After Dinner Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Magazine

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This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

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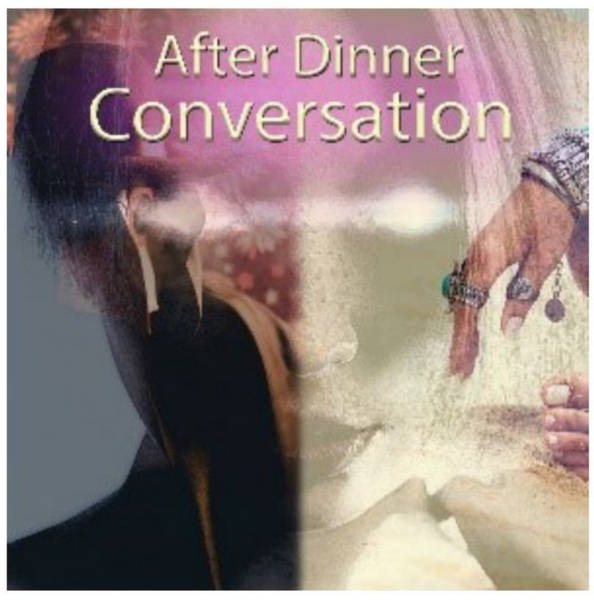

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From the Publisher

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After Dinner Conversation believes humanity is improved by *ethics* and *morals* grounded in philosophical truth. Philosophical truth is discovered through intentional reflection and respectful debate. In order to facilitate that process, we have created a growing series of short stories, audio and video podcast discussions, across genres, as accessible examples of abstract ethical and philosophical ideas intended to draw out deeper discussions with friends, family, and students.

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I d l e H o r n s

Garrett Davis

* * *

The tongs feel heavy in Bub's clawed hands. Seven millennia without incident and he freezes during inspection. In front of Bub, is a thief? He's bound by thick rope to an office chair with poor lumbar support. Bub had truly thought of everything. *So why am I nervous?* He smiles apologetically at the overseer who'd come to witness todays punishments; one of the original angels who fell alongside the great beast. He motions for Bub to continue. The thief senses the change too. Hope glimmer, a gold mist, rises off him like steam. Bub shakily reaches out with the tongs and clamps onto the thief's toe nail. His feet are bare and bloody. They were already on the forth little piggy. Six left—eleven if he does the hands for extra credit. Bub likes counting. He enjoys the steady progression and the satisfaction of meeting a quota. Bub pulls, there's resistance at first but then it comes free. He drops it in the bucket with the others. The overseer nods approvingly and Bub forgets all about the sudden wave of nausea and is quite sure of his place in the natural order of things until pitchfork day, four thousand years later.

Bub and his fellow devils of the fourth circle stand on the fields of ruin. It is here that much of the bedrock blasted from the ninth circle into the atmosphere fell back to Tartarus. Alters had been hewn from the stones and it is here that they tied their sinners. Bub sharpens the tines of his pitchfork slowly, methodically. Flashing a fanged grin at his victim, Bub realizes that the man he is preparing to run through just so happens to be the exact same thief from inspection day! Glances around his stone, Bub sees his coworkers are engrossed in their work. Sulphur and screams fill the air. No one pays him any attention. Everyone loves pitchfork day. Bub launches forward and does something he's never done before. He asks the sinner what he's done to deserve such a punishment. What the man says haunts Bub forever.

He says, "ye-Aaaarrrg!"

Pulling the pitchfork free, Bub slaps the man across the cheek until he regains his senses. "Oh, don't be such a baby. Tell me why you are here?"

"Bikes!" The man says.

"Bikes?"

"Yes bikes, I—I stole bikes and sold them."

"How many?"

The thief's sweating, ash stained brow furrows, "Sir?"

"How many bikes did you steal? Two? Four? Six?"

The thief's face contorts in what is either great pain or deep thought, "Um, well I'm not sure. Maybe a dozen. Look I'm really sorry—"

Bub plunges the farm tool into the man once more but his heart is no longer in it. The fourth circle suddenly seems cold. *How long can one maim the souls of the damned and still get something out of it?* He thinks. Bub steps back to watch his brethren do their foul work. Amidst the screams and blood and gore, he recognizes them for what they are; animals driven by bloodlust compelled to torture without end. *All this torture and*

pain, all because someone stole twelve bikes four thousand years ago? How trivial a drop in the ocean of eternity. How meaningless forever suddenly became in the face of a dozen bicycles. So Bub does what, to his knowledge, no one in hell has ever done.

Bub quits.

The pitchfork clatters at his clawed feet. Walking over to the immense wall of the pit he begins to climb. He doesn't look back, only up, using the sky as his target. A sickly yellow bull's eye far, far above. Eventually his broken and bleeding hands crest the edge of the cliff and he feels something soft. Bub pulls himself up onto the plains of Limbo and up a small grassy knoll the color of antique slate. Chest heaving, he watches a tenebrous geyser of ash spews from the pit he left behind and up into the atmosphere. It falls back to the plains like snow, suffocating plant life where it piles. Next to him on the knoll a sapling struggles to push free of the soot.

Digging it out, Bub asks it, "Well, what now?"

The plant says nothing of course but silence seems a profound answer. Someone will come to fetch him eventually. When they get around to it. *That's the problem with eternity*, he thinks, It's *a woefully long time—all of it, in fact.* They might not notice he's gone for thousands of years. Bub yawns and shuts his eyes. When he opens them again the sapling has grown into a tree. Its roots have wound their way around his body ensnaring him while he had slept. Bub shrugs. This spot seems as good as any for a holiday. There is nowhere else he can flee to. Earth is strictly for the mortals and as for Heaven…Well, he knows *that* ship sailed long ago.

Resolving to enjoy his time off, Bub lounges and lays, loafs and dawdles and becomes quite adept at dozing off. Apart from these "rigorous" activities, Bub counts. He tallies the hairs on his head. Quantifies the tentacles on a passing nightmare and adds up the very circles of Hell; One hundred thousand, thirty-two and nine respectively.

A monster slowly floats into view, wafting up over the cliff edge like ash. A living paradox, the monster is humanoid with barbarian musculature but possesses cunning eyes. Both beautiful and terrible to behold, his youthful body exudes an aura of decay. Bub counts the wings. There are four. Two tiny wings growing from his head and two sprouting from the ankles. They hang limply in the air as if they are merely decorative. He wields a very impractical weapon: a golden staff wrapped with two live cobras, each vying to strike the killing blow onto the other. Fresh blood trickles down its haft informing Bub of its ornamental nature.

An Antediluvian of the Sixth Circle had been sent to pursue him. Bub shrinks down into the roots, willing them to pull him into the soil. A team of Imps or Succubi, minor demons like himself would have been more practical—but to send a mighty Antediluvian—apparently an example was to be made. Landing softly, the Antediluvian scans the surrounding hills for his quarry. Black eyes fall on the tree and he marches in its direction. Bub writhes against his bonds but is unable to free himself in time. The Antediluvian looms above. Bub raises a hand to block an incoming blow that never arrives. Peeking through his fingers, Bub watches his pursuer use the staff's unornamented end to rip roots free of the ground.

"Been looking for you for ages. Glad to have the job done. Right! Get to your feet and we'll be off. Weather is quite pleasant up here. Can see why you picked it. Should've looked here first, really. All that wasted time. Can't imagine climbing though, but then I've got these little suckers." The Antediluvian clicks his ankles together causing the wings to flutter excitedly.

Bub opens his mouth three times to speak but stammers so badly he has to regroup and start over. The truth is that he hadn't expected such a fearsome demon to have such a light and airy voice. Or speak in such a rapid-fire way. Seemingly as fast as the creatures tongue would allow. There is also something vaguely familiar about him.

"You—you're Hermes, aren't you?" Bub asks.

"Did the sceptre gave it away?"

"The wings, actually." Bub says, "Aren't they supposed to be on your hat?"

"Aha! Got you there. The hat hides them. Usually it's this old thing gives me away," He shakes the staff back and forth producing annoyed hisses from the entwined reptiles. "Don't know why I keep it. I'm sentimental I guess. Enough chit chat, times a wasting and people want to talk to you."

"Are you always the messenger?" Bub asks.

"I dabble here and there, but in answer: Yes, for the most part. Call me Merc by the way. Shorter saves time."

He extends a hand for Bub to shake, who does so cautiously. Merc uses the handshake to pull Bub to his feet. Bub flinches as Merc brushes the remaining ash off his shoulders. Merc seems to bare no cruel intention. This lack of malice unsettles Bub but it also gives him an idea. "So you found me. What now?"

"Take you down to the ninth and then I'm off to the next job."

The ninth, deepest circle of hell, reserved for the treacherous and ruled by the Morning Star himself. Brood mothers often tell Fledglings tales, in order to give them nightmares, about how all nine circles are in reality the impact crater from the beasts fall. So hot is the fire of the black lake that the ash rides thermals all the way up to the plains of limbo. Chained to its surface: Lucifer enemy of creation and he wanted to speak to Bub.

"The ninth!" Bub says, feeling suddenly weak in the knees.

Merc makes the whistling sound of a dropping bomb, "Straight to the bottom."

"Look you don't *have* to take me anywhere. No one *has* to do anything. It's all pointless."

"Good," Merc says, "We've agreed this is pointless. Let's go."

"Wait," Bub says. "You're not listening. Say I stole twelve bikes—"

"Bikes?"

"Yes, bikes. But it doesn't matter it could be adultery or murder too. If you compare that one time—"

"Or twelve—"

"Shut up!" Bub interrupts, "Think of existence as a whole rather than life and afterlife. Over ten years, you steal bikes and then get tortured for ten times the ninth power for it. The punishment is disproportionate to the crime and yet those ten years are being held up as more important than the rest."

Merc frowns, "That does seem a tad unfair. What do you purpose I do then?"

"Don't take me back," Bub says. "Tell them you couldn't find me. Or stay here, you said it yourself the weather is good."

"Here?" Merc rubs his chin. "What would we do? What have you been doing?"

"Nothing," Bub shrugs. "It's actually really nice."

Merc shakes his head as though a chill has run up his spine. "No, no, no, no. Always something to be done. Cows to steal, souls to carry, people to trick. I'd simply die of boredom. Now come along."

Merc grabs Bub by the arm and pulls him towards the edge of the pit. Bub can feel the heat of the thermals, hear the screams of the punished and he does not want to go back. One last idea comes to him and it is strong enough that some hope glimmers off his skin. Any fight against Merc, a Sixth ringer and a very old God, will not go Bub's way. But being a God might also be Merc's weakness. Monotheistic religions won out against the old pantheons not because the latter lost its believers but because the former consolidated all its power into one being. The old Gods, Gods like Merc, segregated and took dominion of specific realms and

attributes. Merc didn't seem the type to put up with nonsense so Bub goes limp and falls to the ground. Merc stumbles at the sudden lack of resistance.

"Get up! Get up!" Merc yells, stamping his feet.

Bub does not reply. He lies face down in the grass breathing deep of its earthen musk in case he never gets another chance. Merc kicks him with a winged foot. Bub grunts but does his best to stay still. He counts the blades of grass. If he fails to comply and engages in passive resistance, Merc might just get bored, cut his losses and return to report his whereabouts to his superiors, giving Bub the chance to hide once more.

Merc swings with his scepter which lands with a thunk! The snakes, quick as lightning, bite in the brief instant of contact. Years of torturing has taught Bub not to scream. Screams encourage the attacker. There are six hundred sixty-seven blades of grass in his field of vision. One less and he would have taken it as an omen.

"Enough!" Merc says,

It worked. I've won.

Merc slams his staff in the soft earth near Bub's face. A pulse of power radiates out from the staff and into the surrounding landscape. The ground trembles and there's a tell-tale lurch in Bub's stomach as the ground falls out from under him. The entire hillside crumbles into the yawning emptiness of the pit below. Merc hovers in place and whistles the unmistakable note of a bomb being dropped.

Bub falls, smote by a God he does not recognize. Air, full of ash and the smell of brimstone, howls in his ears to the point where he cannot hear his own screams. He watches the yellow sky recede to be a dot the size of his thumbnail, only to get smaller still. It feels as though he's being slurped up like a plate of entrails, sliding ever closer to some dreadful maw. He shoots past his former home on the fourth circle and wonders if anyone there witnesses his passing. The air gets hotter. Miniature bolts of lightning

18+

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lick at exposed skin leaving black scorch marks where they touch. To his knowledge he is the only demon in all of eternity to quit but he knows he is not the first to make this headlong plunge. Mortals and monsters alike often forget that Satan was once the angel at Gods right hand. *Why wouldn't they?* Satan spent far less time being that man. And yet he's defined by that act of rebellion. Was he the devil while he fell? Is he an Angel now? Just who will Bub meet at the bottom?

The force of gravity is overwhelming Bub feels like he's stretching, as if his face is falling faster than his feet. The nausea inducing lurch in his stomach does not fade but instead intensifies. He passes the fifth circle, rockets through the sixth. Seven is alight with flame but the ninth is a blackest ball of obsidian growing steadily larger as he plummets through the eighth. The impact does not send ash streaming to the sky far far above. It doesn't break ground adding a tenth layer to hell but it does break him. Any eternal being cannot be created or destroyed. Perhaps this is why, God did not simply will Lucifer into the nothingness from whence he came. But instead, like Merc, was repurposed. Bub is a conscious pile of flesh and shattered bone. With nothing intact for the muscles to pull on he's immobile. He can however see out of one intact eye, left miraculously undamaged...a miracle that has him praying to go blind.

