

Reasons Why The Dead Don't Speak



Lee van Laer

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Doremishock Publishing

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Meditation



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There are an endless number of universes, and an endless number of creations. Each one is unique. And every universe, once created, finds itself alone.

Its first instinct is to seek companionship, but before it does that, it must create its own laws. And those laws themselves limit what can be found, and who can be known.

In our own universe, the first two laws were life and death. Everything takes place between those two parallel lines. But the two laws are born of a non-Euclidean geometry, where parallel lines always meet, and thus are never completely separated.

Paradoxically, death was the first Law, because our universe, in the first instant it existed, recognized that everything must eventually come to an end. Not every universe is this wise; some are frivolous, and begin with laws that defy gravity and other necessary forces.

Sorcerers in the Amazon drink the sacred Ayahuasca vine, using the sweat from their bodies to distill a knowing of the first law. It is the only way to enter the charnel house of time, pick the bones of death, and know his secrets.

Every one of them, on the last day of their lives, passes on what they have found to a single chosen individual. Because this secret can, according to tradition, never be shared

with any other person, no one knows that this is always the same thing, and it is this: Wise men all fear death; but death fears the wise man.

Death fears wisdom because it takes death's strength and drinks from it, creating life. The wise man strips death naked in front of him, until both of them stand there with their sex dangling in front of them, shining in a light where there is nowhere left to hide. And death fears that, it fears its nakedness, because death is actually ashamed. He was the firstborn of the laws, but his younger sibling, life, is more radiant. He regrets feeding on something so beautiful, but if it stops, he cannot sustain his own existence. And despite his ugliness, death, like everything else in the universe, loves himself.

Life is the second law.

The discovery of life is not left to the sorcerers. It is in the everyday, and in ordinary people, that the task of knowing her secrets is discovered. Some succeed; some fail. Instead of finding one thing, like the sorcerers of death, many things are found, but in the end, almost all of them also add up to one thing, and that one thing is Love, because in the same way that the secret heart of death is fear, the heart of life is Love.

Life pretends to be afraid of death, right up until the end. But life knows that it needs death in the same way that death knows that it needs life. They are Siamese twins, lovers that feed two bodies from the same mouth.

Inevitably, death gets the bad reputation. Life casts death in the role of the enemy. It doesn't have a choice; there is nowhere else to lay the blame. But this is a good thing. Life is lucky to have an enemy. Life can trust her enemy, because enemies are unable to betray her.

Life is, above all, a teacher. And what it teaches, over and over again, is this:

Remember me, and I will make your blood sing with light in the darkness.

The Bridge



The Gatekeeper



Our aim was to cross the bridge intentionally.

It's said that everyone gets to the bridge, but no one believes they will. At the beginning, it's so far away that it seems like a dream, an impossibility. So it's the journey itself that is compelling; so compelling, in fact, that on the way, one frequently forgets that there is a bridge, or that one will have to cross it.

No one knows how long ago the bridge was built, or who built it. Some say it was built by the gods. Others say it was men who believed too much in themselves—or or did not believe enough. The stories vary. What they all have in common is that they are stories, ideas that men make up to explain things, without really knowing anything at all. Men love their stories. They occupy them almost fully, becoming a substitute for everything that actually happens to them. We live our lives with our eyes wide open, but everything that comes in is transformed into a substance called imagination. That is where the stories begin, and we think that they are good enough, so we accept them. It's one way of keeping busy while we are on our way to the bridge.

We told stories, too. Everyone does. Mostly, stories about the bridge. It fascinates people. Stories about people avoiding the bridge, hordes crossing the bridge in a single day in numbers so vast they cannot be counted, stories about finding the bridge unexpectedly in the midst of a busy city.

Anything is possible, of course. But only some things are true. Unlike others, our group of travelers started out because we knew this. We became suspicious of what we were told; saw how others were driven by fear instead of intention; saw how we, too, were seized by an impulse to flee in any direction that would take us away from the bridge. And despite our pretensions of objectivity, we did want to flee. Something in every man rebels at the idea of compulsion.

Each of us was different. One was a doctor; one a lawyer. One woman was a prostitute who painted herself in colors the rest of us could not understand, unless our need was great, in which case we understood her completely. There was a housewife, and a carpenter, and the man who killed swine for a living. We had two thieves; one was rich and admired, and had obtained permission to steal from those less powerful than himself. The other was poor and desperate, and had already had one hand cut off.

For myself, I was quite ordinary. I had gone to school and raised a family. Along the way, I made enough money to survive. I loved my children and made the sacrifices any man would make to care for them. I had one wife who screamed and hit me, and a second one who treated me with love. And, of course, like everyone else, I heard stories about the bridge.

The first story I ever heard came from an ancient Book that was written, my parents said, by men so wise that the Earth could no longer tolerate their presence, and banished them out of jealousy. Since then, they claimed, no man had

ever reached that level. But the Book was left behind to teach us. The earth is able to send souls away to other places, but books are an entirely different matter. Like everything else on her surface, they are made from her own bones, and, like cancer cells, much more difficult to eliminate.

The Book claimed that the bridge was built not by men, not by bodhisattvas, angels, demiurges, or demons, but by God Himself, and that it was constructed entirely from the love left over after the universe was created. God, so the story went, had an infinite amount of love, so there was plenty left over after a creation as paltry as a single universe. In my own time, in fact, there were men called physicists that said God had created an infinite number of universes. Most thought these men were stupid, or insane, because they preferred a God with understandable limits placed upon him. To me, the story sounded reasonable, but I discovered as a youth that one was not allowed to argue with the Book. To do so enraged the adults around me. There is no room for a precocious child.

The Book claimed that on the other side of the bridge was another place; perhaps another universe, even, because the description of it was so different than our own that no reasonable person could mistake it for having anything to do with where we live now. It was a magnificent place, where everything was perfect, and nothing ever went wrong; where every action and circumstance was initiated by an incomprehensible, incomparable, boundless, and unexcelled complete perfect Love.

In order to get to this place, of course, one absolutely had to cross the bridge, because there was no other path. And only those who earned sufficient merit could ever cross the bridge. It was guarded, so the Book said, by fierce demons who would cast those without merit into the chasm, from whence there was no return.

For reasons I never fully understood, this idea greatly appealed to men. They took great delight in painting pictures and writing stories about all kinds of fierce demons leveling horrific punishments and awesome torments on those who failed to make the cut. It always seemed sincere to me; and the pictures always reminded me much more of what men do to each other than what any divine influence might accomplish.

In any event, only two things were clear to me when I first met the other travelers in my group. One was that there was a bridge. One by one, eventually, everyone left for the bridge, whether unexpectedly, or because an invitation came. Departure was not determined by age; the call might come at any time. Most people lived as though the call would never come, although it is true there were those that chose to continually taunt in the midst of life, daring the invitation to arrive. Some of these people were called heroes; some were called fools. The differences between the two were minimal.

The second thing that was clear to me was that the crossing was irrevocable. Nothing was ever heard from the other side; what crossed the bridge crossed into an eternal silence.

The reason for this, too, was a mystery; while it was clear that crossing the bridge led to another place, that place was separated from us as surely as one universe is separated from another. And it was the disease of curiosity, perhaps, more than anything else, that pushed me forward in my search. I have a poor tolerance for the unknown.

So our group, thrown together by accidents of circumstance, and discovering that we shared common views, determined to set out for the bridge intentionally, rather than waiting for an accident to send us on our way. We agreed that together, we had a better chance of reaching the bridge and crossing it than any of us did individually. And by the time we made our agreement, all of us were convinced that in the end, no matter what we did in life, the point of it was to reach the bridge successfully and cross over.

The existence of the bridge had spawned a vast industry of so-called “experts” on the subject. There were many books on how to get there and how to cross over. Everyone of them contradicted the others. Some claimed that one had to act like an idiot or a fool, with no care in life, and then dash over at the last moment when the demons were distracted. Some claimed that you could build machines that would carry you across the bridge safely, if only you followed every rule and instruction very, very exactly. Still others said there were chants and magical formulas. Each one of the books was compelling, taken by itself. Taken together, they created a great cacophony of noise and words that led to nothing but confusion.

Men argued about the books and sometimes even killed each other over them.

There were even those – charlatans, for the most part – who claimed that they had been across the bridge before, or had contact with those from the other side. We interviewed many of these people, one by one, weeding out the posers and the lunatics until we were left with a very small number of people who seemed to know something that might, just might, be true.

Of that small group, in the end, only one appeared to be trustworthy. He was a quiet man of little means who lived in a small town in the mountains. They called him the keeper of the gate; he lived in a village many hundreds of years old, walled all around with stone. By tradition, one man kept the gates to this village, even though—supposedly – the need for a gatekeeper had long ago ceased to exist.

We heard about him through a group of traveling musicians who played songs about the bridge, and undertook a rather arduous journey into the barren countryside to find him. It was late in the year; the sky was an icy gray, and the first flakes of snow were swirling through the air when we finally found him within the stone walls of his village, sweeping a dirt courtyard clean of straw. He was a short man, with a wiry hair and a beard, a hooked nose that made him look a bit like a bird of prey. Thin to the point of being nearly insubstantial, he was dressed in a single dirty white garment that was ragged at the bottom. Amazingly, despite the cold, he was

wearing a pair of sandals, his feet exposed to the elements, as though he had no fear. His head, however, was protected by a lambswool cap, pulled down tightly over his ears.

