1

Sometimes I get scared. It takes a lot, now that I’ve been through what I’ve been through. But I still get scared…. Well, I guess I’m here to tell you all about that unpleasantness, so we may as well get on with it.

I woke one morning and, though the rainclouds prevented much light from getting in to my windows, I could still, dimly, make out the silhouette of a figure standing a few feet beyond the foot of my bed. I lived alone, of course—still do—and I had absolutely no idea who this person could be. Thinking back on it now, there were so many bizarre features of the scene it’s no wonder I was frightened. Indeed, it was only a matter of minutes before the fear had grown into a terror that had seemingly prevented all other bodily motions from occurring and converted them rather into cardiac motions.

For one thing, the figure was clearly an adult, and yet no more than two feet high. For another, she—or he?—was standing very near to and facing the wall that ran along the side of my bed. And so the silhouette was in profile from my position. Finally, and likely most disturbing of all, the figure seemed to be singing, very softly, to herself, not moving a muscle except for those in her mouth and throat.

Now I had been prone to nightmares for quite some time, and my original assumption was that I was in the grip of the strangest and most recent of the current rash of bad dreams. But somehow that misperception quickly faded. Perhaps it was when the figure began ever so slowly to turn in my direction. The volume of her singing began also to grow.

The most immediate effect of the louder singing was that I could begin to make out the lyrics. I was mildly surprised that the words were English, and yet she could hardly be said to have been singing *in English*, for the words seemed to be randomly chosen from a dictionary without any regard for syntax or grammar:

*… down him analyze thy grandly thistle*

*looking summer casserole together*

*for to by my under pilot jungle*

*only only shiver only penance …*

My eyes had adjusted to the dark and I could see clearly now that she was staring at me. Her singing was loud but leveling off. Her expression seemed a mix of surprise and anticipation. It seemed pretty clear that she wanted some response from me, but I felt utterly in the dark about what form any response should take.

I was frightened. I suppose I had always tried to follow the rules, and now here I was where something was expected of me but I knew not what that something was. I didn’t know what the rules were, and so I found myself unable to follow them. And that thought was simultaneously liberating and debilitating—and, most of all, nauseating. Maybe Sartre and Camus were onto something.

But then she stopped! Just as if I had somehow, by doing nothing, responded to her in the appropriate way, she ended her song. She closed her mouth and turned to walk away—*walk* away, as opposed to floating or jumping through the wall or anything else ectoplasmic. And yet something about the mundanity of her departure was all the more unsettling, especially because she was moving at such a slow pace. She was clearly leaving—her back was now to me, she was reaching for the door etc.—but her steps were coming only every two or three seconds. I’m not sure I can express to you how thorougly disturbing it all was.

I tried to roll over and go back to sleep. That was not going to happen.

2

I met my friend Alex later that evening at Mark’s, which was a deserted bar he liked to go to. In a reversal of Yogi, he had once told me that Mark’s had become the hip place to go because there was never anyone there.

Alex was suicidal; that was clear. That, in fact, was not news. Typically I’d meet Alex at the Bistro or at Mark’s, somewhere around dusk, when the dark was “just starting to smother the earth,” as Alex liked so morosely to put it, and I’d try to give him some reason for living. Not anything grand, you understand. I wasn’t trying to give him some *purpose* in life, some epic vision. I would try only to give him some reason for living *tomorrow*, for not giving up on things just yet. Looking back on it, I suppose I might have saved myself hours of trouble by finding some grander thing, some reason for living a full life, for going out and becoming the fullest human being he could become. But in fact he warned me against that. He always told me that he wouldn’t be receptive to any such Polyanna-ing. If he was to be talked out of suicide this time, it would have to be accomplished by appeal to some *small* thing. For it was the small things, Alex routinely insisted, that were the most real. To be frank, I’m not sure I would have been up to the grand challenge, anyway.

It was the small things that made all the difference, Alex would say. In fact, just as it was the small goods that would somehow make life worth living, so too it was the small evils that Alex found most troublesome when trying to reconcile evil with the existence of a loving God. “Who was it—Stalin?—who said that one death was a tragedy but a million deaths was a statistic?”