Chunks of flaming tree crash down around him. Its kindling illuminates his surroundings. There are four impossibly large lengths of silver chain secured by four identical golden spikes driven into the obsidian bedrock. Bound by these great chains is a giant. He's stretched out over a section of the black rock that wobbles like gelatin. Its thin crust ruptures, spewing forth white hot magma onto the giants back. He grimaces in pain and Bub notices all thirty-two teeth have been ground down to little more than nubs.

A smaller man kneels down to inspect what is left of Bub. He's wearing a three-piece suit designed in Earth fashion. His hair is neatly

combed and parted. Resting on his nose is a pair of gold rimmed spectacles with tinted red glass. He pinches Bub's flesh and rubs it between two fingers the way a toddler might play with a booger. Bub's tongue rolls in an empty cavity that had once been his mouth. The shrapnel of his bones grind against his soft tissues under the strangers red tinted gaze.

"You're Bub," The stranger says.

With no mouth, Bub cannot answer—cannot scream.

"It's okay. I know you can't answer. Think it in your mind."

Yes.

"Good," The man says. "Do you know who I am?"

Yes but how—

"That's the body." Lucifer says tilting his head in the direction of the giant. "Think of me as the unholy spirit if that makes it easier." He pauses, "You quit."

Yes

"Why?"

Bikes.

"Bikes?"

Bub rolls his remaining eyeball, painful but satisfying none the less. Bub recalls the thief four thousand years ago and walks this unholy spirit through his revelations and actions up until this moment. *Can you convince someone who sees himself as greater than God, that he had been wrong all along?* Bub wonders. Then tries to un-wonder it. Lucifer takes off his glasses and polishes them on the fine fabric of his vest. He appears to be at least considering the possibility. Then with a sigh he place them back onto his face.

"You mistake me," he quietly says. "I do not doll out punishment for a sin committed. I do not sit and judge. It is not about a moment sat next to eternity but ownership of that moment for it. I do what I do not to punish mortals but to see the pain inflicted on the face of God when I sully

something he loves and to that end I use you."

The giant rattles its chain as a fresh burst of magma sears it's back. The cacophony of metal echo ad nauseam through the caverns of the ninth circle. Lucifer wrinkles his nose. "Oh, quit your whining!" He turns back to Bub. "If I cannot use you in my war effort," he says pinching a bit of Bubs skin and stretching it, "and let's be honest for once, I can't." He lets go and the flesh droops back into a saggy pile. "Then I shall punish that idleness."

Lucifer stands up, pulling a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wipes his hands clean of some perceived filth. At the same time hands sprout from the ground around Bub. They knead and massage skin, working the muscle against the grit of bone. There is nothing he can do but count to infinity. He starts at one.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Bub says, "*All this torture and pain, all because someone stole twelve bikes four thousand years ago? How trivial a drop in the ocean of eternity.*" Is the concept of eternal punishment for any individual sin, ever just? Is the problem simply that we see bike theft as a "minor sin," but God does not?
2. For what, if any, actions would eternal punishment ever be just?
3. Do you believe there is a "hell?" If so, what is it like and what would be the reasons for someone to be sent to it?
4. Is it fair that Bub is being punished for eternity for *refusing* to punish people for eternity?
5. Why is there a hell at all? If God is all knowing, and all powerful, and all good, how is it even possible for a person to sin?

* * *

The Mind Reader

John Doble

* * *

It happened so long ago you'd think I'd just forget it. But I haven't, I can't; it's nested in my mind, coiled and twisted into my memory like a serpent I can't get rid of. I remember it at odd moments: when I'm eating breakfast or riding the train to work. Once I thought of it while I was making love. And each time I do, it remains as awful, as sinister and stunning as it was that night. But for reasons that keep changing. Different, elusive reasons I never fully understand.

It was the winter of 1973 and I was still in college. The country was at war in Southeast Asia, and in the summer, there were riots in the cities. Events that were deadly serious, yet with an unreality about them too. As if they weren't all they seemed to be, not something to take at face value. I remember anti-war protests that felt as serious as a rock concert: the air filled with music and the smell of marijuana, kids wearing red bandanas, waving Viet Cong flags, and chanting rhymes about how Ho Chi Minh and the National Liberation Front, the NLF, were going to win, like children sticking their tongues out or saying dirty words at dinner to see what reaction they could provoke. Even the young black rioters interviewed on

television seemed to pretend to feel angry when what they really felt was scorn, and perhaps a queer sort of pride that someone was paying attention. It was theater, a way of showing off. It wasn't real, not to the kids on campus, or the ones in the ghetto, maybe not even to those who told the police to shoot to kill. But of course it was all real. And serious, deadly serious. I just didn't see it, didn't understand.

It was a Thursday night; we were in a college hangout called the Waystation, an old stucco building that had been there since the Revolution. Once it was a carriage house on the road from Philadelphia to Baltimore. The stage, then the train, would stop while passengers got out to stretch or eat a meal. I used to think about them, trying to imagine what they were like: gentlemen farmers, merchants, salesmen, immigrants, perhaps an occasional Congressman who knew Henry Clay. No one knew who used to sit in that room, their boots drying in front of a fire, with a mug of ale and a trencher filled with stew. But now the place was run down, seedy-looking; there was talk of tearing it down. The outside was cracked and peeling; hunks of stucco had been patched so often, they looked like tumorous sores. Inside, the great fireplace had been long ago bricked over and the planks on the floor were stained and worn, more gray than brown, with dust so thick you could move it with your shoe. People said it was owned by a speculator, that the university wanted the land for a new dormitory, and that only the price and some protestors from the historical society were holding things up. But students, being students, had made the place their own despite, or because of, the dirt and wear, the off-color draft beer, and the jukebox that played so loud it rattled your rib cage.

It was nearly nine o'clock and I was at the bar. The room was crowded; it was always crowded on Thursdays. Students and former students and those who never were, mingled with a handful of faculty members, the younger ones, and a couple of "townies" looking for girls

who believed in free love. They sat around cheap metal tables with red Formica tops, on chairs with rusted chrome legs and red plastic seats, laughing and talking and arguing about politics, philosophy, religion, and sex. And below the surface, beneath the loose talk and the laughter, lay a reality that few of them knew or cared about. I was like the rest of them. Jeffrey was not.

"People can be divided into two types?" Jeffrey was saying. "The weak and the strong?"

We were talking about psychology, my field of study, and a paper I was writing, and he was repeating what I'd told him about a personality test. The test had been developed after World War II by a group of psychologists who, shocked by what happened in Nazi Germany, had tried to understand how doctors and lawyers and bankers and businessmen--a population of law-abiding, God-fearing, ordinary people--could have taken part in it all, or at least stood there, watching it unfold, without trying to stop it, without crying out in protest. The philosopher Hannah Arendt coined the phrase the "banality of evil" to describe men like Adolph Eichmann who could be kind to children and animals, yet be part of a totalitarian machinery that murdered 12 million people: six million Jews from across the continent, and also homosexuals, gypsies, Russians, Ukrainians and other East Europeans; civilians: old men, women, children. The psychologists had developed a test to discover what kind of person could do such things. In the psychology literature, it is called the "F-scale" the "F" standing for fascist. Elegant in its simplicity, the test consists of only five questions with which a person either agrees or disagrees. An extreme response, strong agreement or disagreement, on all five items, reveals, according to the test-makers, that a respondent has an authoritarian bent or fascist tendencies, and, inferentially, that he might well fall in behind someone like a Hitler or a Mussolini. Jeffrey had asked me what the five questions were and, when I'd told him, he latched onto one of them.

"People can be divided into the weak and the strong? Now I'm supposed to tell you whether I agree with that or not? And depending on my answer, you can tell if…what's the jargon you used? If I have an 'authoritarian personality?'"

It occurred to me later that I may have upset him, that what he did was a defense, a way of protecting himself from what he felt as an attack. But none of that occurred to me then. All I saw was that he was distorting what I'd told him, deliberately oversimplifying. I was sorry I'd brought the subject up.

"It's not *my* test," I explained again. "I didn't make it up. It's a standard test that has been used for decades. And that's only one of a series of questions. Someone has to answer *all* of them. Then, depending on *all* the answers, a psychologist can make a *guess*, an educated guess, about a *tendency* that *might* be part of someone's personality.

He smiled in that self-satisfied way of his, breathing deep and laughing once, so that his shoulder rose and fell. As if to suggest that life was so simple, so easy to understand, if only you saw it the way he did. But then, of course, the smile also suggested, that was too much to ask.

"How easily you dispense with human complexity," he said and then sighed affectedly. "Well, I do agree. Strongly." He seemed bored by the conversation. "Most people are weak, a few aren't. Now what? A psychologist--or a would-be psychologist--would say I'm what--a book-burner? That I want to exterminate people? Run a concentration camp?"

A TV was suspended above the bar and someone had turned it on. I looked up and watched a powerful man in a red t-shirt and shorts slam an orange ball through an iron hoop. There was no cheering, no applause. The volume was turned down. It was the music, the loud, driving rock and roll music dominating all sound in the overcrowded room that caused the televised giant to run down the floor, waving a dark brown fist.

"Jeffrey, why are you ridiculing what I told you? Making it sound

silly, like so much nonsense?"

I was trying to cut through his playacting, hoping that one question, one honest question, would change things between us. But he was like everything else around me: the jukebox, the furniture, the mirror behind the bar. Even if I had opened the door and let in enough air to clear out the haze and cigarette smoke, it would all still be there, it would all be the same.

"Is that what I was doing?" he said.

I felt anger build up inside me. He was patronizing me, treating me like a fool. Yet, naively, I persisted.

"Jeffrey, there are probably plenty of psychologists who might criticize that question, maybe the whole test. But their criticisms would be thoughtful, analytic. They wouldn't take it so…personally."

He signaled to the bartender that we wanted another round.

"Suppose I prove it?" he said. "Right here. Tonight. Suppose I prove that all your little textbook questions aren't worth the paper they're written on. If I did that, what would you think?"

As the bartender set two mugs of beer in front of us, I realized he aroused my curiosity. But instead of his question, I thought about him, about how well I knew him and what it was I knew.

Pale and thin, with dark curly hair, Jeffrey was not imposing to look at. A graduate student in photography, he was outstanding in his field, at least that's what people said. He'd had two shows and was already selling his work. He had few friends; I suppose I counted as one of them. But if not well liked, he was always treated with a certain deference or respect. In part, I'm sure, because of his talent. But there was another reason too.

During that winter of protests and marches, it seemed as if he always wore his old army fatigues. And though he never talked about it, I had somehow learned what he'd done: He'd been a first lieutenant, won a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. He led reconnaissance missions into Laos

at a time when American troops weren't in Laos, at least according to the government. There was a day in the jungle when he surprised a North Vietnamese soldier and killed him with his bayonet. And an afternoon, years later, when--though I never heard him talk about the war, never criticize its wisdom or morality--he, along with a few hundred others, threw his medals over the White House fence.

His left hand was deformed, the tips of his thumb and forefinger missing. I'd heard it was caused by a land mine. It was gruesome looking, a reminder of a war I detested. But it was something else--a badge, a mark, something I secretly envied. For it was proof that Jeffrey had been tested. And come through.

In contrast I was in my first year of graduate school. I was 23. My goal was to teach at a university. And though I never achieved it, I was, and am, generally content with my life. Except around Jeffrey. Then I'm aware of something else, a pinprick of a feeling, that I don't measure up, not to him. And that I never will.

"Prove it?" I said. "What do you mean you're going to prove it?"

"A demonstration." He waved his hand indicating the roomful of students. "With one of them."

He nodded toward the back. "See that girl? In the corner, in the sweatshirt. The one who looks like she's just been raped." He smiled coldly at the description. "Where do you think she's headed? A junkie, an alcoholic? Battered wife, unwed mother? All of the above? She's perfect, exactly what I need."

The girl sat at a table with two others. Above their heads, revolving slowly and illuminated from within, a half-dozen miniature horses, tan with shaggy white hooves, pulled a red beer wagon past green plastic trees. Around and around they went, in circles, forever. Or until someone stopped them.

Her companions looked like they came from an earlier era. A pretty

blonde in a tight-fitting sweater who looked like a cheerleader or sorority member was listening intently to a broad-shouldered fellow with short hair in a varsity jacket. But the girl with them, the one he'd singled out, was a child of the times.

Her eyes did not shine from too much beer; rather, they had a glazed, indifferent, faraway look signifying drugs or depression or both. Her sweatshirt looked slept-in, or as if she took it off at night, rolled into a ball, and put it under her pillow. Her hair, long and stringy and a dull shade of brown, hung down over her shoulders and full, unfettered breasts, sprawling onto the tabletop like so many roots from a dying plant.