Our group, for reasons I cannot go into, had taken a vow of silence. We communicated among one another with signs and symbols, and only one of us was allowed to speak. It fell to me to do all of the communication with the outside world. Not because I was the most able, but because I was the least skilled of all of us, and thus had the least to lose.

It seemed ridiculous for a group of men and women who drove cars, who sent text messages and surfed the web, to be standing in front of a peasant with a broom hoping for elucidation, but we had moved beyond pride and shame. A desperation of the intellect drives men into strange corners. There we were, with our handhelds, our catalog-bought trekking clothes in stylish faux-ethnic artificial fibers, our weatherproof Vibram-soled footwear, pretending we were ready for wilderness and deprivation. We all realized later that we were tricked out like cartoon gypsies, and were probably objects of ridicule in the village. But when we first arrived, we thought we were the ones with the savoir-faire, and in a position to bargain.

When he saw us coming, the man stopped sweeping. He paused briefly, assessing each of us with a quick but penetrating glance. As soon as he was finished, he turned back to his sweeping as though we did not exist

“Are you the gatekeeper?” I asked.

“I might be,” said the man. “But people don’t call me that. I have a name.” He continued sweeping, carefully, herding individual shafts of straw into a neatly organized pile.

“All right,” I said, “My name is Benjamin. What’s yours?”

“You ought to be more careful,” said the sweeper, “giving your name away just like that. Before you give custody of your name to another man, you ought to take his measure. You never know what he’ll do with it. Now my own name,” he continued, turning to us with a wry smile, “it is Ali.”

“How do you know it’s safe to share your name with us?” I asked him.

“I looked at you, and I saw you,” said Ali. “You, on the other hand, are city people, modern people, who look at everything, and see nothing. The risk was yours, not mine.”

“Then we can be trusted?”

“Sometimes,” said Ali, slyly. “Every man wears his heart on his face. A man of discrimination can read that book, no matter how clever the keeper of the face may be. Your face, for example is the face of the man who is soft in his heart, where it matters, but hard in his intellect. This is an advantage. Men who are hard in their hearts can go nowhere. And I see that you – all of you – are travelers. Or at least, you want to be.”

“You are a literate man,” I said deferentially. “We are travelers, indeed, and we are looking for a light, and a guide who knows the way.”

Ali laughed out loud, generously, in the manner of a man who has so much laughter to spare he can squander it almost anywhere he pleases. “Go forth and put your hand in the hand of God,” he said. “It is better than a lamp, and safer than a known way.”

“We would like to take your advice,” I replied seriously. “But we don’t know how. It is said you are a man who understands these things.”

“What things?”

“You understand the way to the bridge, don’t you? We are seeking a man who can point us in the right direction.”

Ali’s face grew serious. He put the broom aside, leaning it on a wall that had mortar crumbling out of it like sand. “Come,” he said. “Come.” And he led us all into the crude stone hut that he called home, where a small fire was burning in a modest hearth. We sat crosslegged in a circle, on wool rugs dyed in the browns and burgundies of roots and berries, knotted by hand on winter nights when the sun set early and there was no other form of entertainment. His wife – of the same size and stature as Ali himself – rummaged about with efficiency, but no haste, organizing tea brewed in a battered pewter kettle that had seen better days, rather a lot of them, it appeared. We had all taken a chill, despite our modern gear,

and we were grateful for the warm cups when they reached our fingers. The tea was bitter and astringent, but it warmed us and reminded us of friendship and gratitude.

It was not until we had all drunk our tea that Ali spoke again. Because of our vows, our company remained silent, which seemed to impress him favorably. He was not a man to use words unnecessarily.

“So, my boy.” Ali looked at me as though I were the only one in the room, although his comment clearly took everyone into account. “Your friends are very quiet.”

“We took a vow,” I explained. “Among us, there is no unnecessary talking. I alone am authorized to speak, but all of us are here to listen.”

“It’s good that you have a form,” said Ali. “But it won’t help you. Where you would want to go, your own arrangements will make no difference. On the way to the bridge, everything is arranged for a man. Men who think they are in control of making the arrangements flatter themselves, and inevitably become victims of their own vanity. Only the man who recognizes that the circumstances do not belong to him can make any progress.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Is there no way for us to determine our own destiny?”

“Your destiny is already determined,” said Ali. “The only thing that is not determined is the way in which you will meet it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You educated people,” said Ali in mild disgust. “You all ask too many questions. Life has to be lived, not analyzed. In the old days, people understood that. Now you rely on spreadsheets on computers, and you think that numbers make the meaning. No, don’t look surprised. Do you think I’m a stupid man? I know all about your computers and your cell phones. They have become a substitute for life. It’s no wonder the mujahedin want to hunt you down and kill you. They see you as no better than the machines they serve. I am not like that, mind you. They are equally enslaved by their ideas. This is the exact problem, everyone is enslaved by their ideas. No one who follows an ideal can go to the bridge by intention.”

“Are we all doomed to be led to the bridge by our noses, then? Are we at the mercy of forces beyond our control?”

“Everything in the universe is at the mercy of one force or another. Men are some of the few creatures who have the ability to choose which force they are under. Some men make wise choices; other men make foolish ones. Only the men who listen to their heart have a chance.”

“Can you teach us how to listen to our hearts?”

Ali shook his head slowly, sadly, in what appeared to be genuine regret. He paused and poured himself another cup of tea, steam rising off it like a dragon into the dark rafters of the hut. Something rustled up there, a small animal, or perhaps a bird, taking shelter from the deepening cold.

“Too many men make such promises,” he said. “Almost all of them are liars. The fact that you are sitting here shows that you have, at least, recognized that much. It is very little, but it is something.”

“So there is a way? A known location, a method of travel? And what of the other side? Do those who reach it ever come back? Do you hear tales of it?”

“This subject is so misunderstood it’s almost pointless to talk about it. There is only a mystery, and a way to live your life forward into it. The river that the bridge crosses is time itself, and it marks the divide between what has been, what is, and what could be. On this side, everything is definite. On the other one, nothing is. Effect represents conclusion, uses matter to define its parameters, and words to describe them. Cause arises from probability, exists before language, and has no need to speak.”

“But the bridge is real. Men have seen it.”

“Every man sees it, sooner or later. Usually, by the time a man realizes the truth, it is too late to do anything. Only the man who prepares himself can be ready when the moment comes.” Ali rearranged himself on the carpeting, opened a tin

box, and began to pack tobacco methodically into the hookah in the middle of the room. “It’s pointless to discuss these things in literal terms. There are stories that can teach you, but every one of them is a cipher. They’re meant to pass by the literal mind and feed the deepest part of ourselves, one we have forgotten. That part connects us directly to the heart of our greatest wish. And to know our true wish, that is what the preparation eventually consists of. Even that is dangerous; some men discover that their true wish is a bad wish, and when a man is formed that way, it is better he kills himself than to go forward.”

“How can a man tell if his wish is bad?”

Ali looked all around the room slowly, carefully, and put the tip of the hookah into his mouth. He lit a match, drawing the flame downward into the tobacco until an orange glow lit the room. Blowing out a thick cloud of lazy, blue gray smoke, he finally spoke again.

“Don’t worry about such things. None of you have a bad wish. If you did, I would not let you sit here.” He took another leisurely puff of the tobacco, and continued.

“I am not called the gatekeeper because I guard the village. It’s convenient for us to let people think that; it’s quaint, and the tourists love it. They come up here by the busload and we entertain them with our brightly colored clothing and our antiquated ways. There’s no shame in it; everyone needs money. But the position of the gatekeeper is a position passed not from father to son, but from storyteller to storyteller. A

gatekeeper has to be able to remember many stories, every single one of them perfectly, word for word, and repeat them with no mistakes. This is so because each of the stories that the gatekeeper tells is a story that can help a man know how to find, and to cross, the bridge. It's forbidden to write the stories down, because they must be told by a living man in order to have the right effect. Without the intonation, without the gestures, without the atmosphere of the room in which the story is told, the story becomes a dead thing. Of course, in the past century or so, some men have written some of the stories down; they hear them from gatekeepers, and they break their vow not to retell the story. We have to forgive them; even though these men are traitors, they are trying to preserve what little is left of the tradition. We are dying out; quite frankly, gatekeepers are very nearly extinct. When the last of us dies, men will no longer walk to the bridge with their head held high, as they did in the old days; they will have to ride there in tumbrels, jeered by crowds on either side, like the aristocrats who were carried to the guillotine."

"What does one have to do, to hear such a story?"

"Once one encounters a gatekeeper, if he does not turn you away, one has but to ask."

I turned slowly and scanned the room, looking at each of the members of our band of seekers. The doctor, the lawyer, the prostitute, the thieves; one by one, they nodded until everyone had given their assent .

"Then we ask," I said. "Tell us one of your stories."

"You have to pick a story," said Ali, "and there are many of them."

"How can we pick a story? We don't know any of them."

"Of course," Ali said, taking yet another puff of tobacco. He chuckled as he exhaled, as though sharing a joke with himself. "You are like infants. So much has been lost that when people find a gatekeeper, they don't even know what to ask him anymore." He paused, thinking. Smoke that he had exhaled eddied back towards him in tendrils, as though seeking a way back in to the dark comfort of his body.

"Very well, since I must pick the story, I will tell my personal favorite. In it is contained much of what you wish to know, if you can discern the meaning. But you cannot know the meaning with your mind, and it will take many years to know it fully. Some of you," he said, pausing so that the words would penetrate deeper, "do not have many years. So you had better listen very carefully indeed."

The Search



Our aim was to cross the bridge.