“I don’t know, Alex,” I said. “It certainly sounds Russian.”

“But does it sound Georgian!?”

“What do you mean, like *Gone with the Wind*?”

“You see, a million deaths—or a Holocaust or a genocide or whatever—*that* I can imagine being some part of God’s grand benevolent design. Because a million deaths is a *statistic*, because a million deaths *means* something. It *matters*. It has some grand effect on the world. But the *tragedy*, my friend, the real tragedy is the thing that is at once terrible and insignificant. I stubbed my toe on my bedpost again last night.”

“Yeah, so?”

“What, I ask you, could God’s plan have been regarding *that*?”

“I don’t think I follow.”

“It’s the little things. It’s the little things that seem as though they couldn’t *possibly* be part of some grand benevolent design, don’t you see? There might be some lesson or grand something-or-other to be achieved by having a Nazi war machine destroy millions of lives, Jewish, gay and Gypsy. But what could possibly be accomplished by having me stub my toe on my bedpost for the thousandth time? I haven’t learned anything—I tell you that much.”

“So you want to kill yourself because you stubbed your toe?”

“You’re an idiot.”

Our little chats would often end in him abusing me. In fact, it is this very thing that seemed to give him some reason for carrying on.

3

But then there was more strangeness. The meeting with Alex was pretty typical. The night I had after leaving Mark’s was anything but.

The sky was all but totally black as I stepped outside Mark’s. The street would have been quiet were it not for the ants. I don’t know if you’ve ever been around so many ants that their moving about was audible, but I think it must take hundreds of thousands. Perhaps millions. The sidewalk in front of me was illuminated at regular intervals by the regularly spaced street lights. And the nearest pool of light was filled with ants. Ants everywhere, in a long ribbon on top of the sidewalk, stretching up Merzhauser Street into the darkness at the edge of town.

Despite the eerieness of it all, I felt a need to discover the object of the ants’ march. So I followed the trail. By chance I had my miniature flashlight with me. It wasn’t long before the sidewalk turned into a dirt trail and the ever more infrequent cars turned into ever more frequent trees. I recalled having been out this way once before, but it seemed a million years ago now. Somewhere past the edge of town the trail got narrower and the ant column got wider. I started to wonder if I was going to have to start walking *on* the ants. Or rather, I started to wonder if I would have the stomach to continue if it got to the point where I’d have to start walking on the ants in order to proceed.

I didn’t have to answer that question, as it happened. At length I arrived at a little clearing in the woods, and suddenly all became clear. There was indeed a veritable feast for the ants on offer in the clearing. The ground surrounding the carcass appeared to have been scorched. Perhaps that was keeping other predators away and allowing the ants to run wild. Quite frankly, I was surprised that there were so many ants in the world, let alone in Franklinton (or, I suppose, just outside of Franklinton). Alex had once told me that if one were to rank the various animal species according to biomass, i.e. total mass of all living members of the species (which of course varied by the minute but remained nearly constant for most species), then the leader by an impossibly wide margin would be the ants. All the ants weigh more than all the human beings, more than all the elephants, more than all the blue whales. A lot more. Recalling this, I started to wonder why seeing so many ants was such a *rare* occasion for me!

The carcass was big. There was plenty of meat left but it was still difficult to tell what it had formerly been, especially because it looked as though there had been a great amount of head trauma. My guess was a large dog or sheep. Possibly a human being. Possibly a small horse.

I couldn’t help but be mildly fascinated by the scene. I might have investigated further but the smell had become truly unbearable.

I turned to go, but that’s when I noticed two people standing on the other side of the dead whatever it was. One seemed to be staring at me in horror; the other was wearing some sort of horse-head mask. I waved at them, but that seemed to make them disappear into the trees. I looked around only half-heartedly for them; my nose was insisting that I leave the area.

