

## NEAR DEATH

The injuries themselves weren't serious. The first was a two-inch gash on the side of my head, a narrow red line stretched like a high-wire between my temple and the corner of my left eye. It bled a lot, in the way that head injuries always do. But it didn't take much to clean up the blood, knit the gash with a few butterfly bandages, and move on with my day. What worried me were all the moments just after the injury, when I was staring up at the white ceiling. I keep thinking about the choice I had to make, lying there on the ground, and remembering this story from the Old Testament, the one where Gideon brings his soldiers down to the water's edge. God tells him that his chosen army will be the few among them who bring the water up to their mouths with their hands, not those who lay on their bellies and greedily lap from the source. I wish I could lap right from the source, I think. But then again, I'd also like to be chosen.

I was watering the plants the first time it happened, standing on a chair in the kitchen. It was Sunday afternoon, just after church, and I remember reaching up through the English ivy hanging above my sink near the window. Brushing the fronds away with one hand, I could find the dry spots in the soil with the the other, and in that way use the little watering can to deposit moisture just where it was needed most. Then the chair gave, or my leg, but in any case I went backwards, the kitchen counter coming up at me fast, and my head bounced off the side, water spilling from the can all over my chest and legs.

That's when I saw it: just a brief darkening at the edges, the way shadows creep into the corners of an underexposed Polaroid. It closed in for just a moment, swirled like blood in water, but instead of resisting it I let myself relax, exhaled, even willed the darkness closer towards the center, towards a blackout, towards oblivion, an end. I felt euphoric, like my pores had expanded to the size of coins and the spring wind was whistling through them. But then, just before being carried off, my body snapped back, shoved me aside, forced itself into the present moment. The ink faded and my eyes focused on the color of the ceiling, a dingy white, like milk crusted on the corner of the jug.

And that's when I discovered it: not so much a desire to be dead, but comfort at the thought. I saw the shape of the possibility, the rough outline of death that I had been sketching for months, years maybe. But then again, here I am. So it couldn't have been as enticing as that.

I said all this to my therapist Eugene, who sort of nodded and hummed and delivered a little speech about God and the next life. He said that Christ had prepared the way for us, and that it would be a mistake to take a shortcut, which I still kind of believe. Eugene belongs to the church where I serve as the youth leader, and for that reason his counseling is free. Not that I wouldn't see him otherwise. He's patient and attentive, bald on top with a ponytail in back. The hairstyle looks lame now but it's also reassuring in some way, because it suggests that at one point in his life Eugene was part of the counterculture. He may still claim to be. Half our congregation, actually, claims to be part of the counterculture, because the vibe of our church is slightly left-of-center. That, and our shared scriptural philosophy tacks against the current of conservative Christian thought that seems to dominate the rest of the country.

I used to believe that, too—the counterculture thing—mostly because the leadership here spends so much time thinking about how best to serve the poor in the neighborhood on the west side of town, where our building sits. But now I keep thinking about other things. Like how our pastor Rob pulled Marlene aside one day after she lead worship and asked her to put a cardigan over her sleeveless floral dress. I'm not certain what he said, but the intent was pretty clear in the way he touched the small of her back, leaned in towards her ear after her last song and before his message. Marlene's smile sort of wilted and I saw a new seriousness in her eyes as she sat on stage in her sweater, holding her guitar and watching the sermon. It's a look she still hasn't abandoned, months later.

So it wasn't Eugene's fault when I did it again, when I climbed back up on the chair in the kitchen and reached towards the hanging ivy, just as before. It was nothing but curiosity, really. I don't remember feeling anxious or sad, just propelled by a desire to know what happened next, after the shadow fell. So I lifted the watering can above my head and sort of let my right leg buckle. I came spinning down towards the counter but missed, twirled too far so that the counter struck me on the side of the neck, or a little lower than that, in the meaty muscle between my neck and shoulder, and my head only grazed the fake marble of the counter.