It's said that everyone gets to the bridge, but no one believes they will. At the beginning, it's so far away that it seems like a dream, an impossibility. So it's the journey itself that is compelling; so compelling, in fact, that on the way, one frequently forgets that there is a bridge, or that one will have to cross it.

No one knows how long ago the bridge was built, or who built it. Some say it was built by the gods. Others say it was men who believed too much in themselves—or or did not believe enough. The stories vary. What they all have in common is that they are stories, ideas that men make up to explain things, without really knowing anything at all. Men love their stories. They occupy them almost fully, becoming a substitute for everything that actually happens to them. We live our lives with our eyes wide open, but everything that comes in is transformed into a substance called imagination. That is where the stories begin, and we think that they are good enough, so we accept them. It's one way of keeping busy while we are on our way to the bridge.

We told stories, too. Everyone does. Mostly, stories about the bridge. It fascinates people. Stories about people avoiding the bridge, hordes crossing the bridge in a single day in numbers so vast they cannot be counted, stories about finding the bridge unexpectedly in the midst of a busy city.

Anything is possible, of course. But only some things are true. Unlike others, our group of travelers started out because we

knew this. We became suspicious of what we were told; saw how others were driven by fear instead of intention; saw how we, too, were seized by an impulse to flee in any direction that would take us away from the bridge. And despite our pretensions of objectivity, we did want to flee. Something in every man rebels at the idea of compulsion.

Each of us was different. One was a doctor; one a lawyer. One woman was a prostitute who painted herself in colors the rest of us could not understand, unless our need was great, in which case we understood her completely. There was a housewife, and a carpenter, and the man who killed swine for a living. We had two thieves; one was rich and admired, and had obtained permission to steal from those less powerful than himself. The other was poor and desperate, and had already had one hand cut off.

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The first story I ever heard came from an ancient Book that was written, my parents said, by men so wise that the Earth could no longer tolerate their presence, and banished them out of jealousy. Since then, they claimed, no man had ever reached that level. But the Book was left behind to teach us. The earth is able to send souls away to other places, but

books are an entirely different matter. Like everything else on her surface, they are made from her own bones, and, like cancer cells, much more difficult to eliminate.

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In any event, only two things were clear to me when I first met the other travelers in my group. One was that there was a bridge. One by one, eventually, everyone left for the bridge, whether unexpectedly, or because an invitation came. Departure was not determined by age; the call might come at any time. Most people lived as though the call would never come, although it is true there were those that chose to continually taunt in the midst of life, daring the invitation to arrive. Some of these people were called heroes; some were called fools. The differences between the two were minimal.

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rated from us as surely as one universe is separated from another. And it was the disease of curiosity, perhaps, more than anything else, that pushed me forward in my search. I have a poor tolerance for the unknown.

So our group, thrown together by accidents of circumstance, and discovering that we shared common views, determined to set out for the bridge intentionally, rather than waiting for an accident to send us on our way. We agreed that together, we had a better chance of reaching the bridge and crossing it than any of us did individually. And by the time we made our agreement, all of us were convinced that in the end, no matter what we did in life, the point of it was to reach the bridge successfully and cross over.

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When he saw us coming, the man stopped sweeping. He paused briefly, assessing each of us with a quick but penetrating glance. As soon as he was finished, he turned back to his sweeping as though we did not exist

“Are you the gatekeeper?” I asked.

“I might be,” said the man. “But people don’t call me that. I have a name.” He continued sweeping, carefully, herding individual shafts of straw into a neatly organized pile.

“All right,” I said, “My name is Benjamin. What’s yours?”

“You ought to be more careful,” said the sweeper, “giving your name away just like that. Before you give custody of your name to another man, you ought to take his measure. You never know what he’ll do with it. Now my own name,” he continued, turning to us with a wry smile, “it is Ali.”

“How do you know it’s safe to share your name with us?” I asked him.

“I looked at you, and I saw you,” said Ali. “You, on the other hand, are city people, modern people, who look at everything, and see nothing. The risk was yours, not mine.”

“Then we can be trusted?”

“Sometimes,” said Ali, slyly. “Every man wears his heart on his face. A man of discrimination can read that book, no matter how clever the keeper of the face may be. Your face, for example is the face of the man who is soft in his heart, where it matters, but hard in his intellect. This is an advantage. Men who are hard in their hearts can go nowhere. And I see that you – all of you – are travelers. Or at least, you want to be.”

“You’re a literate man,” I said deferentially. “We are travelers, indeed, and we are looking for a light, and a guide who knows the way.”

Ali laughed out loud, generously, in the manner of a man who has so much laughter to spare he can squander it almost anywhere he pleases. “Go forth and put your hand in the hand of God,” he said. “It’s better than a lamp, and safer than a known way.”

“We would like to take your advice,” I replied seriously. “But we don’t know how. It is said you are a man who understands these things.”

“What things?”

“You understand the way to the bridge, don’t you? We are seeking a man who can point us in the right direction.”

Ali’s face grew serious. He put the broom aside, leaning it on a wall that had mortar crumbling out of it like sand. “Come,” he said. “Come.” And he led us all into the crude stone hut that he called home, where a small fire was burning in a modest hearth. We sat crosslegged in a circle, on wool rugs dyed in the browns and burgundies of roots and berries, knotted by hand on winter nights when the sun set early and there was no other form of entertainment. His wife – of the same size and stature as Ali himself – rummaged about with efficiency, but no haste, organizing tea brewed in a battered pewter kettle that had seen better days, rather a lot of them, it appeared. We had all taken a chill, despite our modern gear,

and we were grateful for the warm cups when they reached our fingers. The tea was bitter and astringent, but it warmed us and reminded us of friendship and gratitude.

It was not until we had all drunk our tea that Ali spoke again. Because of our vows, our company remained silent, which seemed to impress him favorably. He was not a man to use words unnecessarily.

“So, my boy.” Ali looked at me as though I were the only one in the room, although his comment clearly took everyone into account. “Your friends are very quiet.”

“We took a vow,” I explained. “Among us, there is no unnecessary talking. I alone am authorized to speak, but all of us are here to listen.”

“It’s good that you have a form,” said Ali. “But it won’t help you. Where you would want to go, your own arrangements will make no difference. On the way to the bridge, everything is arranged for a man. Men who think they are in control of making the arrangements flatter themselves, and inevitably become victims of their own vanity. Only the man who recognizes that the circumstances do not belong to him can make any progress.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Is there no way for us to determine our own destiny?”

“Your destiny is already determined,” said Ali. “The only thing that is not determined is the way in which you will meet it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You educated people,” said Ali in mild disgust. “You all ask too many questions. Life has to be lived, not analyzed. In the old days, people understood that. Now you rely on spreadsheets on computers, and you think that numbers make the meaning. No, don’t look surprised. Do you think I’m a stupid man? I know all about your computers and your cell phones. They have become a substitute for life. It’s no wonder the mujahedin want to hunt you down and kill you. They see you as no better than the machines they serve. I am not like that, mind you. They are equally enslaved by their ideas. This is the exact problem, everyone is enslaved by their ideas. No one who follows an ideal can go to the bridge by intention.”

“Are we all doomed to be led to the bridge by our noses, then? Are we at the mercy of forces beyond our control?”

“Everything in the universe is at the mercy of one force or another. Men are some of the few creatures who have the ability to choose which force they are under. Some men make wise choices; other men make foolish ones. Only the men who listen to their heart have a chance.”

“Can you teach us how to listen to our hearts?”

Ali shook his head slowly, sadly, in what appeared to be genuine regret. He paused and poured himself another cup of tea, steam rising off it like a dragon into the dark rafters of the hut. Something rustled up there, a small animal, or perhaps a bird, taking shelter from the deepening cold.

“Too many men make such promises,” he said. “Almost all of them are liars. The fact that you are sitting here shows that you have, at least, recognized that much. It is very little, but it is something.”

“So there is a way? A known location, a method of travel? And what of the other side? Do those who reach it ever come back? Do you hear tales of it?”

“This subject is so misunderstood it’s almost pointless to talk about it. There is only a mystery, and a way to live your life forward into it. The river that the bridge crosses is time itself, and it marks the divide between what has been, what is, and what could be. On this side, everything is definite. On the other one, nothing is. Effect represents conclusion, uses matter to define its parameters, and words to describe them. Cause arises from probability, exists before language, and has no need to speak.”

“But the bridge is real. Men have seen it.”

“Every man sees it, sooner or later. Usually, by the time a man realizes the truth, it is too late to do anything. Only the man who prepares himself can be ready when the moment comes.” Ali rearranged himself on the carpeting, opened a tin

box, and began to pack tobacco methodically into the hookah in the middle of the room. “It’s pointless to discuss these things in literal terms. There are stories that can teach you, but every one of them is a cipher. They’re meant to pass by the literal mind and feed the deepest part of ourselves, one we have forgotten. That part connects us directly to the heart of our greatest wish. And to know our true wish, that is what the preparation eventually consists of. Even that is dangerous; some men discover that their true wish is a bad wish, and when a man is formed that way, it is better he kills himself than to go forward.”

“How can a man tell if his wish is bad?”

Ali looked all around the room slowly, carefully, and put the tip of the hookah into his mouth. He lit a match, drawing the flame downward into the tobacco until an orange glow lit the room. Blowing out a thick cloud of lazy, blue gray smoke, he finally spoke again.

“Don’t worry about such things. None of you have a bad wish. If you did, I would not let you sit here.” He took another leisurely puff of the tobacco, and continued.