4

On my way back into town I saw my sister, which was strange because my sister had been dead for nearly twenty years. I don’t know. I guess it wasn’t she. In fact, come to think of it, this gal didn’t really have a face. But there was something about her, something about her movements or dress or something that brought images of my sister roaring into my head. Perhaps it was the horse-mask person? The lack of a face would explain the mask, I supposed.

5

When I reached my door the little singing girl was standing right in front of it, blocking my way but standing with her back to me, her nose inches from the mail slot. Her singing was fairly faint, and she didn’t seem to be aware of my presence at all. I guess I had had enough at that point because I shut my eyes tight and started screaming.

6

When I opened my eyes she was gone. I went inside. I was exhausted from the constant agitation, but I was also starving. I found some Oscar Mayer hot dogs in my refrigerator. And, as luck would have it, *Jeopardy!* was on TV. Right as the returning champion was discovering that she would no longer be returning or champion, Alex called.

“I’ve just really been into *Smiley Smile* lately, you know?” Alex said. I can’t remember if I said ‘hello’ first. Maybe *Alex* said ‘hello’ first.

“I don’t listen to music,” I said.

“You know: ‘Good Vibrations’, man! The Beach Boys!”

“I guess I’ve heard of them.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“So? Good vibrations. So what?”

“It’s not even about that song, actually. The second half of the album is the real gem. Just try to find something better.”

“I don’t listen to music,” I said.

“All right, fine. So what’s new with you?”

“Are you aware of any deaths in Franklinton recently?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“People sometimes die.”

“Are you talking about human deaths?”

“Maybe.”

“I think I have to hang up now.”

“I don’t listen to music,” I said.

I hung up and turned the TV off. And then I just sat in the darkness for a while. I was trying to *listen*, you know? I just wanted to hear the background for once. The notes that are always there but typically ignored. I found some more things to ingest. It was a good night. I did have trouble sleeping; that was becoming more common. But I amused myself by making up some stories. Eventually I settled in.

7

John always dreamt of a man who was independent, adventurous, a little strange. Was it all just a dream? Might there not in reality be any such man for him? John would spend many days hoping desperately to catch up to his future. His future as he imagined it to be, anyway. Surely the man of his dreams was not far away. Franklinton wasn’t that big, after all. But on the other hand, Franklinton wasn’t that big. The thought that he might have to leave town to find the man of his dreams was a particularly bothersome thought for John. Bothersome because he knew that he really ought to be open to such eventualities … and yet he could hardly stomach the thought of leaving town and starting over. What about his life *here*? What about his career at the pencil factory? What about the classes he was taking at Franklinton Community College in philosophy to better himself? What about his best friends Kim and her husband Jean-Claude? He saw them at least once a week, weather permitting. Oh sometimes Kim would try to drum up some excuse for not wanting to see him that week, but John wouldn’t allow her to sacrifice “JK time”.

It was 5:30 am. Time for John to put on his socks. He grabbed a gray pair of stockings from the drawer two down from the top on the left and pulled them on. First the left. Then the right. Up next: Shoe time.

John smiled at his coworkers all day at the pencil factory, but he had very little success in getting his coworkers to smile back. *Why wouldn’t they smile back?* John hunched over his work to try to mask his sadness.

“Hi, John,” Justine said, as she was passing by. She seemed to be in a hurry.

*Hello, Justine!* “Oh hi, Justine, hi! You look beautiful today, Justine. Did you have a good weekend, Justine? Maybe you’d like to come over tonight and we can talk, Justine!”

John stood up from his work station and stared after Justine as she walked down the hall. She didn’t turn around or anything! Maybe she just wanted to let him have a good look at her ass?

“OK, Justine! I know what you’re doing!”

Suddenly, from the side but approaching fast: “What are you talking about, shitface?”

It was Hector, Justine’s office mate. “Oh h-h-hi, Hector. H-h-how are you doing today?”

“Just sit down, pipsqueak, and get back to work.”

John tittered nervously and sat back down. “You don’t have to be such a bully,” he said aloud.

8

I met Alex the next day at Mark’s. On this occasion Alex was not so much depressed as anxious.