I wondered what she had in common with the other two, why they were together in the first place. The girl seemed left out of the conversation next to her. As if she were there by accident or as a favor to someone. The blonde would lean back and laugh or reach across the table and take the fellow's hand. But her expression, the dull, vacant stare, never changed.

I felt a kind of tired sympathy for the girl. She was like so many others, too many for one person to care about. In those days, it seemed like the campus was littered with kids just like her: who'd dropped out or run away, whose search for something they couldn't define led them to fill their bodies with drugs and live like vagabonds. Yet they were proud and defiant too, as if what they were doing was somehow true, or free, or spiritually authentic. I wished someone would tum off the music and turn up the volume of the basketball game.

"I need a strategy," Jeffrey said. "I can't just walk over and introduce myself. She'd have the advantage then, in spite of herself."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're a man of science," he said. "Think of it as an experiment. I'm about to conduct an experiment using that girl." His sigh was too heavy to be genuinely felt. "I wish there was someone who was more of a

challenge, but in the interest of time…"

A look of concern must have crossed my face because, in a mocking tone, he said, "Don't worry, your liberal sensibilities won't be offended. I have no intention of harming her."

He was patronizing me again, I wanted to insult him and leave. Instead I watched him reach for a piece of paper and on it, in large capital letters, print two words: "I KNOW." He showed me the paper, then folded it in half.

"We begin," he said.

Without glancing at her, he walked over to the jukebox near her table, dropped in a coin, and pushed some buttons. The girl did not notice him. Her expression, the dull, vacant stare, did not change.

On his way back and with seeming indifference, he bumped her chair and dropped the paper near her foot. She picked it up and waved it listlessly after him, then called out as he re-crossed the room. But he paid no attention and rejoined me at the bar.

"You must not look at her," he said and obediently, I turned away. "That was to get her attention. Now we wait."

It didn't take long. A moment later she came up behind us and tapped him on the shoulder. But he did not respond.

"Hey" she said, tapping him again, "you dropped this."

Deliberately, he spun around on his stool, and when I turned too, I thought of his description: a girl who's just been raped. Her eyes were red, probably from marijuana. Her skin was blemished and sallow looking. And her clothes--a gray sweatshirt and a pair of faded jeans--hung on her like they belonged to someone else, as if she'd found them somewhere, tried them on, and decided to wear them anyway, even though they didn't fit. She couldn't have been more than 21. But her tired, drawn, worn-out appearance made her look years older.

"You dropped this," she said, offering him the paper.

Jeffrey kept his hands folded in his lap, refusing to take in. In a tone that was nearly hostile, he said, simply, “I know.”

The girl started. She stood there a moment, her outstretched hand holding her offering, and smiled tentatively.

“Is this a joke?” she said. “Some kind of joke?”

He ignored her question. “You read it,” he said, and she colored slightly.

“It opened when I picked it up,” she lied.

Jeffrey shook his head. '“You had to read it.” His tone was matter of fact. ''You have no self-control.”

The girl seemed to collect herself.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here but this is yours, right?” She waved the paper and he nodded. “Well here,” she flipped it into his lap, “if it’s yours, take it.”

She went back to her table and Jeffrey stared at her. I was about to laugh at his “experiment” but he ignored me and stared at the girl.

She sat back down and pretended not to notice. But she knew he was watching. Self-consciously, she combed her hair with her fingers, then, after lighting a cigarette, made an attempt to join in her friends’ conversation. All the time, Jeffrey stared. Finally she crushed out her cigarette and stared back. Their eyes locked and for a moment she glared at him, chin up, challenging him. Then her face relaxed and she smiled, a tentative little half-smile, inviting him to respond. Instead, he spun around on his stool.

“Superstition,” he said. “Signs, omens, magical thinking--that’s what’s important to her. She doesn’t realize how important.” He sipped his beer and I thought of how a detective works, deductively, clue by clue, piecing things together. “She has no self-respect, anyone who looks like that…she probably hates her life, hates herself. But instead of doing anything about it, or trying to, she’s waiting for someone to come along

and do it for her. A stranger, a magician, some phantom from the back of her mind who'll ride in and whisk her up on his horse and carry her away to live happily ever after."

I thought about Samuel Beckett and his play, *Waiting for Godot*, and about the cults and movements and religious sects that had sprung up, and about the desperate kids who had run away to join them. I was about to mention all that to Jeffrey, but he continued to explain and I did not interrupt.

"She's starting to wonder if I'm him, the one who's finally come. It's a simple enough dynamic, it happens all the time." He grinned, baring his teeth, and said, "Your crowd must have a name for it."

I don't know why I answered. I knew he was baiting me, treating me with the same contempt he felt for the girl. Yet for some reason, I felt the need to show I understood.

"A 'conversion experience,'" I said. "Someone who's predisposed to make a radical change. That's a term that comes to mind."

"Why *do* you people have to label the life out of things? 'Conversion experience.' He nearly spit out the words. "When what you mean is pathetic little people leading pathetic little lives, hoping against hope that someone will come along and change it all for them. And someone will. Inevitably, they will find someone." He reached into his wallet for a ten-dollar bill. "But she's not quite ready so I'll help things along."

He handed the money to the bartender and ordered that a small glass of ice water be taken to her.

"She'll ask who sent it. The only thing you're to say is, she already knows." The bartender cheerfully agreed.

I watched in the mirror as he set the glass in front of her, said something, then shrugged. The girl looked up at Jeffrey. At his back.

At first she ignored the water. Then she wrapped one hand around the glass and began tapping it lightly. She glanced our way, saw he still wasn't looking, raised the glass halfway to her mouth, leaned toward it and took a sip. She glanced up again and took another sip. Then she put the glass down and turned in her chair, as if making a final attempt to resist. Then, suddenly, as if overcome with a burning, unquenchable thirst, she grabbed the glass, lifted it to her mouth, and drained it, gulped it down. I told him what happened and he nodded.

"A good choice, don't you think? Water? Necessary for life, yet so abundant, it's free. Of course it could have been anything--ashes, an animal, wine that represents blood. They're all incarnations of the same thing, aren't they? And so, the *form* doesn't really matter. It's the belief that's key. Of course, with her, I wanted the taking, the taking of something into her body."

What he said was chilling; it was so calculated, so piercing, so merciless. Yet fascinating too, darkly fascinating.

"She wants to believe now, she wants to believe in me." He motioned that we wanted another round. "But it's far from over. She'll probably come over. If she does, no matter what she says or asks you, you must not answer her. For me to do this without harming her, you cannot say a word."

He was being condescending again and I got irritated. I sipped my beer and looked up. There was a commercial on the television, a time out in the game, and I wondered what the score was. Before I could find out, the girl was standing behind us.

"Hey," she said, tugging his shoulder and spinning him around, "what's going on?"

He stared at her and did not reply, and she took her hand off him. "I said, what's going—"

"'What do you think?" he interrupted.

"I have no idea!" Her tone was indignant.

He reached around for his beer and took a long, slow sip. "I know," he said.

The girl took a half step backward. I could feel her unease.

"You drank the water," Jeffrey said.

"That was from you?"

The transparency of her ploy made him smile.

"Okay, so I knew it was from you. I was thirsty. So what?" He watched her, saying nothing.

"I said I was thirsty."

"I knew you were," he said.

The girl began to laugh, a nervous little laugh, more to herself than anything. As if to hear a familiar sound, to convince herself she was really here and this was really happening.

"This is creepy," she said. "This is really creepy. *You're* creepy and…Jesus, now you're gonna say 'I know' again."

The music seemed to blast louder than ever.

"Is this a game? Is this some kind of game?" she said.

"In a way," Jeffrey said.

"It is?" She was clearly surprised by his answer. Her shoulders hunched and she began stroking her neck. One arm dropped straight down, her hand dangling; the other settled across her breasts. She seemed to muster something and her tone was flip.

"Suppose I don't want to play?" she said.

He shrugged and she turned to go back to her table. She took a few steps in that direction, then changed her mind.

"You weren't going to stop me, were you? You'd just let me go back there. To them. *Them*." Her tone made it clear how she felt about her

companions.

"Why would I stop you?" Jeffrey said. "Why would I want to?"

For the first time the girl looked at me. "What's going on here? What's this all about?"

But following his instructions, I did not reply.

She looked down, as if deciding what to do. The stool next to him was empty and suddenly, like a child in a drugstore, she bounced up on it and spun around.

"Okay, I'll play your game. What are the rules?" She laughed. "What are the rules? Does your game have any rules?"

"I don't want you to sit there," Jeffrey said.

She threw back her head and laughed, much too loudly to sound carefree as she wanted. "You think you're so cool. Who cares what you want? Who gives a flying fuck?"

He watched her for a moment, expressionless, then, without a hint of irritation, shifted on his stool, turning his back on her, dismissing her, shutting her out. His manner was totally controlled and icy cold.

The girl didn't know what to do. She sat there, gripping the chrome band of her stool with both hands, twisting herself back and forth like a child waiting to be told she was excused, that she could get up from the table and go out to play. Loudly, to provoke him, she said, "How'd you hurt your hand? Playing games with somebody else?"

He ignored her. Finally, when she realized he would continue doing so, she climbed down off the stool and came around to stand in front of him.

I thought of the way some parents discipline their children, giving or withholding love and approval, like a door that's open one moment, then slammed shut, until the child does what it's told. And when she obeyed him, when she'd climbed down and came around in front of him, he reopened the door.

"It happened in the war," he said. "Do you know what a land mine is?" The girl nodded. "We were on patrol, one of my men stepped on a land mine. He was blown apart. Like a firecracker. I was next to him."

I'm not sure why her manner changed so abruptly. In part, I'm sure, because of what he'd put her through: the way he'd humbled her, bent her to his will. And because his answer was so direct, so unexpected. But surely, too, because of what it was he said. We saw it on television every night, we marched and we signed petitions. But few of us were really affected by that war. Not really. Not in the way he'd been. But whatever the reasons, once he answered her question, her whole demeanor changed.

"My God, I'm so sorry," she said. "I am so very, very…"

He shrugged. "The funny part is, it was one of ours."

"Oh my God," she said.

He sensed the change too and, in response, he became sympathetic, almost gentle. He shook his head, telling her without a word that it was all right.

"Things have happened to you too, haven't they?" he said softly.

The girl nodded and her eyes filled with tears. It was as if, after all the back and forth, she had just decided to give in to him, trust him, to go along, no matter what that meant. She stood there, head bowed, like some disheveled prodigal ready to accept her penance.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?"

"So much," she said. "So many things."

"And it's hard to explain, huh? Explain to anyone."

"Whenever I try…" She broke off, crying. She turned her head until she'd regained control. He gave her his handkerchief and she wiped her eyes and nose. "Confusion, the confusion is terrible," she said. "About things they don't know *exist*."

"And tired? Tired of everything?"

"Sometimes," she began to tremble, "sometimes I think about…"

He reached out and stroked her cheek.

"Don't give in," he whispered. "You're closer to it than you think."

She nodded, smiled through her tears, looked up at him and said, "I know, I'm going west--San Francisco. Actually, a little north, a town on the Russian River. The people there are so different, so laid back and mellow…"

She was hoping for his approval, hoping he'd say that was just the thing to do--start again, turn the page, a new beginning. Instead he wheeled and turned on her, snapped like a rattler, the door slamming shut.

"And that will change things?" His tone was insulting.

"It's different there," she pleaded. "People there have something going, something real, they're not so hung up…"

They were words she'd said many times. To herself and to others. But now, even before she finished, it was clear she no longer believed in them.

"It's over, isn't it?" he said. "Your daydream. Your last, best hope. You thought running away would change everything. You'd go to a magic place where things are different. Where *you'd* be different. Transformed. But I made you see it, didn't I? Made you see what a sorry little dream it is." He chuckled once and his shoulders rose and fell. "Isn't it strange how things work out? I never saw you before tonight and I've just changed your life."

"What's going on?" she said to me. "Please tell me what's going on."

Again I became aware of the music. Rock and roll, primitive, driving rhythms, so loud I could barely think. I began to answer, then felt his hand on my arm.

"What do you want to know?" he said.

"Your name," she said. "Tell me your name."

"My name's not important. But if you want to know, I'll tell you." He did. Then: "And yours?"

Hers was a frantic struggle now, an attempt to salvage something, a shred of self-respect from the ordeal she'd been through. "I thought you knew," she said. "I thought you knew everything."

Jeffrey smiled at her cruelly, one side of his upper lip raised. "That's exactly what you thought," he said.

She staggered, as if punched in the chest. Then she said, "I know what you're doing--playing cat and mouse. And I'm the mouse."

He nodded.

"But *why*," she pleaded. "What in God's name do you want?"

"What do you think?"

She smiled knowingly and shifted her weight onto one foot, accenting her hip. She's attractive, I though. In spite of herself, she's attractive. But his reaction was different than mine.

"Don't make me insult you," he said. She turned her head as if she'd been slapped. "Is that the only time you feel?" he said. "The only time you feel anything anymore? When you're high or getting laid? By someone? Anyone?"

It came pouring out now, the invective, as if he'd been restraining himself all along and could no longer hold back. "And when it's over, when you wake up in some strange bed or come down off your high, how do you feel? Disgusted with yourself? Empty? Used? Yet you keep doing it, don't you? Again and again. It's all you know anymore, isn't it? It's all that's left.