“I am not called the gatekeeper because I guard the village. It’s convenient for us to let people think that; it’s quaint, and the tourists love it. They come up here by the busload and we entertain them with our brightly colored clothing and our antiquated ways. There’s no shame in it; everyone needs money. But the position of the gatekeeper is a position passed not from father to son, but from storyteller to storyteller. A

gatekeeper has to be able to remember many stories, every single one of them perfectly, word for word, and repeat them with no mistakes. This is so because each of the stories that the gatekeeper tells is a story that can help a man know how to find, and to cross, the bridge. It’s forbidden to write the stories down, because they must be told by a living man in order to have the right effect. Without the intonation, without the gestures, without the atmosphere of the room in which the story is told, the story becomes a dead thing. Of course, in the past century or so, some men have written some of the stories down; they hear them from gatekeepers, and they break their vow not to retell the story. We have to forgive them; even though these men are traitors, they are trying to preserve what little is left of the tradition. We are dying out; quite frankly, gatekeepers are very nearly extinct. When the last of us dies, men will no longer walk to the bridge with their head held high, as they did in the old days; they will have to ride there in tumbrels, jeered by crowds on either side, like the aristocrats who were carried to the guillotine.”

“What does one have to do, to hear such a story?”

“Once one encounters a gatekeeper, if he does not turn you away, one has but to ask.”

I turned slowly and scanned the room, looking at each of the members of our band of seekers. The doctor, the lawyer, the prostitute, the thieves; one by one, they nodded until everyone had given their assent .

“Then we ask,” I said. “Tell us one of your stories.”

“You have to pick a story,” said Ali, “and there are many of them.”

“How can we pick a story? We don’t know any of them.”

“Of course,” Ali said, taking yet another puff of tobacco. He chuckled as he exhaled, as though sharing a joke with himself. “You are like infants. So much has been lost that when people find a gatekeeper, they don’t even know what to ask him anymore.” He paused, thinking. Smoke that he had exhaled eddied back towards him in tendrils, as though seeking a way back in to the dark comfort of his body.

“Very well, since I must pick the story, I will tell my personal favorite. In it is contained much of what you wish to know, if you can discern the meaning. But you cannot know the meaning with your mind, and it will take many years to know it fully. Some of you,” he said, pausing so that the words would penetrate deeper, “do not have many years. So you had better listen very carefully indeed.”

The Shoemaker's Tale



“Once upon a time, in a time when there was much less time to tell stories, there lived a shoemaker.

In those days, there was less time than there is today, because time, like the universe, expands as it moves forward. Consequently, the shoemaker was a terribly busy man.

The shoemaker lived in the town of Baghdad, which in those days was filled with happy people leading happy lives. The Caliph, Harun-Al-Rashid, was a generous ruler; his people prospered, and the city filled with the riches of a thousand cities: nutmeg, cinnamon and saffron, blue diamonds from Jarkandh, silks and tea from Hangzhou, hashish and opium from Kabul, Lapis from Badakhshan, olives from Lebanon. Even more important, the city filled itself with scientists, philosophers, mathematicians, all the greatest minds of that age. In those days, men understood how to discover the bridge. Gatekeepers celebrated their stories in music and dance, and wove their tales into carpets. It was a golden age. But it was not an age without its troubles.

Riches attract rich people, who quickly learn to spoil themselves. Prosperity brings greed, and greed breeds arrogance. The shoemaker, who dealt in goods less exotic than the upper class of tradesmen, was poor, and not considered worthy of much consideration. He learned to bow low, to always agree with his customer, and to bargain to his own disadvantage in order to make the sale.

Nonetheless, the shoemaker, whose name was Hussein, kept his pride. He would never buy an inferior piece of leather; his shoes were stitched with the best silk and hempen cord that could be had; the tallow that he sealed leather with was blended with the finest resins. He only had a few needles and one good knife, but it was of the best steel, Damascus steel, and his blade never lost its edge, because he honed it with attention.

Hussein lived near the alley of the goldsmiths, and it was not uncommon to see the dervishes dancing to the sound of the tapping hammers on a late afternoon. They wore brown gowns and tall hats, whirled in circles like bugs in a pond, and recited poems about love.

Hussein knew nothing about dancing, but he liked the poems. Love, he knew about. He was married to the most beautiful woman in Baghdad. She wore a veil, of course, so no one knew it; but when she took off the veil at night, Hussein knew that all the treasure in Baghdad was not enough to pay for her beauty. She had soft brown eyes like the eyes of a fawn; her hair was dark and silky and spilled over her shoulders like waves of cool night air. Her breasts were sweeter than the finest melons, and her voice made nightingales swoon with envy. Her name was Zahira; this because when she was born, it was said, a light shone from within her eyes that filled the birthing room.

That light filled her eyes still. Her laughter was like cascades of silver bells; despite their lowly lot in life, she was al-

ways satisfied, ever ready with a meal or a positive word. They had no children; for reasons only Allah could know, she had never conceived. This didn't matter to Hussein. It was the will of Allah, and Hussein never argued with his superiors.

Then, one day, as so often happens, disaster paid a visit. A plague struck the city. Zahira, stricken along with tens of thousands of others, died. So many expired that the corpses were heaped on carts and dumped unceremoniously, and without the proper rites of Islam, in burial grounds on the outside of the city.

Hussein was devastated. He wailed in anguish against a universe that would do this to him; wailed against his fate, wailed for the lost love of his life. His heart was so emptied of love that he thought he would never love again, and would go to the grave with no love in him. Surely, he thought, if that happened, God would turn him away. God could not tolerate a man who was drained of love.

Most of those in mourning eventually recover from their grief, but Hussein was unable to. It plagued him night and day, became an obsession, until he was unable to even make a good pair of shoes properly anymore. He began to go barefoot, a shameful state for a shoemaker of any kind. He forgot to perform his morning oblations so often that the Mullah had to call him to the mosque and reprimand him.

When a man's soul is drained of love, his thoughts turn to darkness. Hussein began to dabble in subjects that respectable men never have intercourse with; he read books that

were sold furtively on the fringes of the markets by disreputable types without names, who entered and left town under cover of darkness.

Eventually, he learned of the existence of a necromancer. The necromancer was a man who had once been a gatekeeper; polluted with the disease of curiosity, he had moved on to study matters that were forbidden – not only to those who practice Islam, but even to the Jews, Christians, and other infidels.

The necromancer practiced black arts, but like many men who practice evil, he was well respected, and lived in a white house. He had money and power, which he had acquired by doing things that no one dared speak aloud; nonetheless, there were whispers in the alleyways and bazaars, and more than a few found their way to his door with a request for a potion, or advice, or a poison.

Hussein knew he was in violation of the Faith, but there was no shame so great he would not risk it in order to recover his loved one. And thus, early one evening, just as the birds were singing the final song of the day, he found himself on the doorstep of the man whose name was Al-Zulmah.

The servants ushered him in with as much deference as they would have shown to a man who was not soiling himself, and he waited in a small, clean room, where perfumed water and almonds sat in dishes, and verses from the Koran decorated the walls.

Al-Zulmah was a man of stature, handsome, with no sign of a taint anywhere on him. When Hussein saw him, he began to think that perhaps what he had heard about the man was not true. He had an open, friendly smile, laughed easily, and settled him into a chair in his study as though he were an old friend.

“So, my friend,” he said. “What is it that brings you to me?”

Hussein was extremely nervous, despite the reassuring reception. “I am a poor man,” he began, “with little to offer you. But I come with a great need. I have lost my loved one; she died, and was buried in earth that is not consecrated. Since this took place, I have been inconsolable; I wail in the morning, tear out my hair at lunchtime, and beat my breast in the evening. I cannot work, I cannot sleep, I cannot eat. I’ve heard that you know the ways of the world and all the paths that lead in and out of life and death. I have come to you for help, for an answer, for a method whereby I can regain my wife.”

Al-Zulmah dropped the smile from his face like a stone, and pulled his chair a little closer. “Now this,” he said intensely, “is interesting. Few men come to me with questions like this. Most of them want a potion to attract a woman, a poison to eliminate an enemy. You speak of things that require a much larger vision.”

“I don’t know what I’m asking for,” said Hussein. “I’m a simple man. I just want my wife back.”

“Yes, yes,” said Al-Zulmah soothingly. “Of course you are. And that is why you are here with me. I am not a simple man. And there are answers to your questions. The question is not what you want, which is possible, the question is how much you are willing to pay for it.”

“As I told you,” said Hussein, “I am a poor man. I don’t have money.”

“You are simple indeed.” Al-Zulmah smiled in an ingratiating manner, as though he had just received confirmation of something he already suspected. “Payment on the matters we speak of cannot be made with coin. It carries a much higher price.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I will try to explain. You have been cheated by time itself; she is a jealous mistress, and she gathers everyone into her bosom sooner or later. From your point of view, she has stolen from you; from her point of view, she has done no more than collect her due. But time is not invulnerable; even time herself can be defeated. When the universe invented itself, time was not the first, or even the second Law. The first law was death, the second law was life, and the third law was time. It’s paradoxical, true; you would think that time would have had to come first. But life and death define the limits of time, not the other way around, even though men think it so. Life

and death are separated from each other by the River of Time, but in his wisdom, Allah placed a bridge across the river.”

“The metaphysical reasons for this are complex, and you don’t need to know them. What you do need to know is that there is a place where the River of Time runs backwards. One cannot, of course, make the whole river run backwards, but there are ripples, currents, and eddies in the river, and a man who knows where to look can discover an eddy where time does run backwards.”