Staring up at the ceiling again I saw the shadow form, the smoky darkness at the corners of my vision. This time there were little pinpricks of light inside that burned white and purple, flitted around like minnows in the surf. The euphoria returned, carried on a wave of nausea. My heart leaped around in my chest. I exhaled, relaxed, pushed the blackness inward where it collected at the center, and suddenly there was nothing to see or feel. There was only the black and my mind, which was fully conscious, aware of the fact that I could no longer feel the hard floor on my back. I watched the blackness for as long as I could stand, but quickly found that a world without sight is full of color, mostly dull oranges and browns that stretch away into infinity like plains towards a horizon. The colors twisted and bent. I watched them move across the black like the northern lights, and slowly I became aware that the colors had gathered, gained a sort of density, formed a long rectangle at the center of my vision.

The appearance of the shape created a startling sense of space. Before long I had the awareness that I was in a room, huge and cold. I felt a breeze at my back. The rectangle was just ahead, long and horizontal, an entrance to a second room, a new space. That's when I saw that there was someone standing inside. It was a man, or maybe a boy, just at the center. I tried to take a step towards him but my leg kicked, an involuntary motion that brought me back to the kitchen floor again, the cracked white ceiling staring down from above.

The kids in my youth group were a little freaked out by the bandages on my head, the huge purple bruise creeping up from under my t-shirt. I could see it in their eyes during my message about the parable of the sheep and the goats. Leah seemed especially concerned about the injuries. She worried about me in those days. Of all the relationships I had built with the students in my youth group ours was the closest to a real friendship, complete with humor and trust and long, interesting conversations. She liked to probe, poke, find holes in the intended message of the evening, chase after my own misgivings after a night of teaching. She did all of this behind mischievous dinner plate eyes and in a soft, Russian accent, something she still carried even though she and her family had lived in America for almost six years.

I'm not sure why she and the rest of the group were so worried about my injuries. After two years of visiting the church they must have been used to seeing my appearance change dramatically week to week: beard and no beard, new tattoos here and there, a suddenly shaved head, ear gauges in or out, depending on my mood. I explained it to them by saying that our bodies are impermanent. It's also what I told Rob when I interviewed to be the youth leader: that part of our pact with the Trinity

involves an awareness that this earth, our possessions, even our bodies are part and parcel with the vanity Christ avoided during his time on earth. It's something I remember hearing when I was a teenager myself, the idea that in the next, the eternal, our bodies won't matter anymore. Rob was impressed when I said it.

Leah and her rotating cast of friends, on the other hand, seemed unconvinced. Appearances were important to them, as they are to most high school seniors, I guess. She and her clique dressed almost identically, each offering a minor variation on a uniform of black tights, suede boots, puffy down vests covered in that synthetic sleeping bag fabric. Within those bounds, Leah was the trendsetter. There's something to admire about that kind of leadership. I told her as much after meeting, when her friends left. The two of us were sharing a coffee in the youth room, after all the enthusiasm of the evening's games and songs had burned away. The excitement always left behind a vapor of sweat mingled with the smell of popcorn warming in the machine. There's something hormonal about that smell. I remember it from my own days in youth group, not so long ago. But it's possible I only remember it that way because that was the first night she started asking me about sex, I think, asking about what Jesus had to say on the subject. There was a little pause in our conversation about parables and Leah turned towards her mischievous side, looked at me and said "But what about sex? Did Jesus want that?"

I told her that desire was a human condition, just like hunger and pain. I said it was part of a suffering we wouldn't have to bear any longer in the afterlife. It was something I believed, but I knew full and well that the answer wouldn't satisfy.

"That's exactly what I mean," she said. "That sex is human, and that Jesus was human."

I had a suspicion about why she was asking. Leah had a wonderful boyfriend, a quiet, intelligent Asian kid named Tim who shot photographs and carried around a skateboard. Apparently he was the star of the art program at the high school I had graduated from, where Leah and most of the other students in my youth group went. I had seen Tim's photographs at their senior show. Leah asked me to come, and I agreed despite feeling embarrassed that I would be the only person there who was my age.

