

DOUGLAS COUPLAND

LIFE AFTER GOD

**Author of Generation X
and Shampoo Planet**

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Your mother and I honeymooned like bandits in a beat-up 1978 Monte Carlo rental wreck. We stayed in flophouse motels up and down the Appalachian mountains and imagined ourselves as criminals lost in a life of crime—capturing satellites, pulling televangelism scams and climbing down the glass facade of Caesar's Palace while hoisting adidas bags full of stolen diamonds. In North Carolina we bought a gun and shot at road signs; instead of bathing we sprayed Calvin Klein's Eternity into our armpits; we lost money at church bingos and ate catfish deep-fried in lard. It was ten days of not hav-

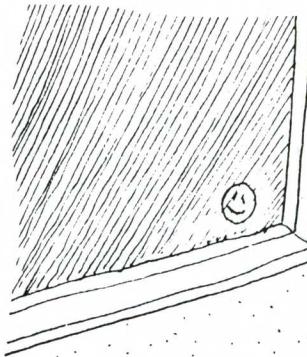
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ing to be ourselves, of being invisible and free, of hoping that the childishness of our ways would cancel out the adulthood of having gotten married.



You, yourself, were conceived with love in a cheap motel somewhere in those first few days. Your mother had stopped using birth control on our wedding night and was determined to conceive immediately. On that first night in a motel somewhere in West Virginia she ordered me to keep the curtains open as we consummated our marriage and then afterward told me of her first childhood sexual experience—of peeking into a second-story motel room window one morning while her family was visiting Disneyland, and seeing two honeymooners making love, the woman astride the man, her arms leaning back, her back arched and her rocking breasts shooting skyward. In the middle of watching this uninhibited scene, your

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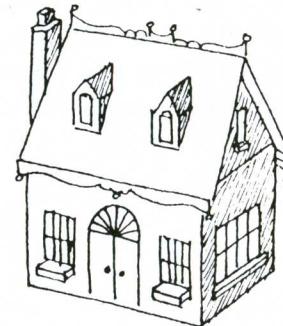
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mother's father honked the station wagon's horn and she had had to leave for downstairs. But then another delay kept the car stuck in the parking lot so your mother snuck back up to the second floor—only to find the curtains closed and, in the corner of the window where she had been peeking, a small Happy Face carved in the glass with a diamond engagement ring.



During that honeymoon trip we also visited Gettysburg, a site I had always wanted to visit, but one which did not thrill your mother who sulked among the many gift shops while I wandered through the monuments and the graveyard, thinking of the past, of war, of time's odd flow and of respect for finer ideas. I felt solemn; I don't think your mother wanted the mood of the week clouded by anything larger than our own small happiness.

Afterward when I returned to the car, I found that your mother had bought you that gingerbread dolls' house you love so much—

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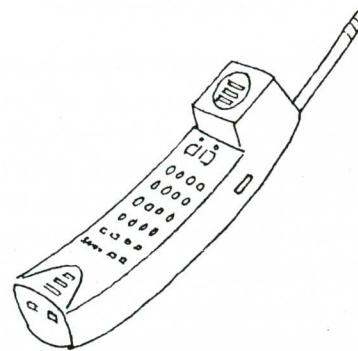
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the house of a townsman's family—as well as some small furniture and some rag dolls to live inside it. I think she knew even then that she was pregnant with you.



I am reminiscing here. Forgive me. My mood is everywhere today, like the weather. The sky is doing four things at once—raining, hailing, sunning and, it would seem further up on Grouse Mountain, snowing. It just doesn't know what to do.

And here is why my mind is all over the place: your mother left me a week ago and she took you with her.

She phones me from her mother's house and we talk every day. This is better than nothing. She says she has fallen out of love with me. She says she is confused. She says she feels lost, sort of like the way she felt when she was younger.

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I told her that everybody feels lost when they're young.

But she says there's a difference. She tells me that at least when she was younger she felt lost in her own special way. Now she just feels lost like everyone else.

I asked her if she was unhappy; she says it is not a question of happiness. She says she remembers another thing about when she was young—she remembers when the world was full of wonder—when life was a strand of magic moments strung together, a succession of mysteries revealed, leaving her feeling as though she was in a trance. She remembers back when all it took to make her feel like she was a part of the stars was to simply talk about things like death and life and the universe. [She doesn't know how to reclaim that sense of magic anymore.] *

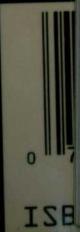
* I told her to wait—that maybe this is about something else.

* She says she doesn't want us to become dreadful people who do dreadful things to

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each other because there will be no one to forgive us. She tries to use a brave, cheerful voice with me, but it never lasts long. She says she can't live in a marriage without romantic love.

* I tried to joke with her. I told her that in the beginning of all relationships you're out there bungee jumping every weekend but after six months you're renting videos and buying corn chips just like everyone else—and the next day you can't even remember what video you rented.