“This sounds complicated,” said Hussein, “and I don’t see what good any of it does me.”

Al-Zulmah raised one eyebrow skeptically, as though suspecting he were dealing with an idiot of some kind. “It’s quite simple, really,” he replied. “If time runs backward, your wife will live again.”

“That,” said Hussein emphatically, “is exactly what I want. How do we do it?”

“Not so fast,” said Al-Zulmah. “This is not a matter to be taken lightly, and not without its consequences. First, you need to understand the background of the matter.” He settled back in his chair, placed his fingertips together, knitted his eyebrows slightly, and said, pensively, “it’s like this.”

The Bridge



“When the earth was first created, there was no moon. Men lived to serve the Sun alone; the sun is a generous individual, and he provided for men the ability to cross the River of Time to the other side without any difficulty. The bridge was easy to see from any point in a man’s life, and men could still walk in straight lines. All a man had to do to successfully cross the bridge, and avoid being consumed by the River of Time, was to set his sights on the bridge and go forward.”

“Then a catastrophe took place. The earth, in a moment of exuberant but ill considered appetite, ate a rather large asteroid, and in the process of consuming it, she came down with a severe case of indigestion. She spit out the Moon, which immediately began to orbit her as an entity in itself.”

“Now, everything feeds everything else. It’s like that from the top of the universe to the bottom. The Sun feeds the earth; the earth now had to feed the moon. She didn’t really have a choice; there is nothing to be done for these things. There’s no rule book, however, that says how much the earth needs to feed the moon, and the earth much preferred to keep things as they were. In a word, she was downright stingy, that’s the long and the short of it. As a result, the moon was always hungry.”

“Now, this may make you feel a bit uncomfortable, but it shouldn’t, it’s just in the way of things. What feeds the earth and the sun and the moon is the souls of men. If the soul of a man crosses the bridge to the other side, it has the opportunity to participate in the life of the sun. If, on the other hand,

it cannot reach the bridge, or fails to cross it, the soul falls into the River of Time.”

“According to lawful arrangements which the earth is unable to overcome, any soul who falls into the River of Time is fair game for moon. The moon fishes all its nourishment from the River of Time, so it is in the moon’s interests to make sure that as many men as possible fall in. As a result, the moon found it expedient to use its gravity on earth in such a way that men could no longer walk in straight lines. It used its light to blind men so that they could not see the bridge, even in broad daylight. Now, men wander around in circles, thinking that they are moving forward, but actually just standing still until they get near the bridge and fall into the river. This means it is nearly impossible for an ordinary man to find the bridge anymore. He spends his life seeing a dream of the bridge in front of him until it is too late. He falls into the river, and goes to feed the moon.”

“You, Hussein, are a most fortunate man. Because your wife died within the last year, she has not newpassed under the bridge yet. But you must make haste, because if you reach the bridge after her soul has flowed by it, all will be lost. In order to recover her, you will then have to go to the moon, which, I hardly need to tell you, is a far more complicated matter. In order to overcome the considerable obstacles that stand in your way to see her again, you will have to follow my instructions exactly, to the letter. Even the slightest deviation will result in... well, perhaps we should leave that aside. Now,

are you prepared to do everything I say?" He concluded with a gentle smile, indicating encouragement.

"Of course I am," said Hussein, "of course. But we still haven't discussed what I will pay with."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," said Al-Zulmah. "Your case interests me. I am inclined to take it on pro bono, so to speak. Simply being here to observe the outcome will be reward enough."

"That is extremely generous of you," said Hussein. "Presuming success in advance, I promise I shall repay you, with the finest pair of shoes that money can buy."

Al-Zulmah frowned. "In these matters," he intoned, "one should never presume success in advance. If there is one thing I have learned in transactions with time, it is to expect the unexpected. Nonetheless, my instructions will be infallible. And they are thus:"

"I will give you a bitter potion which you must drink to the last drop. This will clear your mind of all the cobwebs the moon has created in you over the course of your life. The effect is temporary; as I said before, once you have drunk the potion, you will have to make haste. You will see that its effect causes you to remember everything; who you are, where you are, what you need to do. You will see the bridge before you in a way that no other man can see it. You must begin to walk in a straight line towards the bridge, no matter what happens. Many things will try to distract you. You must ignore them,

always keeping your eye on your aim. Remember this: if you forget your aim, you forget everything, and the moon wants you to forget your aim. It will notice you the moment you finish drinking the potion, because you will look different than other men. The closer you get to the bridge, the more obstacles it will place in front of you. You may be a simple man, but I see that you are a man of great strength in your heart, so I believe you will prevail."

"Once you get to the bridge, an escort will appear. There is always an escort. This escort may take the form of a bird, or a beast, or a man or a woman. It is different for every individual. First, the escort will ask you what your heart's desire is. I must warn you, the escort knows infallibly what your heart's true desire is. There are many who reach the bridge by subterfuge, and try to deceive the escort on this point, but they invariably fail. A man or woman must state their heart's true desire, or they cannot cross. In your case, of course, this will be simple."

"Second, the escort will ask you to wear slippers. Put them on, but as soon as you step off of earth and on to the bridge, remove the slippers."

"Third, as you cross, the escort will warn you not to look down. You must ignore them, and you must look down. On the left side of the bridge, close to the shore, there is an eddy that creates a whirlpool where time runs backwards. Because of the tendencies of the currents, every soul in the river passes this point. My calculations suggest that you will be able to

reach the bridge very close to the moment when your wife's soul passes. If you can pull her out of the river while time is running backwards, she will live again. It then falls to you to return to this side of the bridge."

"At the moment when you draw near to the current where time runs backwards, you must be very careful to keep your attention. When time runs forward, information collects; when it runs backwards, it dissipates. Don't spend any more time at the location than is absolutely necessary. When you see your wife's soul, take her by the hand and pull her out of the river as quickly as you can, then move away from the eddy."

"That doesn't seem so complicated," said Hussein. "I was expecting something much worse. Aren't there dragons or demons or evil beasts or some such? Impossible tasks to be completed? Riddles to be answered?"

"You read too many fairy tales," said Al-Zulmah. "We are dealing here with sciences and laws, not with silly fantasies."

"I'm sorry if I offended you," said Hussein. "It's just that I expected it to be much worse."

"It all depends on what you call bad," said Al-Zulmah. "You are trying here to alter the destiny of individual souls. This can turn out to be a much more serious matter than being clawed to death by a demon."

"I don't happen to think so," said Hussein confidently. "I may only be a shoemaker, but I know a bad deal when I see one. This looks relatively straightforward. We're wasting time, let's get on with it."

Al-Zulmah nodded his head in consent, picked up a small silver bell that sat on the brass tray next to his chair, and rang it. The elaborate white damask tapestries at the back of the room were pulled aside, and a veiled woman carrying a small tray with a flagon on it moved towards them as though floating across water. Al-Zulmah picked it up with his thumb and forefinger, as though he wished to avoid too much contact with it, and handed it to Hussein.

"Very well," he said. "Insh'Allah, you shall find your wife."

Hussein took the flagon and drank it in a single bold gulp, at which point he swooned, fell to the floor, and was swallowed by darkness. His last thought was that he had been tricked, and was either poisoned, or would awaken chained and be sold as a slave.

It did not happen that way.

He awoke in a crowded marketplace, at the end of the day, where the vendors were packing up to leave. It was a strange place, and none of the merchandise was recognizable. There were unique machines made of metal with knobs and dials; piles of gold and jewels made of a substance so light that a merchant could lift an armload of them as if it were a mere

afterthought. The garments on racks were impossibly uniform; the shoes and boots took exotic forms with soles made of a rubbery material he had never seen before. There were books printed in a hand so perfect that no man could have penned it; hundreds of them, thousands of them, so many that it would've taken an army of monks working for centuries to create them all. Each one was perfectly bound, with magnificent paintings that almost perfectly represented reality. There was no explanation for it.

As he scanned around him, on the horizon, he saw the unmistakable towers of a bridge. Setting his sights on it, he began to walk.

As he walked, vendors stopped packing their stalls and began to waive their merchandise at him, hawking their wares, miraculous things that made music of a kind he had never heard before, devices that carried images inside them, things made so perfectly that they must have been made by gods rather than men. He ignored them all and walked on.

Soon he came to a street where men were fighting. On either side of him they fought, jostling him, pushing him, taunting him and daring him to join one side or the other. Bloodied corpses lay in his path; he stepped over them. Devices exploded, peppering him with fragments of masonry. He walked on.

Eventually, he came to the edges of the city. The bridge loomed on the horizon. It seemed no closer than it had been when he first saw it. He continued to walk.

The suburbs and farms gave way to desert. He walked all through the night. Jackals howled and followed him; he walked on. He heard the guttural roar of a lion ahead, as though it were directly on the path. He walked on.

He was becoming thirsty, and the sun began to rise. Soon it was so hot it was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. He walked on.

It was a good thing he was a man of willpower, because as the day wore on, he began to hear his wife's voice, calling him from the hills to the right of the path. He could see the bridge in front of him, see it clearly, but his wife was not calling from that direction. She was insistent, beckoning him to go off the path and be with her. Determined to follow Al-Zulmah's advice, he walked on, although it took almost everything he had in him to keep going. He quickened his pace, afraid that his resolve would fade if her voice did not fade first.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he reached the bridge.