Tim's photos were night scenes, black and white, taken while he was out late skating, I'm sure. The photographs lacked human subjects, and that absence gave the scenes a sort of apocalyptic vibe, like everyone had been raptured and now there was nothing left but concrete and weeds. On a paper sign beside the photos I read that the series had won Tim a scholarship to a prestigious art school in New York, which meant he'd be moving away very soon. I'm sure the distance was on Leah's mind.

"I can't help but think that if he ate and if he slept," Leah went on "it meant that he had, how would you say it? Appetites."

Her big eyes widened as she spoke, like she was surprised by her own insight. I had always been interested in the shape of her face. Her skin was so thin you could imagine it being stretched over her skull. She had high cheekbones and deep eyes even when she was a kid, an incoming freshman recently transplanted to our little town from Moscow, where her father ran a factory that produced giant engines for tractors. He was running a factory in town now, but had never been interested in what was going on at the church.

Leah had photographs hanging as well. They were portraits, mostly: she and her friends in heavy make up standing in ruined houses, wearing short dresses and high heels. That, and some horses. I think someone in her family, possibly her stepmother, owned a farm outside the city.

"With lust," I said, "it's mostly about the beast you feed. It won't go away. But if you're careful about what you give it, it might stop snapping at you."

She nodded, said she agreed. But I could tell by her eyes that I hadn't reached her.

It was around that time that I had to start getting more creative with my process. I could only fall so far from the chair in the kitchen, and I'd often miss the counter top entirely, land square on my back so that I wouldn't even lose consciousness. I found more success in the shower. With the door closed and the water hot enough, I could fill the room with steam, choke out some of the oxygen in the space, and then after a while hold my breath so that I wasn't getting any at all. Then I'd fall, backwards usually, but no matter what direction I went my head would bounce off the tiling on the wall or the porcelain tub, the blow hard enough to rattle my consciousness and bring the shadows back. On the day I finally reached the figure my left elbow must have taken some of the weight of the fall. I think I crushed something there, because afterwards I couldn't bend it much, and I had to wear a sling for the next few weeks.

Staring down the long dull rectangle, I saw the shape again, upright and silhouetted in black. I watched for as long as I could, until the colors in my vision stopped moving, and it was clear that I was standing in some big black chamber, and that the rectangle ahead of me was an entrance, or an exit, in either case some portal to another space. I took a step towards it. The figure inside did not move, just stood with its arms down at its side, legs shoulder width apart, chin level with the floor. A few steps closer I saw that it was naked, or almost naked, a young man wearing no shirt or shoes, just a dark pair of shorts that stopped well above the knee. I stepped closer, and as I did saw a drawstring on the shorts. They were swimming trunks. The young man standing ahead of me was wearing swimming trunks, and as I walked into the rectangle towards him I found myself standing in an orange glow, almost like sunlight, but more diffused, like it was filtered through a white sheet. I looked up above, seeking the light source, but found myself lost in the colors there, standing in what felt like infinity. Soon after that I was back in my shower, a dim pain throbbing at the base of my neck.

I stopped talking to Eugene about my falls because he kept saying the same thing. I wasn't supposed to look at him during our sessions, which is why my couch faced the wall, but whenever I talked about my injuries I stole little glances at his face reflected in the glass of the framed painting ahead of me. It was the hill at Golgotha, the three naked bodies hanging there. Jesus, stuck in the middle, always seemed over-muscular and rangy to me, like some kind of damaged hero at the end of an action movie. I'd see Eugene's face contort in the fake orange sunlight above the hill as he struggled with the topic of death. I started to get the sense that he had no idea what I meant, or didn't want to talk about it. He'd always change the subject, which was rare in our sessions, usually to Leah, whom he knew from church.

"She's staying after every week," he said, a sort of half question.

"Yeah. She's very bright." I told him.

"Mm hm," he said, a therapist's best weapon, this time the vessel for a judgment that settled in the room between us.

"We're friends. I give her advice. Counseling, sort of."

"Mm hm," he said again.