“I really think they’re after me this time, you know?” Alex looked terrible. Puffy eyes, blotchy skin. And he was fidgeting like crazy.

“Who are we talking about again?” I asked, trying to sound genuine and playful all at once.

“The aliens, damn it!”

I was thinking I’d heard this one before. Alex would from time to time get it into his head that there were aliens who had some inexplicably grand interest in him. This time it occurred to me that Alex’s psychology was in a genuinely terrible state, all the time. Or rather, not so much a terrible state, but a terrible constant flux of states, all of which were terrible. Alex was in a constant flux of terrible mental states. I really pitied the man at that moment. I can’t say I ever thought of myself as much of an altruist, but I started to wonder then whether there might not be something I could do to help him, something to ease his suffering.

“Alex, I think we’ve been through this before—”

“I passed by some old man today who was positively staring at me.”

“So?”

“So it was preternatural. I think maybe he was trying to communicate with me—maybe the aliens were controlling his mind. Or maybe he *was* an alien. And I got this weird email today.”

“Email?”

“It was in some strange alien script,” Alex said. “It looked like blueprints for some kind of …”

“Death ray?” I offered.

“You’re mocking me. I fucking hate it when you mock me.”

I sighed and surveyed the room. Without taking my eyes off the bar I said, “All right. Christ. So what was it, then, Carl Sagan?”

No response. Finally I looked back at him. Alex was practically foaming at the mouth with rage. I really thought for a moment that he was going to attack me physically. What a lunatic!

“Whoa, calm down, would you—?”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down!” Alex’s words were coming out in a sort of half-choke, half-whisper while his body positively shook. “I’m in serious trouble and you’re … you’re—”

“I’m sorry, okay? I’m just eager to hear the rest of the story, you know? What did the email look like?”

“Blueprints for something, I don’t know. Maybe a diagram or map? And there was one piece of text that I could read; it was in English.”

“Yeah?”

Alex stared at me, turning white. “It said: ‘Alex’s time’.”

“‘Alex’s time’?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” I began. “That could mean anything—”

“They’re planning my death.”

I ordered another round of martinis. It was going to take some work to talk him down from this one.

9

I had been able to sleep for a moment, but my body woke me to tell me that I had been cutting off the circulation to my left arm. I sat up and waited for the tingling to stop. While I was waiting:

“*Only only shiver only penance*. *Only only shiver only penance.*” It was definitely the singing girl’s voice again. But this time she was not in my room. Not that I could see anyway. I swallowed hard. Why wouldn’t my arm stop tingling!? I used my one good arm to tear away the bedclothes and I stood up. I tried to walk toward the voice, which led me to my front window. The curtains were drawn. My heart was pounding as I raised my right arm to pull them back. I paused. The singing was continuing. Perhaps I could just return to bed and sleep it all away?

Suddenly I drew up my courage and tore the curtain back. I screamed and fell backward as I recognized the sight of the girl, who was hovering upside-down and motionless outside my window, nose pressed to the pane. She stopped singing when she saw my face and said, “No wishing, no forgetting, no revoking. Only penance!”

I was trying to figure out how to respond to this when she flipped right-side up and—I don’t know how to put this—*swam* through my window, jumping onto the floor not two feet from where I had ended up. Terror gripped me, rendering me utterly incapacitated. My left arm was still tingling, but then so was the rest of me. And then even more strangeness: The girl seemed to fade in and out of existence for a few longish oscillations, before finally disappearing altogether.

And still my arm wouldn’t stop tingling.

10

Then one day John worked up the nerve to ask Justine out and Justine said “yes”!

John could scarcely believe his good fortune. “What would you like to do?” he asked, nervously.

“Why don’t you just come over to my house?” Justine asked. She was practically purring.

“What time?”

“Midnight. Here: I’ll write down the address for you.”

Justine scrawled down an address on the back of an envelope with a Freiburg 113 Extra Black, #1.5 lead. John took it quickly, positively beaming at Justine, who, smilingly, turned back to her work.

“745 Stagira St.,” said the card.