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Our calls last a little while. And then she will hang up and I am alone again and try to understand what she is telling me. I try to figure out where this change in her came from. I walk through the house but it now makes no sense—stairs run into the ceiling; rooms are walled off. Perhaps I clean up some of your remaining toys, absent-mindedly trying your Fisher Price McDonald's employee headset. The phone will maybe ring again or sometimes it will leave me lonely for the night.

I sit at the kitchen table in my flannel housecoat eating toast with peanut butter while I think these thoughts. The neighbor's German shepherd barks at ghosts and the

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occasional redneck guns an engine down Lonsdale Avenue a few blocks away. But otherwise the world is quiet here in this unassuming grey-and-pink 1950s box which overlooks the lights of the ships in the harbor and the tall buildings downtown.



Now: I am an affectionate man but I have much trouble showing it.

When I was younger I used to worry so much about being alone—of being unlovable or incapable of love. As the years went on, my worries changed. I worried that I had become incapable of having a relationship, of offering intimacy. I felt as though the world lived inside a warm house at night and I was outside, and I couldn't be seen—because I was out there in the night. But now I am inside that house and it feels just the same.

Being alone here now, all of my old fears are erupting—the fears I thought I had

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buried forever by getting married: fear of loneliness; fear that being in and out of love too many times itself makes you harder to love; fear that I would never experience real love; fear that someone would fall in love with me, get extremely close, learn everything about me and then pull the plug; fear that love is only important up until a certain point after which everything is negotiable.

For so many years I lived a life of solitude and I thought life was fine. But I knew that unless I explored intimacy and shared intimacy with someone else then life would never progress beyond a certain point. I remember thinking that unless I knew what was going on inside of someone else's head other than my own I was going to explode.



The phone rings. It's her. I tell her a thought I have had. I tell her how strange it is that we're trapped inside our bodies for seventy-odd years and never once in all that time can we just, say, park our bodies in a cave for even a five-minute break and float free from the bonds of Earth. I then tell her about the fears I had years ago. I tell her that I thought that intimacy with another soul was the closest I could ever come to leaving my body.

She says to me, but were we ever intimate? How intimate were we *really*? Sure, there were the ordinary familiarity-type things—our bodies, our bodily discharges and stains and seepages, an encyclopedic knowledge of each other's family grudges,

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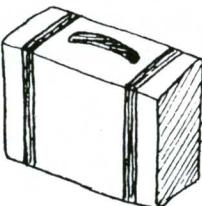
knowledge of each other's early school yard slights, our dietary peccadilloes, our TV remote control channel-changing styles. And yet . . .

And yet?

And yet in the end did we ever really give each other completely to the other? Do either of us even know how to really share ourselves? Imagine the house is on fire and I reach to save that one thing—what is it? Do you know? Imagine that I am drowning and I reach within myself to save that one memory which is me—what is it? Do you know? What things would either of us reach for? Neither of us know. After all these years we just wouldn't know.



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You were born almost ten months to the day after the wedding, wildly overdue. And once you were born, almost magically our life was converted from one of carefree penury to one of striving middle-class participation. One thing about having kids, o daughter of mine, is that even the most anarchistic paupers suddenly find themselves living in a house. Parents begin slipping you checks; strangers in the Shoppers Drug Mart checkout line earnestly speak to you about the importance of growing up while you wait to pay for a breast pump. The process is seductive. But in the end *you're* the one who has to pay the mortgage. Society indeed conspires to keep you ball-and-chained.

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And let me tell you a bit more about my life now—brace yourself, for it's not glamorous: I travel the roads. I work for a medium-sized software company called ImmuDyne. I am not an egghead—I'm just a guy in a suit who drives a boring mid-sized car and spends too much time in airport hubs with a suitcase full of brochures, diskettes, smoker's toothpaste and airline honey-roasted nuts which I eat in over-air-conditioned hotel rooms while watching late-night TV. I feel like the punch line to a joke I might have told you ten years ago. But you know: life just catches up on you.

When you're young, you always feel that life hasn't yet begun—that "life" is always scheduled to begin next week, next month, next year, after the holidays—whenever. But then suddenly you're old and the scheduled life didn't arrive. You find yourself asking, "Well then, exactly what was it I was having—that interlude—the scrambly madness—all that time I had before?"

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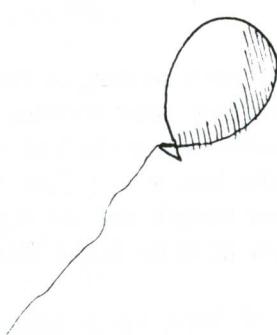
Another afternoon: I'm unshaven, dishes are fermenting in the kitchen sink and my shirt smells like a teenage boy's bedroom. There were no clean spoons around the house so I ate cottage cheese with a plastic tortoiseshell shoehorn that was lying next to the couch—so I guess I've hit a new personal low.

The TV's off; before me is a coffee mug full of dying felt pens and three-ring binder paper left over from my stress-management night school class two years ago. Rain is dripping on the laurel leaves out the front window. Looking there, I remember your mother once sitting on the window sill, eating Sweet Tarts and talking to the barn

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swallows nesting in the rafters above. I remember your mother flashdancing with a kitchen chair she had nicknamed "Otis" one New Year's Eve. These little things make us love people and yet realize at the same time how little we know them.