By this time, the desert landscape had given away to a more inviting terrain. The grass was green; fruit trees grew along the banks on either side of the bridge, which was a magnificent structure, made of what appeared to be silver. It was

brighter than silver, however, and translucent, as though it were somehow filled with light. It was enormous, larger than any reasonable structure ought to be.

To his surprise, he saw no one else around him. Given the vast numbers that were supposed to be crossing this bridge, he was puzzled. Then again, he thought to himself, maybe that was the whole point. Maybe very few men crossed the bridge anymore. He had no way of knowing.

He approached the entry to the bridge cautiously, placing each foot quite deliberately, as though it were dangerous to walk here. He held Al-Zulmah's instructions clearly in his mind, expecting at any moment to be distracted once again, as he had been on the path. He realized that he was incredibly tense.

"Relax," said a voice, as though reading his thoughts. It was to his left. He turned.

An extremely attractive woman stood there. Dressed in a gossamer robe, which barely concealed her ample feminine charms, she was fine of feature and fair of skin. Her hair was a golden brown, with supple curls that gleamed in the light. Her lips were full and sensuous, even more full and sensuous than his lost wife's. Even more astonishing, she wasn't wearing a veil, which gave him a terrible shock.

He took one step back almost involuntarily, in apprehension.

"We don't wear veils here," she explained, once again as though she knew exactly what he was thinking. "By the time one reaches the bridge, such things can be dispensed with."

"It is immodest," protested Hussein. He was shaken by the fact that, confronted with a beautiful woman without a veil, there was a part of him attracted to her. Immediately, it felt like a betrayal of his wife, but it was right there inside him, right where his heart was, so deep inside him that the only way to get it out would be to cut it out with a knife. And it felt like he was being stabbed there with a knife. This, this was indeed unexpected.

"I wish to be with my wife again," he said quickly, as though the words were an incantation that could fend off the nicely rounded breasts of this lady, which were very hard to take your eyes off of, even if you were a pious man.

"You're doing this incorrectly," she said with a smile and a silvery laugh. "You are supposed to wait until I ask you what your heart's one true desire is, not just blurt it out like that."

"I haven't practiced this much," said Hussein curtly. "I am a man on business, and I mean to complete it."

The woman smiled again. "I see you are," she said. "but what might that business be?"

"Now you're doing it incorrectly," he said. "You're only supposed to ask me one question, aren't you?"

“My, you are touchy,” she replied. “There are no strict rules. Friendly conversation is permissible.”

“I’m not feeling too well,” said Hussein. “I just walked through a city full of strange magic, and a desert filled with wild animals, with nothing to eat or drink. Experiences like this tend to make a man somewhat irritable.”

“So I see.” The lady reached into her gown. “Your feet look tired. Why not put on these slippers. And while you’re at it, have a sip of this. It will refresh you.” While he was donning the slippers which, he noted professionally, were made of a particularly fine and glossy grade of silk, she reached into her gown again and pulled out a small flask. Hussein grabbed it and drank from it greedily. He realized as soon as he began to drink that it was wine, forbidden by Islam, but he was so thirsty he could not stop himself.

“You have tricked me,” he said after he finished. “You know it’s forbidden to drink alcohol.”

“I’m not sure you’ve noticed,” said the Houri, for Houri she must be, he thought, “but you have come to a place that lies outside the ordinary laws. This is the point where decisions are made. The rules you lived by no longer apply here. You cannot use rules here; here, it is your choices that make the difference, and not the laws you follow.”

“I’m not a philosopher, I’m a shoemaker,” said Hussein. “Such things are beyond me. Shouldn’t we get on with it?”

“My, my,” said the Houri indulgently, “aren’t we impatient. Most men who reach this point want to savor the moment. But not you, I see. Very well then. Let us cross.”

She stepped forward onto the bridge. He followed, but the moment that his feet touched the bridge, he took off the slippers.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said, frowning.

“You just told me it is my choices that make the difference. Right now, I choose to be barefoot.”

“Very well then,” she said, somewhat sternly. “However, there is one thing you don’t have a choice in. When we get to the water, you must not look down. Please be very clear about that.” She led on.

It was quite a long walk until they reached the point where the bridge and the shoreline began to part company.

Hussein paused at the rail.

“Why are you stopping?” She asked him.

“I have heard,” Hussein said innocently, “that there is a place here where time runs backwards.”

The Houri looked at him a bit suspiciously. “Where did you hear that?” she asked him.

“A man I know. Just a regular sort of person, but pretty well-educated, you know. People from Baghdad get around.”

“No regular sort of person knows that,” she replied tensely. “In fact, only one man comes to mind, and that particular fact is alarming. Nonetheless, it’s true. Look over there on the riverbank, and you will see.”

Hussein looked toward the river bank, and the most miraculous sight met his eyes. There was a huge grove of trees on the side of the river. But it was no ordinary grove of trees. Underneath these trees, the gravity seemed to be turned off. Leaves, dead brown leaves, were slowly floating upward through the air towards barren branches. As they met the branches, they reattached themselves, quite carefully, as though they knew exactly where they were going and where each one of them belonged. As they reattached, they began to turn bright reds and oranges. Soon, to his astonishment, the reds and oranges gave way to the magnificent lush greens of summer.

At this point, the leaves begin to emit light, to shimmer with a golden substance that left their surface and moved unerringly towards the sun, like an infinite number of tiny iridescent insects swarming into the stratosphere.

As the leaves gave their light back to the Sun, they slowly became a lighter, paler green, the color of mint sherbet, and then shrank and shrank more, until they turned into buds, which were absorbed back into the tree.

The sight was impossible for eyes to behold. Hussein, gasping from the sheer beauty of it, very nearly forgot his aim right then and there. He began, in point of fact, to forget who

he was or where he came from, and he remembered Al-Zulmah’s comment about information dissipating. He realized that the reversal of time affected everything in the vicinity; he was quite literally losing his recollection of himself. It was becoming difficult to recall his name, his profession, or where he came from. The effect was most peculiar. Hopefully he would not be stuck here too long.

He cast his eyes downward to where the waters eddied, not far under his feet.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” said the Houri, much more sternly, indeed. Her eyes flashed with an angry fire. “In fact, I specifically told you not to do that.”

“Be silent,” said Hussein sharply. “I come now to my purpose, from which you will not dissuade me.”

“Very well then,” the Houri said, “but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

As Hussein’s eyes met the water of time, an awesome sight presented itself. The surface boiled with the images of hundreds of people, thousands of people, up and down the river in numbers so uncountable it defied comprehension. Next to the bridge, here, where the current circled and time ran backwards, souls were passing him one by one, dozens in a minute, moving so swiftly it was difficult sometimes to even make out their individual features. Some of them held their hands out towards him, but it seemed terribly difficult for them to break free of the surface. It was as though time were

a thick gel that trapped everything within it, like a syrup or a honey. The souls were like flies, struggling to free themselves. Limbs and heads bobbed up out of the river aimlessly. The most pathetic sights of all, perhaps, were the bare feet that broke the surface here and there; they conveyed a sense of helplessness, of souls ruled by forces utterly beyond their control. It was the impression of a charnel house, filled with corpses, swirling around in sweetness, a sickly sweetness that coveted them and would not let them go.

It was, quite frankly, horrifying.

Then, to his astonishment, he saw Zahira.

It seemed scarcely credible that he would find her so soon; she was not far away, drifting towards him almost randomly. She grew close enough that her face was distinct and unmistakable, and there was still a light in her eyes—the same light, he thought, that had always been there – but the light seemed turned inward. She was not reaching for him. She did not even seem to see him; she was being tossed and tumbled slowly in the current as though unconscious. Hussein panicked; maybe she had drowned in the current of time. Were souls able to drown? He didn't know, but the idea was disturbing. He bent down, extending his hand, realizing that he would have to reach down into the river to pull her up.

“I definitely wouldn't do that,” said the Houri emphatically. “Definitely.”

“You're a busybody,” replied Hussein angrily. “Don't distract me. This is going to be difficult enough as it is.”

“Very well then,” said the Houri, folding her arms in distaste. She turned away in a huff, as though she didn't want to see what was going to happen next. “Have your way. Men usually do.”

Hussein braced himself, stooped, and plunged his arms into the River of Time just in advance of Zahira as she inexorably swept towards him.

The pain was immediate, and it was extraordinary. Time was colder than the ice that rich people put in their drinks; it was hotter than the blacksmith's fire, and sharper than the butcher's knife. The shock of it was so great that he almost missed his wife's forearm as it swept into his waiting hands. By an act of sheer will and rose up in him from a place he could not name and did not know, he closed his hands around her arm and pulled, pulled with all his might, pulled against a force so strong it seemed certain he would fail. The reason for Al-Zulmah's advice about the slippers now became clear. It was a good thing his feet were bare; if he had been wearing the slippers, it would've been categorically impossible to keep a purchase on the polished surface of the bridge. As it was, he needed to plant himself with all the gravity of his body in order to pull. Zahira was pure dead weight; there was nothing for her to gain purchase on, she could lend him no assistance, and she made no effort to grasp him in return. She was a rag doll, a sack of inanimate tubers.

Hussein burst out in a rage—filled, empowering scream of anguish and pulled her out of the water in a single nearly superhuman surge of strength. He fell backwards, Zahira in his arms. Pushing himself up on his elbows, despite the lingering pain in his hands, he grasped her by her forearms and helped her to her feet.

Shame of shames. She was completely naked. The embarrassment was intense, especially standing in front of the Houri. He was stunned for a moment, not knowing what to do next.

