, playing Huck Finn, playing search-and-rescue performing heroic feats. The two of them spinning on the tire suspended from a weeping willow growing next to the river, water below them like a promise, Patrick's blonde head whipped back from the g-force, wispy hair in his eyes, willow branches brushing their faces, hands gripping the twisted ropes until they unraveled at high speed, kicking them free. The two of them—Patrick four, and Ezra six—lying side by side in tall grass, listening to crickets, dreaming of floating so far away they wouldn't ever be found.

Long days in his cell—all the monkeys in the zoo howling, smashing against their bars—Ezra had kept a medieval history of art book until it was overdue, returning to Bosch’s painting, *The Ship of Fools*, over and over again, examining every detail as if he could find hidden meaning in its brush strokes: people caught in their folly—a man puking over the side of the ship, two drunks naked and imperiled in the water, even the monk and the nun caught in their own foolhardiness. Eat! Drink! Be Merry! Floating to nowhere, the scene somehow even more grim and foreboding than Hogarth’s *Gin Lane* whose streets were filled with corpses and whose happily drunken mother let her baby tumble from her lap to its death.

“Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” That one he remembered himself. His father stumbling home drunk, paycheck long gone, his mother weeping and begging while his father raged into the night. During school recitation, the nuns taught them that verse and a few others he still remembered: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom to devour.”

He’d wondered then how they knew—the nuns. Their eyes on his in pity, in warning. How they’d known it was him whom the lion sought, flames crawling up the wall, licking the fray of curtain edge, climbing hungrily for more, gobbling up faded roses and wallpaper pansies in seconds, then impatiently moving on to walls, framing, the roof—all of it, the whole house, consumed in moments. A blink of an eye.

But there had been no secrets, not like he thought. Once, when it had been really bad, when all his father had been able to find was a chain to remind Ezra and Patrick of their sins, there had been talk of someone from the church “taking them in,” but his mother would have none of it. Told them to mind their own meddling business. Said, “Let they who’ve not sinned throw the first stone.” Only the stones of his father’s sins were so heavy they buried them all.

His father had been gone for a month or more—that’s why Ezra wanted so badly to help his mother, to help Patrick. Build a fire to keep Patrick warm while he slept. Build a fire to make the house warm when their mother returned from her night shift. Build a fire. A six-year-old’s faith: if he could just do this one thing

he could right all the wrongs. Their father would come back home, clean the equipment grease from the folds in his hands and pull Ezra and Patrick into his lap. Their mother would bake bread, humming like she did when she was pleased, and they would all sit together and eat, and they would be warm and full, and they would be happy.

The kindling took easy. The curtains even easier.

He'd called and called until his voice went hoarse, his cries like the bullfrogs he and Patrick hunted along the Joe's marshy banks, but Patrick wouldn't come out of the bedroom, wouldn't come out of the house. By the time the neighbors came running, by the time their mother came, the house was already devoured. While Ezra watched, the smoke turned toward him, opened its mouth and roared.

*

Just before Headquarters—a tiny logging town, last civilization until Montana—the prison van met up with the lead fire crew from Timber Protective, following their red crew-cabs another hour out past Aquarius and up the drainage road. Ezra stared out the window as they bounced over water bars and ruts; it was as though they were driving through a tunnel of green—the woods so thick, so close together that fires burned through the crowns, hundreds of feet from the ground, as if held aloft by the air. The wind was a furnace blast through the window. He looked straight ahead, trying to focus, readying himself for the action.

At the bottom of the burn, they unloaded and geared up, Ezra's stomach steadied by the smells of the fire: oil and chainsaw gas, smoke and char, talcum dirt and weedy heat, and behind it all a hint of green unburned forest. Ezra balanced a chainsaw over his shoulder. The others carried an assortment of Pulaskis, combies, rhinos, and rogue-hoes—fire-line digging and scraping tools. A Forest Service crew had come on early that morning—the fire bad enough all fire entities had been called in: federal, private, prison. The Forest Service boss said they'd set the east-side line so Ezra and his crew should take the lower west end.