"That's why you came to me tonight," he continued. "Why you let me do it. Because whatever else I may be, I'm *real*. And with me, you are too. It's no exaggeration, is it? No exaggeration to say I make you feel *alive*! I woke you up from your stupor, your drugged-up daze. Humiliated you? Yes, I did…but you got something in return. Something precious, something

you need--the feeling of being alive."

"Stop it," she said. "Please stop."

I'd had enough. I got up to leave but she grabbed my arm and looked at Jeffrey. "You can," she said to him. "You both can."

He grabbed her shoulder and shook her roughly. "Do you want to know what this is all about?" he said. She nodded and again her eyes filled with tears.

"This was an experiment. You were the subject of an experiment."

"A what?" She couldn't believe what she'd heard.

He nodded at me. "We made a bet," he said.

"What kind of bet?"

"That I could manipulate you." His tone was casual, as if he'd just told her the time.

"To do what?" She began to cry. "I already said…" She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands. "You have no right to do this."

"Why not? You enjoyed it. You enjoyed every moment."

"Maybe at first," she said.

"That's the first truthful thing out of your mouth," he said.

She nodded. Even in the midst of it all, she seemed pleased by his approbation. He continued. "We were having a discussion, an argument. In order to make my point, I had to find someone. I didn't have much time so I needed someone easy, someone who's slovenly without any dignity or self-respect. I chose you."

She stood there, numb with disbelief.

"I didn't intend to puncture your balloon, end your little West Coast dream. That wasn't part of the plan. But now that I have," he softened his voice, "I want to make it up to you." He held out his hand, the mangled hand, stroked her hair and softly spoke her name. "Let me help you. Help you see what you've turned into. You still have time. It's not too late, I can help."

"How?" she sniveled.

"Go home and look in the mirror. Look at what you've let yourself become. Then do something about it. You can do it. I want you to. And when you have, come back. I'll be here. I'll wait for you."

"Go fuck yourself" she said. Her words were fiery, but her manner was meek and defeated, there was no fight left in her. She went back to her table. A moment later, she picked up her coat and left the room.

"Jeffrey…" I began.

"Not now," he said.

I lit a cigarette and looked up. Ten basketball players and two referees, out of sync with the music, were running back and forth, back and forth.

***

We waited almost two hours before she returned. In that whole time, we said nothing to each other. Not a word about what happened. I nursed my beers, careful not to get intoxicated, and waited.

If I hadn't been there to see her when she came back, I would not have believed it, the change was that remarkable. Instead of a runaway, or a pothead, she looked like a student. The sweatshirt had been replaced by a pale blue, oxford cloth shirt with a button-down collar and a midnight blue, V-neck sweater. Her jeans, though faded, looked neat and clean, and came down over the tops of a pair of polished black boots. Pulled straight back and hanging in a ponytail, her hair looked freshly brushed and seemed to shine in the haze of the room. Though she still wore no makeup except a trace of lipstick, her face looked smooth and her skin clearer. Even the dullness in her eyes was gone; they were alert and lively.

"Hello," she said, coming over.

Jeffrey smiled at her. "You look much better."

"I feel better," she said. "I wasn't sure you'd really wait. I mean, I know you said you would, but I wasn't sure." She took another step. "Can

I sit with you? Wanna buy me a beer?"

He shook his head and her body tightened. It was not the answer she'd expected.

"Why not?"

He reached out and caressed her cheek. "Because you don't need me to. Not anymore."

She stood there, letting him stroke her, then pressed her cheek against her shoulder, pinning his hand in place. He started to pull away but she reached for his hand, held it in both of hers, then, softly, lay a kiss on the tip of his damaged forefinger, then his thumb.

"I understand," she said. "I think I finally understand."

"I think so too," he said.

She nodded and turned, and he threw some money on the bar. We were gone before she crossed the room.

As I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, I told him he'd done a fine thing. He leaned back, his hands behind his head, and even in the dark I could see him smile.

"You still don't get it, do you?" he said.

I did not say a word.

"A fine thing," he said, sarcastically. "For Christ's sake, I could have done anything I wanted with that girl. *Anything*."

"But you didn't," I protested. "You could have, but you didn't."

"She'd have let both of us…"

"But you didn't," I said.

"*I* didn't, *I* didn't. But someone will. Others probably have. And others certainly will. She was easy for me, and she'll be just as easy for someone else…Maybe not tomorrow. But next week, next month…"

I drove in silence.

"But you," he said, half-turning in his seat, "you were worse. More difficult of course. But worse, so much worse."

I didn't know what he meant.

"With you it was intellect, intellectual curiosity. You watched. Damn it man, you *watched*."

He raised his voice. "How far would you have let me go? When would you have stopped me?

"'I'm not going to *harm* her, don't worry, it's all going to be fine.'

"I did it to her all right, but don't you see, I did it to you."

I watched him reach for a cigarette, his first of the night, and light it.

"Jeffrey," I said, "I want to tell you something. As a friend. Something you won't want to hear."

He stared straight ahead and I said something I used to believe. "I think you're an angry person. Bitter. Maybe because of the hell you've been through. Jeffrey, I think you need help. There are people, professionals…I think you need to see someone."

He looked at me and smiled and in that moment I came to hate him. "I know," he said.

I turned on the radio and listened to two men analyze the results of the basketball game. I drove him home in silence, dropped him at his apartment, and did my best never to see him again.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe, as the story mentions, that all people can be split into the weak and the strong? What does the story mean by "weak" and "strong?" Who in the story is weak and strong?
2. Do you believe that something like the f-scale can actually measure someone's preference for authoritarianism?
3. Do you think Jeffery (*the person who talks to the woman*) as the potential to be a "book burner," that is to say, an "authoritarian personality?" What aspects of his personality lead you to that conclusion?
4. Is having an "authoritarian personality" a good or bad thing? Why or why not? Is there something inherently bad to deferring to authority?
5. How is Jeffery's ability to manipulate the woman (*and his friend*) relevant in him proving the point he is trying to make? What do you think Jeffery has proven through his experiment? Is the narrator just as guilty because he watched it all happen, and did *nothing*?

* * *

I, von Economo

C.F. Carter

* * *

I'd never seen a Bentley Mulsanne in the flesh, not even in the chop shops where I sold the luxury cars I boosted. Yet there it was, parked behind an inner-city soup kitchen with its signature hood ornament of silver wings stretched wide to the heavens. An insult to the entire neighborhood, if you asked me. A wonder its tires weren't slashed or its gleaming paint job scratched nose to tail. A wonder it was still there at all.

I leaned on the car to finish my smoke while squinting up at the old church that housed the Bun In The Oven Cafe. The city archives had pictures of the church taken decades ago when it was St. John's Lutheran. Back then, the building shone like gold, with soaring towers and sparkling stained glass windows. But today the windows were dark and the brickwork crumbling, ruined by its environment like everything else in the downtown core. Including me.

I heard a jangling of keys, and the doors on the Bentley locked with a thunk.

A solemn-faced man holding a funeral umbrella stood nearby. He'd

appeared out of nowhere, as if he'd sprung from one of the dark puddles. His eyes slid from my face to the large bulge under my raincoat, then his expression softened.

"You look like you could use a hot meal," he said, shaking his head pityingly.

"I'm not here for that."

"Nonsense. Your baby needs nourishment. There is no shame in hunger."

"I'm not pregnant." I unzipped my windbreaker to reveal the large paper bag I was protecting from the rain. "Happy now? I'm looking for Father Ashley."

He glanced quickly around the lot. "You've found him. But call me Father Ash."

I grabbed a handful of cash from my purse in a hurried manner, hoping he'd think there was more where that came from, even though there wasn't--that I hadn't scraped and sinned and hawked my dead mother's jewelry for it. And I held the eight thousand, four hundred and sixty dollars so close to his nose that he could smell the dead presidents.

"I'm here to sponsor," I said.

Two rows of white porcelain spread across his tanned face. "Splendid! And who do you have in the bag?"

"My mother."

* * *

Did the piteous creature just say, *I'm here to sponsor*? She was a guttersnipe, marred by tattoos and facial piercings; a drowned rat in rumpled clothes with makeup streaming down her pretty cheeks. I knew hundreds of girls just like her, abused and neglected, sleeping rough in garbage-strewn alleys. So dejected, so miserable! A hearty meal and a touch of makeup would do her wonders.

"Bless your soul," I cooed. "The loss of a parent is a terrible thing.

May I ask who referred you?"

She appeared uncertain, then fished a coin from her jeans and placed it in my outstretched palm.

It was a 2007 Presidential Dollar, known among collectors as the "Godless" coin because they were minted without the phrase "In God We Trust." As good as a secret handshake, because she could only have received it from another sponsor.

I memorized the number engraved on the coin before handing it back. "Come, let's get out of the rain."

I led her through the back door and into my private study, once the church's vestibule. Paneled in rich mahogany, the room featured a custom floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window depicting my own likeness being pulled heavenward by an archangel. Sturdy bookshelves laden with wondrous curiosities lined the walls: leather-bound tomes, death masks, antique scientific instruments, preserved organs, and magic talismans. There was even a shrunken head which may or may not have been real—it hardly mattered; the purpose of the bric-a-brac was to evoke an air of mystery, along with the wisps of frankincense that rose from a burner on my desk.

I gave her a chance to soak everything in before gesturing to a seat. "So tell me, what made you decide to sponsor?"

She placed her rain-speckled bag on the floor and dropped into her chair. "Call it a birthday present. To myself."

"How nice, a June baby. We're of the same nest."

She didn't reply. After an awkward silence, I reached for a jar containing a floating human heart and swished it around. "As you've no doubt noticed I have a preoccupation with life and death. I've read everything ever written about the afterlife. And do you know what?" I replaced the jar on the shelf and leaned forward conspiratorially. "I've found the answer to life's greatest mystery: the nature of the soul!"

The girl looked unimpressed. “So how does God fit in?”

“Alas, he doesn’t. I’m a materialist.”

“Yeah, I saw your car.”

“That’s *materialistic*,” I explained. “I’m a material*ist*, which means I believe in materialism--that we are all just highly evolved matter. “

“I know what it means,” she snapped. “But I thought you were a priest?”

“Not any longer.”

“And here I was calling you Father.”

“You may call me whatever you like. May I ask your name?”

She glanced at the window. “Angel.”

I offered my most ingratiating smile. Wasn’t every streetwalker or stripper named Angel or Candy? How deliciously ironic. “It’s my pleasure to meet you, Angel. So why don’t you start by telling me what *you* think I do here.”

“You reincarnate people.”

I nodded reluctantly. “In a manner of speaking. But I prefer the term *transmigration*. The word *reincarnation* comes with too much religious baggage.”

“So you deal in souls.”

I laughed. “Are you implying I’m the devil? Contrary to what you’ve seen in movies, a soul isn’t something you sell or redeem. It’s a *point-of-view*. Quite simply, your soul is whatever is looking at me, right now, through your eyes.” I paused, wondering how best to explain it. “Consider two identical twins, perfect copies right down to their DNA. Both are self-aware, and both would refer to themselves in the first person. Now think about this, Angel. What separates one twin from the other?”

“Their souls?”

“Precisely. But this begs the question: what is the *nature* of the soul?” I handed her a small clay sculpture from the bookshelf which she

turned over in her grubby hands, as if to appraise its street value. "That, my dear, is a golem, from Jewish folklore. According to the Talmud, only God can give a soul to that inanimate matter. And in the Bible, it says only God can give a soul to man after creating him from dust." I smiled enigmatically. "But I assure you that they're both wrong."

She stopped fiddling with the golem and looked up.

"Listen, Angel. That golem in your hands *already has* a soul, as do all the books on these shelves, and every last pebble in the parking lot." I swept my arms around the room. "Souls are everywhere. God doesn't *create* them, and they're not metaphysical. They are *physical*."

Angel shook her head. "But if God created everything, including books and pebbles, he created the souls, too."

"I suppose one could argue that, if one believed in God."

She looked dubious. "So you're telling me that pebbles are self-aware?"

"Of course not. Self-awareness is an illusion of the brain." I took a model of a brain from the bookcase and placed it between us, using a pen as my pointer. "There are two small areas believed to play a role in self-awareness. One is under the left temple, and the other is behind the center of the forehead. Both contain large, oddly shaped cells called *von Economo* neurons, and these cells are only found in higher order mammals. Are you following all this, Angel?"

"I think so," she said thoughtfully. "You're saying that the soul is the *physical* matter that makes up those funny *von Economo* cells that give us self-awareness. "

"Exactly right!" I exclaimed. "*For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*"

She wiped tears from her cheeks with the back of her arm, and I knew my revelations were affecting her deeply.

"Let me show you around," I said gently.

* * *

"Let me show you around," Father Ash said, and none too soon, because my wig was dripping down my face and the reek of his incense was turning my stomach.

He brought me to a dim hallway that was painted black from floor to ceiling. An open duct above our heads carried the smell of boiled cabbage and baked bread, along with the faint clatter of dishes. Along one wall, a series of windows faced into the dining room with chairs in front of each of them. Some were empty, others were occupied by shadowy figures.