"Relationship advice. She's dating someone named Tim, from the high school." I hadn't planned on mentioning that. "She's in love, I think. She's deciding how to respond to that. I want to help."

"How would you respond?" Eugene asked

"To what?"

"Love. First love."

I cast back for a memory, the image of someone I met during a high school mission trip through South Carolina. My line disappeared in the dark water and then came back with the vague sensation of fumbling after a bra strap under some trees on a riverbank, the feeling of pubic hairs bunched underneath wet nylon on my fingertips.

"I just want her to be happy," I said, and that was true.

"Right." Eugene said. I heard him uncross and then re-cross his legs.

She brought Tim with her to the next meeting, and for most of the evening I watched him skulking around, not talking much, taking off his glasses to clean them over and over. When she came to him and touched his arm, introduced him to some friend or another, he'd smile and offer his hand, betray no sense of the discomfort I saw on his face when he was alone and unobserved.

That night I spoke from Matthew, told the story of Jesus driving the demons out the man on the road to the Gadarenes. I wanted to use the story to show that we can't always know why someone is suffering, that as fishers of men it's our responsibility to greet everyone exactly where they stand. But the story took me by surprise, as it always does. It's one of the strangest in all of the Gospels. When Jesus asks the man's name he replies "I am legion." Then Jesus speaks his own name and the demons rush up out of the man's body. Desperate for some vessel to inhabit the frantic spirits jump into a herd of pigs who stampede over a cliff and tumble into the water below.

One thing I like about the New Testament is how grounded so many of its concerns are. Jesus understood hunger, for example. He saw a crowd waiting for his word to salve their spirits, and instead he gave them fish and bread, something to soothe the ache of their bodies. He'd meet wounded, broken women who'd walked miles for his advice, and instead of asking after their inner turmoil he'd kneel down and wash the dirt from their feet.

But then there's the pigs. That story always disturbed me, the idea of a soul without a frame, those angry, desperate demons darting around in the sky, seeking something, anything to inhabit—it means that there's space inside our bodies, room for more than just our own souls.

Leah must have sensed my misgivings, because she stayed after with Tim, shot some teasing questions my way once the room had cleared.

"But you can't possibly believe that," she said, laughing a little. "The demon pigs. It's silly."

"I don't think my belief has anything to do with it," I told her.

Tim was listening but clearly annoyed. He exhaled through his nose, cleaned his glasses again.

"Of course it does," Leah countered. "We're all interested in what you believe. This is why we come."

A long silence fell, during which it became clear it was Tim's turn to talk. Leah looked towards him, and he shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, cleaning his glasses again. "I don't think anybody knows. People just tell themselves whatever it takes to believe."

I thought about that for a moment. Tim put his glasses back on his face and looked into my eyes.

"Besides, as far as I can tell the point of that story isn't the man on the road, or even the demon. It's about names," he said, and then turned and left the room.

"I'm sorry," Leah said after a moment. "He had a bad experience. I've tried to get him to talk about it, but he doesn't tell me much." Then she reached across and put her hand on my knee. I had the strange feeling that it was something she'd seen in a movie.

"Leah," I said.

"What?" She smiled again. "You're scared. All of the time you are scared."

I put my hand over hers for a moment, felt her thumb with my own before lifting it off of my knee.

"We have to go" she said, and then shouldered her purse. "Next week?"

"Next week," I told her, and then she left.

It took almost a month of falls to reach the young man in the swimming trunks. Every time I got close enough to see his face he'd turn away, spin clockwise away from my grasping hand, and before I knew it I'd be staring at the ceiling again, a new injury to add to the collection. On the morning we finally met I was a little worried about my left ear. I had fallen on it three or four times that week and it had started to sort of engorge. I had this strange feeling that if I hit it one more time it would erupt, like a kernel into popcorn.