“What did you expect?” said the Houri, disgusted with him. “Souls don’t wear clothes. They have no need for them. Here, take this.” She handed him a shawl, which he wrapped around Zahira to restore her modesty. She stood there helplessly, a blank look on her face. She was as stunningly beautiful as she always had been, and Hussein burst out in tears at the sight of her.

“My love, my love!” he cried, gathering her into his arms. “I almost died without you.” She accepted his embrace, but did nothing whatsoever in response. He hugged her tighter. There was still no response. He stepped back, looking into her eyes, but there was no sign of recognition at all, and no words met his.

He turned to the Houri in bafflement. “What’s wrong with her? Why doesn’t she recognize me?”

“Evidently,” said the Houri in distaste, “your advisor knows far less than he thinks he does. What did you think was going to happen?”

“He told me he that I could have my wife back, if I pulled her from the river,” said Hussein. “But he didn’t say it would be like this. What has happened to her?”

“The River of Time washes every soul clean of its memory,” explained the Houri. “Souls that do not cross the bridge are purged of their experience, so that they will not have to suffer if and when the moon consumes them. Those that are not eaten are returned to life bereft of any memory of their past. It cannot be any other way.”

“What you’re saying,” said Hussein in horror, “is that this isn’t my wife anymore.” He took several steps back from the blank faced woman in front of him. She showed, once again, no reaction whatsoever to his words or his movement.

“Technically speaking, this is exactly your wife,” replied the Houri. “But her essence and her personality have been removed. Time works in this way. Eventually, it erases everything. Mountains. Rivers and oceans. Even planets are eventually purged of their being by time. There is, of course, a consolation, but no individual arising can conquer time alone.”

“Nothing is as I expected it to be,” said Hussein. “It appears I’ve been deceived.”

“You wanted to be deceived. You asked for the impossible, and it was promised to you. You should have known better.”

“What do I do now?” Hussein asked. He felt like an empty shell, drained of all his desire and intention, drained of his love, drained of his life, drained of his words, and now, drained of even his memories themselves.

“Well,” said the Houri dryly, “you’ve broken quite a few rules here.”

“And the consequences?”

“Yes, I suppose he didn’t tell you about those, either, did he?”

“He said a lot of things I didn’t understand.”

“As I said before, you should have known better.”

“What do I do now? Do I go back?”

“Behind you waits only death, and the River of Time. If you return, the man who sent you will question you to discover what you learned, and then he will take your life. He is forbidden to cross the bridge, you see, and he knows that death holds nothing more than immersion in the river for him. He fears this; and so he finds ways to keep himself alive. He has already lived a great many more lifetimes than an ordinary mortal. He does this by killing others and feeding himself with their souls. In this way, he has learned to be like a

tiny moon, but it will do him no good. A creature of his size can never acquire enough material to overcome his limitations. Eventually, he will run out of gullible souls, he will die, and the river will take him.”

“So I cannot go back.”

“Oh, you can, if you can make your peace with that fate. But I somehow doubt that. If nothing else, you are a man with backbone.”

“What are my alternatives?”

“As you are, you can no longer cross the bridge. For you, too, it is forbidden. I am not allowed to escort you any further.”

“Then it seems,” said Hussein, “that I have no choice other than to leap from the bridge into the river.”

“Don’t be so hasty,” said the Houri. “In addition to death, or oblivion, there is one other choice you can make. You can choose to serve.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Those who serve become escorts on the bridge. We stand between life and death and escort men as they arrive. There’s a word in the world of the living for this job; it’s called Purgatory. This is a place between Hell and Heaven, untouched by time, but bridging it, where souls cleanse them-

selves in the hopes that they may someday be deemed worthy to cross the bridge.”

“So I would stay here?”

“Indeed.”

“And what of her?” He nodded towards Zahira, who still stood, unseeing, uncaring, at the edge of the bridge, the shawl hanging from her nakedness like an afterthought.

“You must return her to the water,” replied the Houri. “The signature of service is always sacrifice. You must give up what you want to own, in order to acquire anything worth having.”

Hussein gathered Zahira into his arms, gently, lovingly, as though she were the most precious cargo any merchant ever carried on the Silk Road, rather than a lump of inanimate flesh on its way to a destination it could not know and would never care about. She weighed very little, as though losing the weight of her memories, of her life, her personality, and her essence, had left her insubstantial.

He lowered her into the river very slowly. It took her back without a ripple, as though nothing whatsoever had interrupted its work.

“Follow me,” said his companion. “Now your work begins.”

Epilogue



Ali finished the tale in a whisper. There was an extraordinary stillness in the room.

He leaned behind him to stir the fire with an iron poker. We studied each other, took in the frowns and puzzlement in each other's faces, searching each other's eyes for a glimmer of comprehension. We knew each other intimately, and it was written the same way on every one of our faces; we were mystified.

"I don't understand," I said finally. "How does this help us know where the bridge is?"

"Myths last for centuries, because it takes that long to understand them. No man has ever outlived a myth. Not in a single lifetime, in any event. Now comes the time to exercise a muscle you men of the New World rarely use: patience. And it is time for my wife and I to eat our dinner. We would invite you, but we are people of little means, and certainly unprepared for a crowd such as yours."

"Many thanks," I said. Our group stood, and bowed deeply. "May we come again, and hear more tales?"

"You may come again," said Ali. "but give it time. A month or two. If you fill a man with too many stories at one time, he barfs them up like a dog who has eaten too much." There was much laughter at this remark, as though we were old friends. We took our leave. Heading back towards the city, there was a quiet sense of exhilaration. The sense that we

had discovered something extraordinary, that miracles might manifest themselves.

That did not last long. Ali's telling of the shoemaker's tale had the opposite of the intended effect – or, at least, the opposite of the effect I think he intended. The fact is that I don't know what he intended at all. Unfortunately, we will never know.

The next time our group met together, we fell to argument about the significance of Ali, and the meaning of the story he told us. Some of us found it profound; some thought it was nonsense, a fairy tale for children; still others confessed they were unable to judge its significance, and preferred to forget about it and move on. All of us agreed that Ali represented something real, but each of us perceived him differently; like the blind men and the elephant, every member of the group walked away with an idea of their own that did not correspond to the rest. Ultimately, the disagreements festered. The group broke apart into fragments and went their separate ways.

Several of us went back to see Ali late in the following spring. It was not easy to get there; war had broken out in neighboring regions, and everywhere, bandits had to be avoided. The Americans were killing people by remote control, with Hellfire missiles that struck without warning and annihilated their target. Foreigners were all treated with suspicion, contempt, and even hatred. We had to adopt disguises

to enter the region, and traveled mostly under cover of darkness.

When we got to the village, the courtyard was overgrown. Ali's house was deserted; the villagers informed us that he had died of pneumonia the past winter.

Nothing was left of him but the one story he had told. And we never encountered another gatekeeper.

It may seem as though the whole episode was worthless, as though it led to a dead end. This is the way with men who think that life is meaningless. The events are random, determined by accident alone, and nothing leads anywhere. For myself, I don't think this way. And it is only now, at the very end of my own life, that I begin to understand what Ali was telling us.

Most of my group was not so fortunate. Two men went mad; one joined the monastery. Three of them became caught in the events of ordinary life and made enormous amounts of money, but died unhappy and alone. The prostitute and I alone remained in contact and became good friends. Finally, we understood one thing.

She, she understood this one because she understood her own nothingness, and that is a good place to start. I, I understood the one thing, because I refused to give up. Perhaps neither reason is a good one, but one single understanding is better than no understandings at all.

Now, my child, I am old, and my eyesight and memory is fading. The time is coming soon when I will pay with everything I have taken in, in order to make my crossing into the great silence.

Before I go, I will leave you with what I have understood. And it is this.