"I call this the *hall of mirrors*," Father Ash explained in a low voice. "These windows are made from one-way glass to allow our sponsors to watch the young mothers."

We stopped near the first window where a rheumy-eyed man in a newsboy cap was leaning toward the glass, wringing his hands and muttering softly to himself. The unsuspecting girl tore pieces from her dinner roll and popped them in her mouth, while the old man watched her like she was a pigeon at the park.

"This is Thomas," Father Ash said. "His true love, Maggie, passed away a few months ago. That young lady on the other side of the glass is Tamara. She was thin as a promise when we first saw her, oh yes, but look how plump she is now. My cook creates nutritious meal plans for each diner." He looked over my shoulder. "Speak of the devil, here she is now with Tamara's soup."

A hard-featured woman in a dirty apron pushed a clattering cart over to Thomas and squatted next to him with a serving tray. Silently, the old man stirred spoonfuls of powder into a soup bowl with a wizened hand, then turned back to the window to resume his vigil.

"What did he put in the soup?" I whispered.

"Organic matter, purified from the deceased. We adjust the

dosage for each stage of pregnancy. Since Tamara is in her first trimester and baby's brain hasn't begun to develop, we use a small amount."

On the other side of the glass, the cook had made her way to the girl's table and was placing the contaminated soup in front of her. Unaware of what she was about to eat, the girl smiled and picked up her spoon. I fought the impulse to pound on the glass to warn her. That could have been my own mother, twenty years ago...

"We allow our sponsors to add the special ingredient themselves because it makes them feel more involved," Father Ash explained. "Even though Thomas will never see Maggie again, it gives him peace to have a direct hand in helping his dog's soul live on."

I was floored. "His *dog*?"

"Many people count their pets as family. And who's to say animals can't be reborn as humans? The Buddhists certainly believe it."

I followed him numbly to the next window.

A middle-aged couple were huddled around an overturned milk crate where they'd set up a small shrine. When the woman heard us approach, she pulled her headscarf around her face, but the man was watching a woman squeeze into the booth on the other side of the glass, tilting the table with her distended belly.

"This is Mr. and Mrs. Shareef," Father Ash said quietly. "Their son drowned in the family pool while Mr. Shareef was taking a business call." He gestured at their makeshift memorial of flowers and photographs. "I'm offering them hope that their loved ones will live on in *this world*. Something religion cannot provide."

"What happens after the baby is born?" I asked.

"Our sponsors receive a folder with the child's details, and I provide annual updates by email."

"Doesn't that worry you?"

He shrugged. "Why should it. All sponsors must swear on a bible

that they'll respect their beneficiary's privacy."

I wanted to laugh. These people were warped by grief and wouldn't be stopped by God or the law. They'd snatch the baby the first chance they got . . . But at least they would be motivated by love. The real evil was Father Ash, because the only thing worse than a monster is the guy who shows one where you live.

Father Ash led me to the final window which framed a dark-skinned girl eating soup as she read from a dog-eared paperback. "Letisha is in her 35th week of pregnancy, so her baby is the size of a honeydew melon. It's an exciting time, because she can feel her baby kicking. But the most important part of the brain is developing too, so the name of the game is to load as much ash into her as we can without spoiling the taste."

Letisha's sponsor was watching her from a mobility scooter. His skin was blotchy and pale, and I could tell from the drape of the blanket over his lap that his legs were missing.

"This is Max," Father Ash said, shaking his head sadly. "He spent his life behind bars for armed robbery, and never told a soul where he'd stashed the money he stole. And now that he's terminally ill he won't be able to enjoy his ill-gotten gains."

"I don't get it. Who's he trying to bring back?"

He turned to me and smiled. "That's the million-dollar question, Angel. He plans to transmigrate his own soul into Letisha's unborn child, and then will his fortune to her. If everything goes as planned, he'll be enjoying his own money one day. He won't have any memories of his old life, of course, but nonetheless the baby will have his soul. Imagine that! A second chance at life."

"But if Max is still alive, how are you getting his ashes?"

"I'm not—yet. And our window of opportunity is closing. God willing he'll die in the next few days, then we'll have everything we need."

I felt my jaw tighten. I thought I wasn't playing with a full deck, but

this guy was a whole other level of crazy.

"Eating human ashes isn't as macabre as it sounds," Father Ash added, noting my revulsion. "After incineration we sterilize everything in an autoclave, then we start the purification process. Ashes have a gritty texture and contain tiny chunks of calcaneus bone, so we need to filter all that out. Then we further refine the ash until it's food-grade quality."

"I see," I managed to say. But I didn't see. Every horrible thing I'd discovered in my father's old boxes was true.

Twenty years ago, my father had sponsored my mother, watching her through one of those creepy windows as she ate God-only-knows who's ashes. Then he took me away from her.

I wanted to kill Father Ash for what he'd done to my life. Pull the Glock from my purse and smoke him right there. But I had another plan.

I was my father's daughter, after all.

* * *

I brought her back to my office and sat on the corner of my desk. "I'm sure that was a lot to digest. Do you have any questions?"

She hesitated. "How can you be sure it's possible? Transmigration, I mean." Her voice seemed oddly strained.

"Because my theory is based on science, not superstition. When you're dead and buried and your flesh becomes food for insects and bacteria, your soul *could* find a new home in them. But they wouldn't have the *von Economo* cells needed for self-awareness. It could take millions of years for your soul to climb back up the food chain and into the light. What I do here is shorten that wait time for you. There are no guarantees, but I believe I'm your best bet for immortality."

"So it comes down to faith again," Angel said.

I spread my hands and smiled.

"Okay, last question." She focused her world-weary eyes on mine. "Do you feel any remorse for anything you've done?"

I told her I didn't.

She stared at me for awhile, then gathered up her things. "I'll get back to you. At the very least I'll be filling out my organ donor card."

I showed her to the door. "Drop off your mother's remains when you're ready. "

I waited until Angel had left the building before I opened my laptop and punched in the numbers I'd seen on her coin.

My records showed that the coin belonged to John Dewitt, a man I'd met in prison some twenty years ago who became one of my first customers. I'd almost forgotten about him; he'd murdered the woman he was sponsoring and abducted her daughter to raise as his own. Did a piss poor job of it too, spending most of his years in prison for violent crimes and arson. The tomfool blew himself up building a pipe bomb in his garage . . . But how did Angel get his coin?

Lost in thought, I locked up and headed home.

The parking lot was abandoned. Imagining a gang-banger lurking behind every shadow, I hurried to my Bentley and locked myself in.

I noticed a paper bag on my back seat, and the blasted thing was dripping all over my hand-stitched leather. Angel must have made up her mind, I thought, and the bag presumably contained her mother's remains.

I removed a smooth silver canister from the bag. It seemed a little on the heavy side, so I unscrewed the lit just to be sure . . .

* * *

I waited for Father Ash in the shadows of the parking lot until the back door to the church finally opened and he hurried to his car.

I watched his parking lights come on, then his interior lights. His shadowy outline moving around inside.

I held my breath.

A heartbeat later, a deafening explosion proclaimed to a dozen city blocks that his soul had been returned to the universe, vaporized in a cloud

of carbon so dispersed that it would never form another *von Economo* cell, not even in a billion years.

The church's stained-glass windows rattled from the shockwave; not enough to shatter them, but enough to shake off decades of dust. And the bricks were bathed again in golden light as the fireball rose like a Phoenix from Father Ash's car.

It was over.

Tomorrow, I would reincarnate myself, by choosing to become someone new. And I would make my mark in the world, because nobody was truly dead as long as they're remembered.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Father Ash says the soul is found in the oddly shaped cells called *von Economo* neurons. What evidence would the story need to provide for you to believe that that the soul is true (*at least, in the story*)?
2. Father Ash sells the service of feeding organic matter from the deceased to the pregnant mother so as to instill the soul into the baby. Is there *any* scenario, or set of facts, where you would believe this soul transfer service is anything other than a scam?
3. Angel's father was John Dewitt, who died building a pipe bomb. Angel kills Father Ash with a pipe bomb. Does this provide *any* credibility to the soul theory? If there is a soul, what information do you think it carries about the person?
4. Is the comfort he is providing others by believing a loved one's soul is being put into another a valuable service in itself? Is "comfort" based on a lie a legitimate service worth paying for?
5. Do you think Father Ash got what he deserved in the end?

* * *

L o v e S o u n d s

Pamela L. Laskin

* * *

My daughter's getting married. She is thirty-two and beautiful. I remember—it seems like just the other day—when she was sprawled and breathless. There she was, flat on her back, covered by pink panda pajamas, the odor of sleep drenched in her pillow. Today she is a young woman, and one whom I am proud of; she's doing work at Rutgers University, the kind of work her deceased father did, as a researcher. The groom, Mark, does the same kind of work, which is lovely since they can travel to conferences.

I am hoping they can find a nice conference to Hawaii right around June; it would be perfect for the honeymoon. I see her now—her long, auburn hair piled sky-high on top of her head, the lilies streaming down the piles of lace on her long, white gown and taffeta—oh, and such beautiful taffeta. A gust of wind comes from nowhere and blows the window open—a poltergeist, perhaps, here to disturb my reverie. I imagine Mark in his black tux with a blood red tie.Who will be his best man? Who will be her maid of honor? Deidre was named for my dead father, Dave, whose

funeral I never got to attend. I wanted to, but I had the flu, and I didn't want to give it to my nieces and nephews. I've always loved the children. I'll make a fine grandmother!

And what about the mother of the bride? Of course, the color of the dress I wear will depend on Deidre and Mark's color scheme. I will suggest pastels to her, since I look so good in pastels with my bronzed complexion. Deidre isn't often open to my suggestions; she often says, "Mom" with a huff and a puff, as some of the young girls do. How Deidre got that pale skin—the slightest touch of the outdoors will burn her—I'll never know. Her father, was bronzed like me. People always said we made a handsome couple. No one is left from our small circle of friends and relatives to bear witness to the love we once had. Only a photograph of Joseph and me as a young bride and groom, me in silk, him in a smart, gray suit, remains on top of my bureau. That was love! Next to the photograph are many others of Deidre—at one month, three years, the two of us ice-skating at Prospect Park; there's even one of the two of us at the World's Fair. Oh my! I took her to so many lovely places.

Yes, the bride will look stunning like her mother once did, and the mother of the bride will be blushing, too. The dress will cover the scar on my chest, the one that appeared after the four-flight episode. Though I haven't met Mark's parents (I ask my daughter so often to meet them; after all, Deidre has lived with Mark for seven years), I am certain we will get along fabulously well. That day I will skip my medication, just so I can have a drink. Cheers!

Though my daughter hasn't formally announced the wedding, I know it is for real for a number of reasons:

She's watching her weight, so she can fit into a size four dress. I wear size fourteen, and am proud of my weight, but Deidre was never a good eater.

She's been on edge lately. Just the other days she snapped: "Why

do you call me every day?"

"I've been doing it for years."

"You didn't call me every day at college."

"You were away at college. I couldn't afford it. And your father didn't leave you enough money to afford it, either."

"Leave my father out of it!"

Whenever I mention her father, she grows angry. The day of her father's funeral, she was red and ravaged. It was spring; the rain was rampant. All I could think of was April showers bring May flowers. Deidre pounded her fists against the open-casket where Joseph lay, looking as handsome as ever. I crept up behind her, and when she turned around, there was a look of horror on her face. "Why him?" she had screamed, "why him?" then she ran off. Joseph's second wife looked surprised.

I try to avoid talking about her father, but sometimes I can't help it. After all, I want to see my baby girl happy.

She's been very secretive!

Just the other week we met for lunch. I ordered scrambled eggs, white toast and home fries, like I always order. She got a salad without dressing which was, of course, to keep her weight down. Throughout the meal, she was very close-mouthed. Deidre was dressed informally—khaki bell-bottomed pants, a loose, long shirt. Her pants were baggy, and I told her this, and also how pale she looked.

"When are you going to wear make-up?" I had asked her. I feel so disappointed that she doesn't wear make-up like so many of the young girls do.

"Soon," she said, nibbling on a carrot, savoring its taste.

"You really need blush. Revlon's blushing bride would be perfect for you—not too red, not too pink. And there's a matching tube of lipstick; all the girls are wearing it!"

"I'm not like the other girls. Let's drop it."

I noticed the Laura Ashley wallpaper in the restaurant. I never knew about Laura Ashley until Deidre introduced me to her designs—long, loose dresses, which my daughter wears all the time. I don't like them, but when I tell my daughter this, all she does is shrug her shoulders.

"You always tell me that you will wear make-up soon."

"This time I mean it." She smiles and her whole face lights up. She was always such a sad child, so somber, often huddled in nothing more than skin and bones. She needs to put on more weight before the wedding.

"My little girl, sweet as peaches and cream," I start to sing out loud, and Deidre doesn't try to stop me.

"What's that?" she asks.

"A song I sang to you when you were an infant. Do you like it?"

"Hm, hm."

Enough to want to use it at an affair, I wonder.

"What other songs did you sing to me?"

"Faygala, Faygala."

"Ah, that's my Jewish name."

It's clear why she's interested in this name. I shake my head yes. She needs this for the marriage license, the ketubah. I want to ask her more about the marriage, but instead I inquire about work. Then, she opens like a blossom, telling me about her latest breakthroughs in cancer.