I don't know what it was about myself that your mother found lovable. I guess whatever it was is not enough to overcome the things she is feeling now.



I am a quiet man. I tend to think things through and try not to say too much. But here I am, saying perhaps too much. But there are these feelings inside me which need badly to escape, I guess. And this makes me feel relieved because one of my big concerns these past few years is that I've been losing my ability to feel things with the same intensity—the way I felt when I was younger. It's scary—to feel your emotions floating away and just not caring. I guess what's really scary is not caring about the loss. I guess this is what your mother is responding to. I make a note in my mind to talk about this with her.



A phone call: I tell your mother that I know I've been feeling less these days but I promise that I'll try to feel more. She laughs, not meanly, but genuinely.

I say that I know life has gotten so boring so quickly in so many ways—and that neither of us planned for this to happen. I never thought that we would end up in the suburbs with lawnmowers and swing sets. I never thought that I'd be a lifer at some useless company. But then wasn't this the way of the world? The way of adulthood, of maturity, of bringing up children?

I am kicked in the gut. She says that one of the cruellest things you can do to another

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person is pretend that you care about them more than you really do. I'm not sure if she means this about me or if she means this about herself. I ask her and she says she doesn't know.

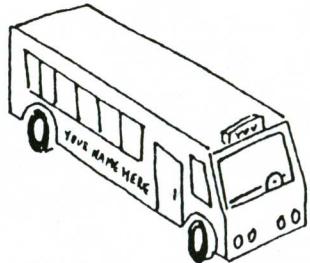
She says: I'm sorry, but I just stopped being in love. It happened. I woke up and it was gone and it scared me and I felt like I was lying and hollow pretending to be "the wife." And I just can't do it anymore. I love you but I'm not in love.

I say: But I still love you.

She says: Do you? Really?

I say: Yes.

She says: Then I'm hurting you. Please stop asking me to say these things to you.



Why is it so hard to quickly sum up all of those things that we have learned while being alive here on Earth? Why can't I just tell you, "*In ten minutes you are going to be hit by a bus, and so in those ten minutes you must quickly itemize what you have learned from being alive.*"

Chances are that you would have a blank list. And even if you gave the matter great concentration, you would probably still have a blank list. And yet we *know* in our hearts that we learn the greatest and most profound things by breathing, by seeing, by feeling, by falling in and out and in and out of love.

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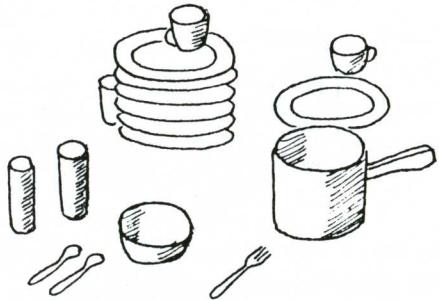
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My mother comes to visit and she talks while she washes my dishes. She does not see things the way I do. She says that your mother is young and will see things differently after a while. Just hang in there. She says that what we are going through is common in couples and one of the great sad points of life—but it is survivable. I don't ask her how she knows this because I might be even more saddened by the answer.

She scrubs and puts order into the chaos. She says: "First there is love, then there is disenchantment and then there is the rest of your life."

And I say, "But what *about* the rest of

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your life—what about all the time that remains?"

And she says, "Oh—there's friendship. Or at least familiarity. And there's safety. And after that there's sleep."

I think to myself: How do any of us know that it's going to end up like this? That *this* is all there was maybe going to be? I say, "Oh, God."

And my mother says to me, "Honey, God is what keeps us together after the love is gone."



You are old enough to enjoy stories, now, Baby, so let me tell you a story. Let me tell you a story about Gettysburg—honeymoonland—of a man from the town of Gettysburg itself, called into duty days after the battle, to clean up the remains—rolling up his sleeves and gathering the slain bodies, row upon row, digging graves in an endless line, building bonfires of broken horses and broken mules, breathing clouds of flies and the steam of blood and soil, burying and exhuming, burying and exhuming the rows of bodies and limbs, all day long for many days in succession.

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He returns to his home and he is unable to speak, and he sits by the fireplace. His daughters surround him but are silenced to a hush by their mother. They know that this is not the way he used to be. The children whisper, "Why won't Daddy talk?" and the mother says, "That is a father's choice, children," but Mother herself is worried, but then what can she say to him, either?

She whisks her daughters off to bed, their toys left behind them on the floor, and then goes off to bed herself, taking a long look back into the main room at her husband, still seated by the fire, still silent.

The night passes and the children awaken. They run downstairs and there, while the birds sing outside and a wind blows through an open window, they find their father lying asleep in his chair next to the fireplace embers. They are happy that he is resting and they go to their breakfast. It is only later on when they go to play that they realize that something is different, but they don't know exactly what, and so they give

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the matter no second thought, laughing with each other and reaching for their dolls which they find lined up in neat rows up against the side of the dolls' house.

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