The conditions were bad: windy, hot, dry. But not just that—it was eerie, threatening. A dark sky full of warning. Smoke hanging like a tattered shroud over burning trees.

Ezra and his crew hiked the line they'd been directed to. Spread out on the section above them, the Forest Service crew were blackened and smeared as if they'd been burned themselves. Ezra was surprised to see a girl—long blonde hair in a braid down her back—heaving away with the rest of them. She stopped to right her hardhat that had slipped to the side, and glanced down to where Ezra and his crew had stopped to set up. She gave a quick wave and smile as if welcoming them to a picnic. Everyone else kept their heads down, attending to business.

Ezra had been warned it was a bad burn, could tell it with one glance, but early in the morning the wind picked up and by the time they were a few hours into sawing and digging line to flank the fire, burned out snags had started falling, dislodging boulders that came barreling down the steep slopes like god-sized cannonballs. At one point, it got bad enough Ezra told his crew to get behind the standing trees and stay put. There was no way to work without getting crushed.

In the mayhem, the fire jumped the upper line and the Timber Protective crew lost their heads, calling in heli bucket drops and fire-plane retardant drops, misdirecting everything in the smoke. Ezra knew enough to maintain radio silence; the inmate unit was the lowest in the fire hierarchy, but even if they hadn't been, this was no time for discussion. It was time to keep your head down and watch your back.

The heat as thick and choking as smoke, the air like dust, every now and then Ezra would look up from digging and see the girl somewhere up above, narrow shoulders heaving Pulaski against baked ground. She didn't stop once, swung the tool over her head with everything she had, feet planted wide apart, braid whipping with her effort, as if she alone would stop this fire.

They all worked until afternoon before pausing for a small break. Ezra's crew caught up with the Forest Service crew up above and as the men pulled out canteens and candy bars, the girl wandered over and sat next to Ezra. "Claire

Rosen,” she said, smacking her bubblegum and holding her hand out, gloves still on. He shook her hand and she gave him a brilliant smile before breaking out a smashed sandwich. She worked her gum into a ball with her front teeth, took it out of her mouth, and carefully placed it on her sandwich baggie before taking a bite.

She flopped backward, lying in dirt and clumps of bear grass, chewing and talking at the same time, swiping at wisps of hair that had loosened around her face, little strands of blonde getting into her eyes, her forehead and temples smeared with soot. Told Ezra her older brother worked on a Missoula fire crew, said she couldn’t wait to tell him about this. She talked about the summer, about the conditions. How they had it much worse than anyone in Montana. When she finished her sandwich, she popped the hardened gum back in her mouth to chew it again.

*

Late that afternoon, a hotshot crew from Montana showed up. The fire had jumped another line, was burning heavy into federal forest. The superintendent hiked the line to assess the trajectory and conditions. Trees were still falling. It had turned almost rhythmic by that point. The thumping heave of Pulaski splitting the dirt open like a wound, the shuddering whoosh and earth-shaking thud of another tree falling and rolling at them. It’d been like this all day.

The superintendent hiked down to tell Ezra what he’d already told Timber Protective and the Forest Service crew: they should all leave—it wasn’t safe. He was writing up a report detailing the conditions as well as Timber Protective’s lack of organization and planning, etc.

Ezra wasn’t surprised the superintendent didn’t like the conditions, wouldn’t commit his crew. Who would? But it wasn’t Ezra’s job to question, to critique. His job was to work, to get the job done. When the hotshot crew left, he told his own crew to keep their heads down; they would continue until Timber Protective directed them not to. It wasn’t his fire to call.

He watched for the Forest Service crew and Claire to pack up, but they stayed on after the hotshot crew left. They were young, wanted to show their mettle, prove themselves. At the end of the line, Claire leaned on her Pulaski and grinned down the mountain at Ezra. Smudged and disheveled, she fist-pumped and yelled, “Oh Yeah! Fuck Montana!” Everyone grinned. They were together in this.