"How's Mark?" I interrupt.

"Fine." She looks annoyed, and I can't understand, but I don't bother asking; this marriage must have her so on edge.

"How are you doing, Mom? How is the program?"

I am only too glad to tell her about Continued Social Services, and the fact that I made a potholder in red and yellow. This will match the kitchen Deidre and Mark will one day have in their new home.

These were the colors she always dressed her dolls in. I always thought this was strange. Deidre was an unusual child—bright, but she

never wanted to do anything I wanted her to do. I wanted her in pinafores like her friends, but she only wanted to wear pants. I would have liked to make a wedding shower for her, but it's apparent it's not going to happen.

She cried a lot as a baby, but this changed as she grew older. From ages three to seven, she didn't shed one solitary tear, but then, when she was seven and a half, she was taken to Flushing General Hospital for an emergency appendectomy. I was already separated from my husband, and I thought she was going to die. Awakening from her anesthetized sleep, she cried—with real, large tears in her eyes—"mommy, mommy; help me, mommy," but she wasn't talking about me.

"Where are you off to now?"

"Oh, I don't know—a walk." She looks around furtively.

"Then I'll walk with you."

"No, you can't. I'm going." She stops short.

"Where?"

"I'm meeting Janet for dessert. Bye"

Though I don't travel much, I have to find a suitable place for her wedding. I board the train for anywhere, and sit holding my breath, hoping no one will ask for my destination, since I am not quite sure where it is. When the conductor asks me for payment, I have to fudge it, and I tell him I am going to the end of the line, so I guess this is where I have to go, since I have paid for this. The train finally stops; the cool air stabs me as I set off to walk. It starts to rain and I am not prepared. This is the Catskills. How many times I had begged Joseph to take me to one of these fancy hotels. And how many times had he begged off, saying another time. Here the leaves do somersaults in the air, the sun shines all the time and the cool, mountain air quilts everyone, all of us being equal. Here I could have been happy. Deidre was happy up here in camp—but then she'd come home and call me, "Rachel", as if the word "Mom" were a disease.

There is a reason I want to have a large wedding—two hundred

and fifty people, at least—for my little girl. I have to make up for what she didn't have as a youngster. Every time I went to hug or kiss her when she was two, three, four years old, I'd get so carried away by her, that she had emerged from my body, that I'd hug her furiously, and before I knew it, I was locked away, stuck behind bars with all those crazy people. I loved her too much, so I just couldn't hug her enough. These hugs were all I could do to love her, and the authorities had the audacity of accusing me of strangling her. She was my baby; a mother could never, ever strangle her precious child. All I wanted to do was keep her inside me forever. Finally, when she was six, Joseph threw me out of the house, locked me up in Creedmoor State, filed for divorce, and six months later, Deidre was his—not mine; I only saw her on the weekends. But what wonderful weekends we had—shopping, ice skating. My sisters gave me money to buy her gifts. But I could not stop thinking of the injustice of taking a child away from a mother. I tried to make it up to her with a red velvet ice-skating skirt. How she loved it! She nuzzled her face in the skirt, like she had briefly in my breasts before I was told to give up nursing. That was a terrible time for me. The doctors made me stop; they said I needed my meds, which would be passed on to the baby. She was only five days old when she had the last of my breast-milk—ten tiny fingers and toes curled like roses. My daughter will carry a bouquet of roses.

I limp through the tiny streets where there are no sidewalks. The cars drive slowly as in procession; they are following me down the road. There are as many trees as there are tombstones in an over-crowded cemetery. And then—there it stands—up a long, winding road: THE INN. It starts to rain, slowly first, then more and more.

"This is it!" I scream, throwing off my shoes. "This is it!" I say, jumping up and down, the grass tickling my toes.

"Lady, what are you doing?" A large, ominous looking man walks out of THE INN. His hands are in his pockets; there's a grimace on his face.

"At last, I have found a place for my daughter's wedding—here!"

"We don't provide catering services for large affairs."

"I want my daughter's wedding here. I am not leaving." I take a twenty-dollar bill out of my purse, just to show him that I am serious. The rain doesn't cease; it's pouring.

"Lady, you're trespassing. I'll have to call the police if you don't get off this property."

"Call the police."

"What's your name, lady?"

"Rachel. Rachel Zion," I announce proudly.

"Any relatives from these parts?"

"I have one daughter—Deidre Zion. She works at Rutgers. She's the one getting married."

I start dancing beneath the sky, under the trees, dancing to the music of the wedding march. I am still dancing (in the rain, no less!) when the police take me away.

I pound my hands against the walls until my knuckles are bleeding. It's not the first time I have seen blood.

"Help, help," I cry, "the birds are after me again. Why?" No one even answers. These men in blue; how long do they think they can keep me locked away? Stupid people—who do they think they are? I'm certain the owners of that place do not have children, and if they do, certainly not a daughter. A little girl is so precious; she is a jewel in a shining sea, and when you've done right as a parent, people look at the daughter and think what a fine mother she must have had.

"Who do you think you are?" I scream. "I am just a poor mother who wants to do right by her daughter."

Next thing the men come—the ones in white jackets. They look familiar.

"Where do you think you are taking me?" I ask. They tie my hands

behind my back. “Creedmoor. Do you know where that is?”

Of course I do; what do they think I’m an idiot? But I don’t give them the satisfaction of an answer.

In the morning, the sky is a pale, metallic blue. There are so many birds in the air; though I can’t see them, I can hear them. Visitors walk in and out all day—my sister, my brother, my therapist from daycare. The doctors give me pills; I devour them like candy. I crave chocolate ice cream. I wear rolls of flesh like an extra set of clothes; my emaciated daughter doesn’t come to visit me. After three days, she charges into the room, wearing bright, red clothes. My therapist told me not to make waves, so I keep quiet.

“What happened? Why did you end up here again?”

“I was just fulfilling a mother’s obligation.”

“What are you talking about?”

I grab one of the chocolate-covered cherries she has brought me, and eat it, ravenously. “I was looking for a place for your wedding. Is that such a crime?”

“What wedding?”

“You’re getting married. I know you are, so don’t deny it.” I gaze at her nails, chewed down till I can see the blood. Mine are polished hot-pink.

“I never told you I was getting married.”

“But I know you are.”

“How?”

“A mother’s intuition.” I smile.

“There’s lipstick on your teeth,” she tells me. She wrings her hands. “Let’s drop the subject.”

I allow the conversation to drift away from marriage for a while.

“How do you like my hair?” I ask.

“It’s lovely.” She starts to bite her nails, which tells me there are problems with the wedding plans. Maybe it’s the in-laws. Perhaps it’s the

fit of the dress. Should I bring up the color scheme now? I had so wanted to choose the place for her wedding.

"I'm just tired of this." She takes her sunglasses off. Her eyes are swollen. I really feel for the pressure she is under—planning a wedding while working and maintaining a home.

"I understand," I tell her.

"No you don't. I wish my stepmother were here with me."

"You don't have a stepmother."

"Yes I do. I lived with them. Remember? After my father died, I lived with her."

I put my hands over my ears. "I can't listen." Deidre gently pries my hands loose, puts them by my side, and gives them a tight squeeze.

"I would like not to hide everything from you," she says.

"You can tell me anything, honey. I am your mother."

"I don't know."

"Tell me about your marriage plans."

"I wish I could."

"What do you mean?"

Deidre looks down on the ground.

"Should I call Gladys, the woman you call your stepmother? Do you want me to make plans with her?"

"No."

"Then what about your marriage?"

"If we ever get married, there will be no wedding. Let's drop this subject."

No happy bride and groom, I think, and the tears start to stream down my face, as my baby takes a hanky out of her purse, and wipes my tears away. My daughter's not getting married. What will people think of me?

"Next time you want to know something, just ask," she says,

depositing a large kiss on my cheek.

After I sleep for what seems like days, I contemplate a life for myself without a Granddaughter. It is enough to break my heart. What will people think of her, living in sin forever with her boyfriend? Worse yet, what will people think of me? I can hear them now, "How abnormal, a young girl without a husband, who values career over family."

I give up the idea of a large and fancy affair: flowers on the table—gigantic yellow irises, a ten-piece orchestra, and a girl in a long gown. After a week, I am let out of the facility. I go out to lunch with my sweet daughter and her boyfriend. He seems sad, distracted, and does not join the conversation.

My daughter starts getting busier. Every weekend we're supposed to get together, she has something to do. The summer months zoom by. In the fall she looks fuller, richer; her cheeks shine. I tell myself it's not worth being hopeful. Fall slips into winter. Finally we meet; it has been several months. We go to a diner in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. I order a hamburger and my daughter orders clear chicken broth.

"What's new?" I ask.

"What can be new? I spoke to you yesterday."

As she lifts her hands up to the soup bowl, I catch it out of the corner of my eye—a gold ring sliced thin as a fork. The blood drips out of my roll, and on my fingers.

"What's that?"

She tries to make light out of it. "Oh, we finally decided to tie the knot."

Outside, a blizzard is building. Soon the snow will be steep and I'll be scared for my daughter to drive. Suddenly, I'm at a loss for words. I try to find a voice, but it's gone.

"I knew you would be upset. We wanted to keep it simple."

"How simple? Without your mother?" I want to push Deidre into

the snow.

"No one was there. We went to a justice of the peace." She doesn't look up from her soup.

"How long ago was this?"

"Oh, a while ago."

"Was it after your birthday? I saw you on your birthday."

"Yeah, I guess around then."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to tell you in person."

"Were Mark's parents there?"

"We didn't tell them either. What's fair is fair." She picks a cuticle off her finger and watches it bleed.

"But I'm your mother."

"It doesn't mean I don't lo--." She stops. "Mom, we just couldn't. You have to try and understand."

She drives me home. Though the roads are slippery, I know her ride home will be a lot more treacherous. I worry about her, the new wife who will one day have a daughter and know what it means to be injured. She hums the tune for the hora, the traditional dance done at Jewish weddings, under her breath. I can't imagine how Mark's parents felt. I promise myself and my daughter I won't go crazy.

Yet, no matter how many pills I take, no matter how much blacker the night gets, I get no reprieve from being awake. How could someone whom I brought into this world, whom I loved with all my heart and soul, not have me—her mother—by her side. Who was her witness? Should I call Mark and congratulate him? Should I call his parents? I don't even know their last name.

I lay awake listening to the secrets of the night; they are difficult to decipher. The neighbors are awake and talking about me; they've done this so many times that I have had to call the police. On the other side of the

wall, there are love sounds—alternating loud and soft heaves and sighs. I lay down in corpse posture and try to imagine sounds of love when they were mine, but I can't.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What is it, specifically, that is wrong with the mother/narrator?
2. Parents often get overly wrapped up in the lives, and wedding plans, of their children. What are examples of things the narrator does that go beyond the norm?
3. Is the narrator more interested in her daughter's wedding, or how it reflects on her, as the mother? What evidence do you see in the story to support your answer?
4. Do you feel sorry for, or angry at, the narrator? Why?
5. Assuming Diedre really did invite her husband's parents to their wedding, is it wrong that she didn't also invite her own mother? Is the obligation (*if any*) to her mother more important than the embarrassment her mental illness might cause at the wedding? Is it ethical for Diedre to be embarrassed of her mother for having a mental illness?

* * *

The Shadow Of The Thing

Tyler W. Kurt

* * *

Winter started early this year. Standing outside the doorway, that was my last pre-thought. And by "pre-thought" I mean, the last thought I remember thinking before everything changed, that my fingertips were cold, that I should have worn gloves, and how much it was going to hurt my knuckles to knock on the front door.

Maeve and Jason lived in a tract home in the suburbs, which was odd, because they were the people least likely to live in a tract home in the suburbs I had ever met. She was a travel blogger who had been to over 70 countries, mostly underdeveloped, and he was a wingsuit skydiver who paired the most dangerous sport in the word, wingsuiting, with base jumping, also one of the most dangerous sports in the world. Making it, I assume, even more dangerous.

To pay his share of the bills he did computer programming for companies that that had problems too complicated for their own

programmers to figure out. He was a "fixer" at 600 dollars an hour, but for computer code.

I knocked on the front door and the sound of footsteps came alive in the house. Moments later Maeve opened the door. She was wearing flannel sweatpants with a drawstring, an old over-sized shirt with holes, and pink bunny slippers. It's the outfit most people wear when they're home sick with the flu, but I knew Maeve well enough to know this was her everyday outfit when she wasn't traveling.

When she saw me standing at the front door a wide smile splashed over her face. "Dakota, you came," she said, her voice scratchy as she spoke. Her voice sounded like a chain-smoker, but she didn't generally smoke. "Jason," she yelled back behind her, "Dakota came!"

"Cool" I heard from the upstairs office.

"I told him you'd come! Come in!"

I entered, following Maeve as she shuffled through the kitchen with an over-sized island to the living room. Without looking back she shuffled to the record player, turned the power on, and put the needle on a record. Through pops and cracks the Beatles played on large speakers.

She's doing this for me, I thought, as I sat on her couch across from the overstuffed chair where I knew she would sit. She knows I like records, and she knows I like the Beatles.