I hit the front of my head, luckily, fell straight forward into the tiling above the shower handle before collapsing into the tub, where the blackness came to greet me again. I watched the dull rectangle form, turn gray and then orange, saw the young man standing there at attention. This time I didn't walk towards him. I just stood and waited for my eyes to adjust to the new light, watched as the soft sunny glow crept up into the corners of the rectangle, climbed outside the frame and spread to the rest of the room. In time I felt the soft loam of a riverbank on my bare feet. The long warm call of a million cicadas swelled and swelled then dissipated, made space for the rank odor of decay I recognized immediately as algae.

I looked down at my body and saw it young and complete, unmangled by time and puberty both. There was a hardened glaze on my skin, a film of sweat and river water baked into a crust by the sun. Ahead of me the water flowed with a quick current, flanked on both sides by deeply bowed willows and big leafy ferns. I took a stop towards it and, to my surprise, felt another hand in my own, a leading gesture, someone pulling me towards the water.

She stepped ahead of me then, and I saw her again after so many years: long dark hair and brown skin and swim suit bottoms that didn't match her cotton tank top. I couldn't see her face. She wouldn't turn around. I watched her wade into the water, saw it swallow her body up to her waist but she tilted against the current and began floating downstream on her back, like a leaf blown onto the surface from the banks. I knew I was supposed to follow, and I did. I plunged into the river, submerged myself completely in the inky cold black, but when I came back to the surface hoping to see her ahead of me I was inside my bathroom again, draped over the side of the tub, sucking hot mouthfuls of air into my stinging lungs.

Tim came back the next day, before youth group. He walked in while I was setting the folding chairs into a circle and practicing my talk for the night, a lesson about Jesus and his temptations in the desert. I was surprised to see he wasn't alone. A tall kid with a shaved head and little black eyes trailed in his wake. Tim was holding his skateboard.

"Jesus, man," Tim said, a little disgusted. At first I couldn't tell what he meant, but then I remembered the injuries, my left eye in particular. The skin around it had started to turn purple and yellow after I had fallen face first into the wall. There were some popped blood vessels as well, so most of the white around my iris had gone red.

"Hi, Tim."

"The fuck's wrong with you?" he asked. There was genuine interest in his voice, as if I could answer his question, but also reticence, like he was scared of what he was about to do.

"What do you mean?" I said.

Tim sort of sighed and nodded and the kid behind him stepped forward and planted a punch right in the center of my chest. I went down immediately. From the floor I heard a frightening choking noise and then realized it was coming from me.

"Fucking creep, man," Tim said. "How old are you anyway?"

"What?"

The kid stomped on my left hand with his boot and I screamed.

"Leah isn't even eighteen," he went on. "Did you know that? You could be her dad. I should call

the fucking cops. They'd take you to prison.”

“You're confused,” I tried.

“No. You're confused,” he said, and then swung his skateboard into side of my head.

I had never floated on my back before. It had always frustrated me when I was younger, watching the older kids float in the pool while I had to tread water constantly, my legs growing tired in a matter of minutes. But something was different about the river that day. It moved with a swift current, pushed through a furrow of red shale that rose as giant walls on both sides of the water. I looked up at the sky and watched it move, saw the stringy gold clouds enter and then exit my vision as I floated downstream, the cool water pressing up against my back and my legs.

Where had we even met? I couldn't recall exactly, could only remember the pressure rising in my chest and neck as she pulled me away from the group and asked me to come with her, someplace private, a place she went when she wanted to be alone. She was standing there now, on the bank, holding the rope swing. I knew that if I could just keep my body still, could stay afloat for just a moment, that soon I'd be there with her, and that I could admit myself to desire in a spirit of joy.

That's when I saw them. There were just two or three at first, each one tumbling through the air over the red cliff side above me. They seemed to hang in the sky for a moment, haloed with orange sunlight, frozen, but followed suddenly by many more, dozens even, an entire stampede of snarling pigs tossing themselves over the edge. The animals plummeted towards me in a havoc of tusks and dust and bristly fur that blocked out the light from the sun, each one screaming in its own voice, announcing its readiness to plunge into the rocks and water below and be done with it forever. I closed my eyes and waited for the splash.