They battled side by side for hours, through the rippling heat and smoke, chainsaws spitting black oily wood into peach-colored chips on the fresh-churned dirt dark with moisture that within an hour dried to dust. Hoses strung out like white intestines across the hillside, spreading a ready net of water, everything still burning, the ground hot underfoot. Cedar trees burned inside out, punky heartwood consumed, nothing but an outer shell left standing.

By early evening, they bore the marks of the battle: white reverse raccoon eyes gleaming out of blackened faces, singed-off eyelashes, boots baked stiff from the heat, saw slashes in their steel toes, yellow fire-proof Nomex shirts drenched with sweat, green pants crusted brown, fetid with smoke. The smell of the burn, of smoke and charred wood, an overwhelming presence.

Claire was glassy-eyed, looked as if she’d been rolling in an ash pit—even her hair grey with soot. Ezra walked up to her and gave her his extra canteen and last packet of Kool-Aid. He told her it wasn’t his business, but she looked like she could use a rest. She nodded and sat. He sat with her, told his crew to continue on up the hill. She drank her Kool-Aid, pushed the hair out of her eyes, smiled at him despite her obvious exhaustion. Said she’d now logged more fire hours than her brother, said she couldn’t wait to rub this fire in his face.

She was so young, talking about her brother. Everything still coated with the sweetness of simple sibling rivalry. Who got the biggest slice of pie, the biggest scoop of ice cream.

You would have thought that after Patrick, Ezra would never have struck a match again, never flicked a lighter open thumbing it to flame, but instead he hadn’t been able to get enough. All those lost years, dark years. He burned everything—tried to burn himself, light his flesh like a candle, flames inked into his skin, but it was never enough. He’d wanted to die engulfed in flames. The hell the nuns

had always warned about, a way of going home, a way of forgetting. Booze, heroin, fire, flight, what was the difference? It'd all gotten him to the same place. The nuns had said it over and over again: said if they didn't watch out, the world would eat them alive and spit out their dry bones. It was the way destiny worked—a curse in the blood, a curse in the air like a kiss, leading you all the places you never thought you'd go.

But he was here now, he reminded himself. Fighting flames, cauterizing the past. Claire was talking about how she couldn't wait to go swimming after they got off the fire. Dive in the North Fork and wash the soot off. Said she loved the water, could fall asleep back floating, that she'd once accidentally dozed off and floated down some rapids, waking to rocks and whitewater. Ezra smiled, thinking how he could add this moment to his own memory. These things—each tiny good thing. Maybe one day there would be enough to offset everything else.

They were still sitting when he heard it—almost a whistle, all that air rushing through needles. He knew it was close, knew it was coming fast. He lunged on instinct, but Claire didn't. She was still talking about the river, had taken her hardhat off for a moment to tuck the loose hair back under it—not that the hardhat would have done any good anyway, not with the force of an uprooted seventy-foot grand fir whooshing past Ezra almost gently, catching him in the back of his leg, its heavily needled braches pinning him momentarily from moving.

It buried Claire so completely they had to saw their way in to her. Ten feet of green flat-needed branches. A smell like Christmas. Ezra pulling branches away so frantically they made him stop, get out of the way.

By the time they cleared the branches and bucked the trunk off of her, it was dark, nothing but the fire's orange smoke glow and their flashing headlamps. A scene from nightmare—the very hell the nuns had warned of. Flames joining themselves and rushing on.

The men maneuvered her body in a sling down to the ambulance that came from two hours away, sirens screaming, even though everyone knew there was no rush. No call for haste or announcement. No call for anything but mourning.

They pulled the crews and the hotshot superintendent filed his report. Local newspapers picked the story up—the first local wildfire fatality in decades. There would be an investigation. There might be charges. Suits. But other than a few police interviews—the prison wildfire crew suspended for the rest of the season pending the investigation—Ezra was removed from it all. He sat on his cell bed, sun glaring down like a punishment, remembering the purple wad of bubblegum between her teeth when she'd smiled. The most beautiful thing he thought he'd ever seen.

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