"Do you want some tea?" Maeve asked, shuffling back to the kitchen. "I'm going to make myself some tea."

We'd been friends far too long for such formalities. A conversation was coming, I thought. While I waited, I looked around the living room I'd been in more times than I could remember. If a room could be a comfort smell, this room was it for me. A gas fireplace. Two overstuffed chairs that looked like they came from *Alice in Wonderland* and a very respectable collection of records.

There were two pictures on the wall. One was a picture of a raven

with a repeating spiral pattern behind it; the other was a black and white photograph of a very old leafless tree in an empty grassy field. Alone in the grassy field it looked, I thought, like the first tree — or the last — to ever exist.

A microwave dinged in the distance and Maeve entered with two cups of tea, handing one to me. I held it up to my mouth and tried to sip it, but it was too hot. Maeve settled into her *Alice in Wonderland* chair, her feet came out of her bunny slippers, and she pulled them up under her. Slowly, she blew the steam off her tea. And for a while, we just sat there.

Maeve blew the steam off her tea again and again, until, eventually, she could take the tiniest sip. This task complete, she lowered the tea and looked directly at me. A wide smile came over her face. "Okay, I'm not going to bullshit you. I'm just going to tell you. I'm going to take some Apple and wanted you to be here."

I lowered my tea. I'd read a bit about Apple in my Facebook feed; it was the new drug-of-the-week getting all the news. It was called Apple not because it was a red pill, but because it was a circular pill with a dimple on top, giving it the appearance of an apple. The Facebook headlines ran the gamut from "New Party Drug" and "Teen Dies," all the way to, "Miracle Mind Bender." Given that I didn't do drugs I hadn't bothered to click on any of the links to learn more. I figured it was a fad and, like all fads, would be out of the news soon enough.

Maeve, however, did do drugs, nearly all drugs. And yet, she was seemingly immune to addiction. She smoked cigarettes but had never taken them up in earnest. She had smoked pot, but only rarely. She had taken various uppers, downers, feel-good pills and hallucinations, but would sometimes go months without taking anything at all. She was a unicorn. She was, seemingly, a casual drug user who was able to stay casual in her relationship with addiction for an extended period of time.

"I don't understand." I responded. "You don't need me to do drugs."

"Because, Jackass," she said, shifting her feet under her butt, "I wanted you to be here when I took it for the first time, I wanted to share my first experience with *you*."

"You wanted me to be the sober one keeping an eye on you in case something went wrong."

"Well, that too."

"Can't Jason do that?" Just as I spoke, Jason came down the last three steps of the stairs.

He tilted his head back and forth in a serpent-like sort of way, "I've already taken it," he said, seemingly not to us, but towards us. He paused to look into the light in his mind before drawing focus back in our direction again. "Is that tea?" he asked. And with that, he turned and walked into the kitchen.

I only saw him briefly, and he only spoke briefly, but even in that instant I could tell he was different.

"Is Jason on Apple now?" I asked.

"No," Maeve replied. "It's not that kind of drug. The media, they've got it all wrong. It's not a drug you take for a few hours. It's a drug you take once and it's with you forever."

"That doesn't make any sense. So, it never leaves your body?"

"No. That's not what I mean. I mean you take it, and it changes you, and from then on out, you're a different person. The drug isn't in your body anymore, but the changes it causes in you stay with you. It's like seeing a baby born or a person die. The experience is over, but the change in your perspective stays forever."

"I've never seen either of those things."

"You know what I mean, though. The point is, it doesn't get you high, it makes you different. Jason took it over a month ago, and he's been like this ever since."

Jason walked back through the living room with his cup of tea on his

way to the stairs. Overhearing our conversation, he paused and turned toward me.

"I know it's confusing" he said slowly. "I wouldn't have understood it before either. And now that I've done it, I don't think I can really explain it. Not, like, really explain it. Imagine if there was a true world layered on top of the world that you see around you, and you were just seeing it for the first time now."

Jason held up his tea to show me. "When I hold this up, you see a cup of tea, and together we've give it the name 'cup of tea.' But what if it's just the form of the thing in this moment that we call tea, but not the thing itself." Jason paused to think more. "Like we call the thing coming into the beach a wave, instead of calling it a form of the ocean."

Jason forced a content smile, then his eyes went glassy. His smile turned to a deep sadness as he looked down at the ground, and for a moment, I thought he was going to cry.

Jason looked up at me again. "I'm sorry, that must sound really stupid to you. It's just, it's hard to explain. It's understanding more, I guess, is the best way to put it." Seemingly more satisfied with his answer, Jason took a slow sip of his tea and walked up the stairs.

I turned to Maeve, who was looking longingly at her husband. "He's really messed up, Maeve. He's like half-a-step away from thinking he's Jesus."

"The more you listen to him though, the more sense he makes, in a Jason kind of way. He's like this all the time now; like sad, but not sad, more melancholia, or … I don't know the word for it."

"Is he able to work in that state?"

"Yeah, he still works. In fact, his coding is better than ever now, but he talks about his work being trivial. I'm not sure how long he's going to keep doing it."

"And that's what you want, to be like that forever?"

"Maybe."

"I read online that something like 5 percent of the people who take it commit suicide within just a few weeks of taking it."

"Yeah, I read that, too. But on the online discussion groups I was looking at it was more like 1 to 2 percent and it's almost totally people with other mental health issues or who mixed it with other drugs when they took it."

"Maeve, it's a drug. It's like a *serious* mind-altering drug. You shouldn't put drugs in your body."

"Adderall, Zoloft, Xanax, Lexapro, Prozac, Viagra, Synthroid, aspirin. Do you even want me to get into the heart and blood pressure medication people take?"

"I mean drugs not prescribed by your doctor."

"Caffeine, nicotine, chocolate, sex, sugar, adrenaline — "

" — You know what I mean. I mean, like, drugs that don't occur in nature, like human-created drugs not proscribed by your doctor."

"Putting aside the fact that loads of things that alter your body come from nature, Apple isn't a human-created synthetic drug. It's from an orchid in South America."

"Fine. So, what … you called me here just to have me watch you take this orchid drug that might make you kill yourself? No, the answer is no. I won't do it."

"Maeve's face turned to empathy. Look, I know this is hard for you. But if this is the last time I'm going to see the world the way I see it now, to see you the way I see you now, it is to much too say I wanted to see you one last time? I wanted to see you. I already had dinner with my mom and sister last night to see them one last time."

"Did they know you are going to be taking Apple?"

"No, fuck no. They would freak the fuck out if they knew."

"Then why do you think I would be any different?"

"Fuck you. Okay. Fuck you. Look, I'm doing this with or without you. I want to understand the truth behind the curtain. I'm going to take it with or without you, motherfucker, but I wanted you to be here when I took it, because I wanted you to be the last person I saw, and if something goes wrong, I wanted you to keep me from jumping out a fucking window or choking on my own tongue because Jason doesn't seem like he's in any condition to be trusted with that. It's a compliment and you're fucking it up!"

Her outburst caused the room to go quiet. My tea was cooler, so I took a long sip. "Are you going to do this with or without me?"

"Yes."

"I just want to have said, out loud, to you, that I think this is a terrible idea and I wish you wouldn't do it."

"Duly noted."

"Okay. Fine. Fine. What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing!" Maeve's eyes lit up. Okay, hold on, I'm going to go get it. I wasn't sure on the dosage so I bought a few." Maeve went back to the kitchen with her empty teacup. I heard the refrigerator door open and close. Moments later, she returned with a small bag that she tipped upside down on the table between us. Three round pills fell out. She grabbed one and held it between her finger and thumb.

"You're 100 percent sure about this?"

"Yup." And with that, she swallowed the pill.

"How long does it take to work?"

"Online, they said it should take about a half-an-hour for it to start, and another hour for it to be totally in effect."

"So … we wait?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Maeve got up, flipped the record player and put the needle down to play more music. She walked over and turned off the lights in the room and

turned on the gas fireplace. She turned her chair to face the shadows the fireplace cast on the wall and sat back down in her *Alice in Wonderland* chair. The music played as she faced the shadows on the wall.

"I was told that watching the shadows on the wall was the best way to experience it."

As Maeve watched the shadows on the wall, I watched Maeve. I glanced over at the table that laid between us. Two pills left.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Dakota is going to take one of the left-over Apple pills?
2. Do you think Maeve is making the right choice by taking Apple?
3. Would you take Apple, why or why not?
4. If it turns out what Maeve says is true, that the effects of Apple are a change in your whole perspective on the nature of the world around you even after the drug has worn off, does that change your opinion of the drug?
5. Apple is supposed to help you understand more of the true nature of the world. Prior to taking it, is there any way to determine if that is what it actually does? Can you ever really understand something new before you experience it?
6. What are the factors that make you think Apple is, or is not, what it claims to be?

* * *

A r e Y o u H i m ?

John Sheirer

* * *

Arthur had just picked up his coffee a few minutes before seven--one cream, no sugar--a pleasing medium brown one shade lighter than his own skin. He was a regular at the local coffee shop, stopping nearly every morning on his way to work at the bank. He usually didn't look down the side streets as he walked through the mid-sized city, preferring to look ahead, but something drew his attention this morning--a small sound he couldn't identify--so he glanced to his right. Arthur saw a young woman sitting on a three-step stoop halfway down the street. The movement of her hands to her face drew his uneasy attention. Something about the situation didn't seem right, so Arthur stopped, turned, and looked directly at young woman.

She slumped slightly but wasn't slouching. Her hair, medium length, medium brown, a bit messy, hid most of her profile, but Arthur could tell right away that she was young. Definitely older than Katie, his sixteen-year-old daughter, but not by much. Her jeans and sweatshirt had that youthful, worn look so popular these days. And the clothes would shield her from

the late September morning chill until the temperature climbed back near summer heat by early afternoon. Her shoulders dipped and rose slightly, and then Arthur heard the sound that must have originally caught his attention, louder and recognizable now, but still soft.

She was sobbing.

The last time Arthur had seen Katie sob like this was when she didn't make the travel soccer team when she was ten. He hugged her then, let her vent about how she was better than half the kids who were chosen for the team, and told her about the fun she'd have on the non-travel team. Her sobs turned to giggles because her father didn't know the real name of the "non-travel" team. Arthur considered fatherhood a learn-as-you-go prospect, so he was happy to sound a little dumb to ease her disappointment. He still didn't know the team's proper name, but he came to every game he could. She was one of the best players on that team and quickly learned that getting lots of playing time was better than riding the bench on the travel team with older girls.

Arthur had helped Katie then, partly with what he said but mostly by just being there for her. So his first thought was to go immediately to this sobbing young woman and try to help her as well. He knew she wasn't his daughter, of course, but she was someone's daughter, and she seemed to need help. His leg muscles tensed toward the strides that would lead him in her direction. But he consciously stopped his movement, second- and third-guessing himself. I don't know her, he thought, and she doesn't know me. And besides, I've got to get to work.

He was actually early for work, as he was every morning, so that wasn't really a concern. He loved getting to his office at the bank half an hour before everyone except the overnight custodians and security guards. He could get himself organized, prepare for the day, arrange his desk, boot up his computer, sip his coffee in the quiet--no one asking if he'd seen last night's game or was ready for that afternoon's meeting.

Her sobs grew louder, more insistent, as Arthur hesitated, his momentum toward that quiet time in his office stalled. Before he knew exactly why, he was moving toward her, step by step, steadily covering the forty feet that separated them.

"Excuse me," Arthur said, his voice purposely gentle, maybe too much so because she hadn't heard him. "Excuse me," he repeated, a little louder this time. She looked up, tensed, startled at his approach. "Are you okay?" Arthur asked.

She stared at him. To Arthur, she seemed to be weighing the merits of escape. Her hands had moved quickly to the steps, palms pressed flat on the cool concrete as if to launch herself to a standing position. Arthur recognized the fight-or-flight expression on her face. He'd seen it before--many times.

But just as quickly, her apprehension melted to relief--and then grief in barely three seconds as she began sobbing again.

Arthur saw that she was, indeed, young, pretty in a general way, no makeup, morning hair. He immediately labeled her as a student at the liberal arts college in town. There must be five hundred like her within a few square miles. Arthur had seen them for years: almost all white, though more shades of brown as the years had gone by, usually in groups of three or more, often laughing through orthodontia-perfected teeth, but sometimes deadly serious as they discussed deep thoughts from their classes or current events.

Or maybe they were just gabbing about their love lives--Arthur couldn't guess what college-aged women talked about. He had married Donna, his high school sweetheart, at age eighteen, right after boot camp. Donna had been his childhood neighbor, three houses down and across the street, her home visible from his bedroom window. They'd talked about marrying each other when they still had training wheels on their first bikes. When people asked how they'd met, Arthur could never answer. It was like

asking when he met his left ear or his right knee. She had always been part of him, and he couldn't imagine any other life. Donna usually answered, "We met in preschool, I think, but maybe earlier." In fact, they had been born at the same local hospital, twelve days apart--Donna arriving first.

After three years in the army, thankful for a stateside deployment where he could share inexpensive military housing with his new wife, Arthur and Donna bought a starter-home two blocks from their childhood street with the help of a veteran-rate mortgage and small loans from both their parents. Donna worked in the army base kitchen washing dishes and worked her way up to facilities manager in ten years, the job she still held today. Arthur attended the local community college and then a nearby state university on veteran's benefits. His head for numbers earned him an accounting degree and a position at the local bank. Like Donna, he fast-tracked to management and stayed there, happy to earn a living wage doing a job he was good at while avoiding the constant headaches that the big bosses complained about every chance they got.

Youthful romantic exploits weren't his area of expertise. What the hell do I know about college kids' love lives? he had often thought when he saw them holding hands or sitting side-by-side, leaning together in the coffee shop booths. They seemed so young. Had everyone been that young when he was in college? Had he ever been that young? Was he even that young when he met Donna before preschool?

The young woman looked down at the street as her sobs returned. Arthur thought she was probably having love-life troubles, after all. What else could a young, healthy, white, probably wealthy college girl possibly have to cry about? Either she had dumped some guy or he had cheated on her or he had dumped her. Or maybe she had her first crush on another girl. That happened in college. Sometimes in the military, too, Arthur knew. Sometimes it went away. Sometimes not. That wasn't his business. He just wanted people to be happy. But this young woman wasn't happy.

There was room on the stoop, enough that he could sit beside her without touching her, not getting uncomfortably close. Donna was fond of saying, “Come invade my space,” when she asked him to sit with her on the couch for a quiet night of television while Katie was at a school event or out with her friends. When he taught Katie to drive, the closest she came to losing her patience was when she asked him, “Can you not invade my space?” as he reached to help her with the gearshift. They both laughed. She learned quickly and was already a better driver than Arthur or her mother by the time she got her license. Arthur immediately began setting aside money for a sensible Toyota as a future graduation gift.

Arthur stepped forward and eased his big frame onto the stoop, being careful not to spill his coffee. The concrete felt cool through his slacks. She didn’t look his way but stiffened a fraction, just enough for Arthur to notice because he was expecting that reaction. “Is this okay?” he asked. “Is it okay for me to sit here with you for a minute?”

She glanced at him quickly and relaxed, nodding slightly.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Arthur asked.

She drew in a long breath and exhaled in a short burst, blowing air through a mouth oval like an athlete, just as Katie did at soccer practice. Arthur was relieved to see that her sobs had stopped, at least.

“I’ll just sit here with you for a minute,” he said. “Make sure you’re okay. Talk if we need to. Or just sit.”

She breathed steadily now, staring at her feet. Arthur swished his coffee around its cardboard cup and looked off in the distance. He glanced down and noticed that the new kid at the coffee shop had spelled his name “Author” when he wrote it on the cup. He suppressed a chuckle--wrong place, wrong time. He made a mental note to keep the cup. Donna would get a kick out of it later.

A minute passed. Neither said anything. She signed now and then, but her tears had morphed to an occasional sniffle.

Arthur had no idea what she was thinking, but his own thoughts were calm, focused on her, sending good energy her way, wondering why she was upset. Wondering if his presence was helping, hoping it was. Wondering why she had chosen this spot to sit and cry. Wondering if she'd still be crying if he hadn't stopped to comfort her. Wondering how he would have felt about himself if he had chosen to ignore her and just gone off to work as he had countless mornings before this one.

Two more minutes went by, and Arthur drifted into a companionable meditative state, almost absent conscious thought. He felt that his presence was helping--his big, dark, solid body creating a personal gravitational field that pulled some of her sad desperation away while he projected reassurance to lend her his strength as she sought to renew her own.

Then Arthur noticed two white men walk by on the main street, the same street he had approached the young woman from just a few minutes earlier. One man glanced toward them and hesitated--just a minor hitch in his stride, not more than a second. In that second, Arthur knew the man was assessing the situation: big black guy sitting alone with a small, young, white woman in a semi-hidden space. Arthur guessed that the man did a quick calculus in his mind, registering the fact that the black man was close to middle age, large but wearing a neat, white shirt (always white), navy dress pants, necktie, and employee-type ID badge clipped to his pocket. The young woman seemed to be there voluntarily, wasn't being physically restrained, didn't seem in immediate jeopardy. Arthur knew that he probably would have followed the same thought pattern if he were seeing things from this guy's perspective.

The man looked away and walked on, immediately back in step with his companion. Arthur figured he hadn't seen enough of a threat to feel the need to intervene at that moment.

But what if the man had pulled out his cell phone a few steps later

and dialed 9-1-1? Arthur had been looked on with suspicion enough times in his life to know that it happens to black men. In high school, he learned that it was easier to go to the mall with at least one of his white friends, drastically reducing the number of times that he was followed around the store by a clerk who was probably told by a manager that black boys steal. Arthur always politely nodded to the clerk, smiled, and asked about some article of clothing. The clerk usually relaxed and struck up a conversation. Arthur tended to believe that white people, like all people, were basically good. The impulses that led some white people to suspect him based only on the color of his skin could, in Arthur's experience, generally be overcome.

Generally. He had been pulled over by the police a few times for no apparent reason. "DWB," his friends called it. "Driving While Black." One high school friend who always did well in English class called the experience, "a pigmentational hazard." Arthur's father had given him "the talk" when he was just seven: Most police are good. Be polite. Do what they say. Smile but don't laugh. Make eye-contact. Keep your hands away from your pockets. Follow orders right away. Move calmly but not lazily. He had given Katie a toned-down version of the same talk when she was eleven. Being black and female was usually less threatening, but not always.

For Arthur, for Katie, this strategy had worked. For some--for many--it had not.

Times were changing, slowly, and so was Arthur. He had experienced DWB and related attention less and less as he grew older, wrinkled on the edges of his eyes, grayed at his temples, and advanced to wearing a shirt and tie at work. Living and working in the same place for twenty years helped. Being seen with Donna and Katie at church and restaurants and soccer games and office parties week after week, year after year helped. Inhabiting the same neighborhood his whole life helped everyone see him

more as just “Arthur” and less as “Big Black Guy.”

Sometimes, though, being “Big Black Guy” had advantages, Arthur acknowledged. When Donna and Katie visited the office holiday party last year, he caught Dave, a white guy in the loan department, staring at Donna’s breasts through eyes half hazed by too much spiked punch. Arthur was prepared to ignore him, but then Dave’s gaze went to Katie’s backside as she walked to the restroom down the hall. Arthur maneuvered silently behind Dave, hovered above him, and spoke two words down toward his left ear: “No, David.” Dave flinched, mumbled an apology, and retreated to the far side of the room with the other white guys in loans. No real harm was done. If it was okay for Arthur to place the angel atop the Christmas tree without a stepladder, then it was definitely okay for him to use his size to intimidate an annoying coworker who had the questionable judgment to leer at Arthur’s wife and daughter.

But this wasn’t an office holiday party. This was public space. Arthur hadn’t recognized the white man who had glanced at him long enough to slow his step. That guy wouldn’t have recognized Arthur either. To him, Arthur wasn’t, “Arthur.” He was just, “Big Black Guy”--at least a little, despite Arthur’s tie and ID, despite the fact that the white man was probably a good man. Here was “Big Black Guy” seated alone with this small, young, sad white woman. Arthur didn’t want Donna and Katie to see him at an arraignment.

There were a dozen ways this could go wrong, Arthur knew. He was still polite to the police, always. He respected the fact that they do a tough job. Most of them are heroes. Most. Some aren’t. A few are on a power trip that often involves race. Arthur stood for the anthem at sports events, but he realized that those guys taking a knee have a point. They’re not disrespecting the flag. They’re respecting what that flag should represent for everyone. And besides, Arthur had seen enough of those so-called “patriots” using the anthem time to buy hot dogs and beer or take a pee

to know that their outrage was selective.

Without glancing at his watch, Arthur guessed that ten minutes had gone by. The young woman beside him seemed to have traveled from heavy sobbing to ordinary sadness in their quiet time together. Arthur knew he had helped even if he didn't know anything about what had happened to her. Was just being there for a fellow human being sometimes enough? Just offering company in a time of need? Had she come to this semi-public place with the unconscious hope that someone would join her, share her sorrow?

"Okay," Arthur said and stood.

The young woman looked up at him. She seemed nice. She really was pretty, Arthur recognized at a deeper level than when he first saw her. Not beautiful in a magazine-cover, TV-show kind of way, but definitely pretty. She reminded Arthur of Katie--although he knew that made little sense. They didn't look anything alike. Maybe something in the eyes, Arthur considered. Whoever had broken this girl's heart probably didn't deserve a heart that could be broken to the point of all the tears that streaked her face.

She was so young. Who knows? Arthur thought. Maybe, like his daughter, she was just a kid crying over being cut from her soccer team. Only this time, it was her college team. Could it be that simple?

But this young woman was an adult, unlike Arthur's daughter. He knew his daughter would be an adult soon enough. Katie might go to college here, or she might go somewhere halfway across the country. Arthur tried to plan for his daughter's education, for her life ahead. He felt like he'd been planning since before she was born. Some things had gone as he'd expected so far, some not. Arthur felt like he had been an adult his entire life. What he remembered most about his own childhood was that it felt like another form of adulthood, just in a smaller package. He had guessed his way through life then just as now, and his best guesses seemed

to be mostly turning out right and adding up to the life he was happy to be living.

Young or old, man or woman, white or black or whatever else, Arthur thought, aren't we all just stumbling through adulthood pretty much all the time?

"My dad died this morning," the young woman said, pulling Arthur from his thoughts, her voice cracking as it edged into the quiet morning. "My mom just called. Hit by a car walking to work."

"Oh, honey," Arthur said. "Oh, honey. I'm so sorry." He honestly was.

"Can I have a sip of your coffee, please?" she asked.

"Of course," Arthur replied. He'd forgotten he had it but held the cup toward her. She took it, sipped, nodded, looked Arthur in the eye.

"Are you him?" she asked.

"Who?" Arthur replied.

"My dad," she said, the words coming out in one last, small sob. "Come back as an angel to help me. To just sit here with me like you used to. One last time. Let me know everything will be okay again."

"No," Arthur responded. "I mean, I don't think so. I don't know."

She extended the coffee cup back in his direction. He took it, feeling the lingering warmth through the paper cup. These things hold their heat long after most everything else in the world goes cold.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm okay now. I have to make some calls. Get a flight home." She rose and turned, climbed the steps, and used a key card to open the door. Arthur realized that she lived here. He was on her front step, a guest who had invited himself into her home.

The young woman turned and caught the door before it swung closed. She looked back at Arthur, her face level with his, maybe even a few inches higher, because she stood atop the steps.

"Thanks," she said again. "Do you have a daughter?"

"Yes," Arthur replied. "Katie. Sixteen. Seventeen in two months."

"Good," she said. "She's lucky."

The young woman turned, and the glass door swung closed behind her. Arthur could see her sneakered feet moving upward and fading into the shadows as she climbed the stairs inside. She had calls to make. She would make them. She would move forward as surely as she moved up those stairs and out of sight, gone from Arthur's life. After a few seconds, all Arthur could see in the glass door was his own reflection. He watched himself reach into his pants pocket, pull out his phone, bring it close to his face as if to give it a kiss.

"Text Katie," he said softly, and then dictated a message just for her, a few essential words that needed to be said right at that moment, feelings that he resolved to express to her more often. Then he slipped the phone back in his pocket, sipped his coffee, and turned to walk, once again, toward work. He'd wait to call Donna at lunch, as he did most days. Today's conversation would be different. Today he would tell her why he'd arrive at the office just a few minutes later than usual.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Does Arthur have an obligation to stop once he realizes the girl is crying?
2. Why does Arthur say, "What else could a young, healthy, white, probably wealthy college girl possibly have to cry about?" Does this qualify as stereotyping?
3. Were you surprised to find out midway through the story that Arthur is African American? If so, why?
4. What does this passage tell us about Arthur, "Arthur stood for the anthem at sports events, but he realized that those guys taking a knee have a point." If those kneeling "have a point" why don't you think he kneels with them? Particularly given that he has experienced DWB?
5. What are the other examples of stereotyping that happen within this story, or within you, as you were reading it?

* * *

Additional Information

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From The Editor

The big news is, of course, Season Two and we are all quite proud of it. We also are now at about 15,000 short story downloads per rolling 90 days for the short stories, which is pretty exciting. And last, but certainly not least, we are in contract negotiations with two fairly large magazine distributors. These sorts of things are always going on, however, so I think I'm going to instead use this section each month to tell my favorite stories that are in the spirit of the "After Dinner Conversation" stories.

In *All Star Superman* #10 a young girl is up at the top of a building threatening to jump. Superman flies up to visit her. Everyone assumes that Superman is going to save her, but instead, he simply talks to her. In fact, he gives her the choice to save herself, or to jump to her death.

This was a big break, I'm told, for the Man Of Steel; the idea that heroes shouldn't save us, that we should have agency, and that the role of a true hero is to listen, to be supportive, and to allow the person the dignity to understand and use their own agency to improve their own lives. I like that idea.

Of course, one is left to wonder if Superman would have saved her anyway if she jumped. It hardly matters for the purpose of the example.

It's a shift and, I would say, a significant one. And a reflection of the world we live in now vs the world that we were in when Superman first came out. I like the world we are in now better.

Best Wishes,

Kolby Granville