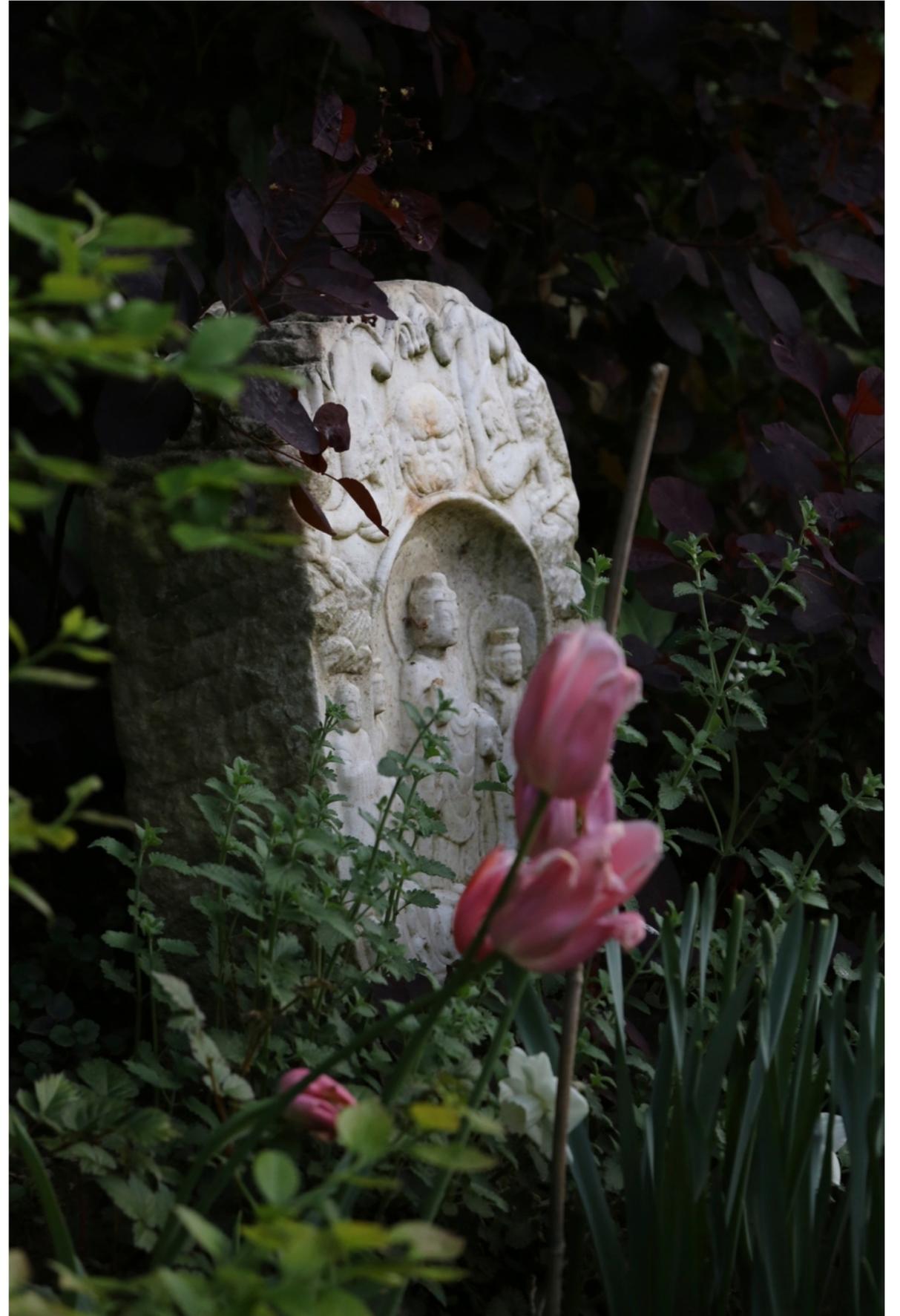
The bridge does not lie outside us. The bridge lies inside us. The bridge is no allegory, no metaphor, no object. The bridge that crosses the River of Time from the shores of life to the shores of death is our life itself, the very life we live. As long as we search for it outside ourselves, we walk in circles; only if we look within the experience of our life itself can we discover the straight line that Al-Zulmah indicated.

It is the sensation of our life itself that forms the bridge. We are the mendicants and the escorts; we are our own travelers, and we are our own guides.

The only way we can cross the bridge of our life without falling into time is to discover that one true wish, the wish of our own heart. We can come to our life and live it without knowing that wish, but if we do not discover the wish and use it to cross the bridge of sensation that lies between life and death, we fall into the River of Time, and it consumes us.

It is a hungry river.

Reasons Why The Dead Don't Speak



Sharon



A few months before she dies, Sharon has a dream. It's one of those dreams where she knows for certain she is dreaming from the get-go, and yet it is absolutely real, as though she is inhabiting a second universe much like her ordinary one, but with special features, like a theme park.

She is lying on a grassy embankment that slopes gently down towards a verdant stream. It's warm; her feet are bare, and she wiggles them in the grass, enjoying the ticklish sensation. The undergrowth is lush; tropical flowers are abundant, but the air is cool and favorable. The grassy embankment is well cared for, neatly trimmed, as though it were a resort. A place where rich people come to drink themselves silly and have clumsy sex that would have been better had they stayed at home, sober.

Even when she has sex sober, Sharon doesn't enjoy it much. It scares her to let someone else get that close to her. Masturbation is much safer and thus more satisfying, but it makes her feel guilty, so she parcels it out to herself in very small doses between the requirements her relationships place on her.

She has always had a relationship. Despite the fear, she hates to be alone.

At the top of the dream embankment perches a dream house, with a slender veranda, and open windows. It is faintly colonial: painted a yellow ocher, with a tiled roof, the windows sport shutters that curiously remind her of a vacation in Guatemala which part of her knows she has never actually been on.

Inside the house are her mother and her Aunt Annette, who is already dead. Annette died of breast cancer seven years ago. She refused all medications, saying God sent her the pain for a reason, but by the time the end came, she was in delirium, and couldn't remember what it was. Because she was a minister, everyone thought she knew what she was doing, but Sharon isn't so sure.

Now Annette is alive, and she appears to be perfectly okay. She has shed the wasting disease that killed her, and she's partying it up in the little colonial house with her mom. They're animated, gestural. They appear to be having a conversation, but the only thing Sharon can hear is the faint sound of laughter. It's puzzling, because they don't seem to be far away, but the sound is coming to her from a great distance, as though they were on the other side of a thick wall.

Suddenly, un-brokered by time or events, Sharon is inside the house.

Annette's hair is—it always was—unruly and shockingly white; her glasses are thick like bottles and her smile is generous. She laughs a lot for someone who's dead. It's confusing, because she's definitely dead, but she isn't. Sharon feels mildly discomfited by this, as though she was watching a politician display an unexpected streak of honesty. She wants to tell Annette that she should move on, but she knows it's not her place. Everything here is arranged exactly as it should be.

She sees Annette's lips moving, but she can't hear anything she says. The room is somehow filled with a thick but utterly transparent gel that slows everything down; the river of time itself has changed, become viscous, impenetrable. As the sound loses velocity, it drops to the floor, where it is too low down to hear it. Sharon considers stooping down and putting her ear to the floor, but it would be embarrassing. Embarrassment is as scary as sex. Sharon has lived a life of arrangements that carefully avoid embarrassment, a risk-minimizing life. It didn't do her much good, of course; the divorce was a big embarrassment. The only saving grace was that so many of her friends went through the same experience. When enough of you are embarrassed all together, she has found, it's not so bad.

Annette is still talking, and now she's speaking directly to Sharon, looking her right in the eye, but she can't hear anything. She feels she has an obligation to respond, but anything she says will probably be wrong. The cynic in her recognizes that the situation is just like her real life, but with the sound turned off.

It occurs to Sharon that this dilemma is just as embarrassing as picking the sounds up off the floor would be. Sensing that the situation can't be changed, she leaves her muted Aunt, her mother (who seems to just be standing there with no purpose whatsoever, another feature of the dream that mimics real life) and goes out of the house.

Outside, she curls up on the grassy slope, luxuriate in the wiggling of toes again, and begins to conduct a detailed inspection of the grass, which reveals a surprising amount of detail for an imaginary entity. As she does so, a bird alights next to her.

It's not a bird, it's a lizard. It's a lizard, and a bird. It has magical properties that effortlessly combine both animals. Its scales and feathers are emerald green, like the iridescent carapace of a rain forest beetle, and it is a friend.

The tiny Quetzalcoatl flaps its wings and preens itself with a confidence no wild animal could ever achieve in the presence of a human being. There is no other animal like this animal. It's her friend; a protector. She probably ought to be scared of it, because it's a little like her relationships: even though it's beautiful, it looks poisonous and dangerous, with sharp teeth and little sharp claws. But for some reason, it's not frightening at all. It seems like the most attractive and most natural thing in the world, and in a flash of intuition she understands that it is a messenger.

When death comes, she realizes, Quetzalcoatl will appear again, and it will be imperative to follow him.

She wakes up, with a peculiar organic sense of satisfaction that rests somewhere deep in her body, near the lower part of her spine. She's never had that feeling before, but she knows it means there is something real in her now. She never had anything real in her before, and she never knew it, but now she can tell the difference. The difference is in the way

she smells the air and the feel of the sheets as she touches them. Everything is alive now; last night, when she went to bed, everything was dead, but now it is living. She can't explain this; it's totally illogical. She was alive for 45 years and thought she was alive, doing everything that people who are alive do. She grew up, went to college, got married, made babies, got divorced. She owned cars and had fights with her lovers. She did everything you do, but she wasn't alive. She doesn't know what it was, but now she sees that it wasn't living.

Now, she has had a dream where she meets death, and she sees that that confers life upon her. It doesn't make any sense.

Sharon walks to the bathroom and turns on the shower. The water comes out of the faucet in a glistening stream like a sacred substance, magical and filled with radiant beams of light. It's just ordinary water, but it's not water anymore. What is it? It reminds her of taking LSD when she was in high school. Only it's better. This isn't like a drug; this is what is real and can be touched and felt and heard and seen with the body when all the drugs are gone: the drugs that keep her asleep and keep her fearful. She sees now that most of her is filled with just those kinds of drugs, but she never knew it. For some reason, they are not in her right now, and the world is different.

It occurs to her that everything is chemical.

She puts her head under the shower and lets the water fall on her body. She can sense every nerve, and every nerve tells her that she is gloriously, irrevocably alive. She has never lived before, but this morning, she is reborn.

Douglas – the latest, and an acceptable, relationship—is still curled up on the bed when she comes back in, drying her gradually deteriorating body with a towel. Her breasts sag and there's too much fat on her, but he still seems to like her. She finds it disappointing, she wishes he had higher standards. Nonetheless, when he wants her, she responds in kind. The fact that sex is frightening doesn't keep her from wanting it. There's an animal in her that she can't possibly argue with, and when the moment comes, it's not interested in her feelings. It's as though she has a completely separate mind in her with a completely separate agenda. There are actually, she has realized, two Sharons. One that is desperately afraid of sex, and another one that wants to hump like a bunny rabbit.

The conflicts she has about this inner division have consistently devalued the men in her life. She is serially dissatisfied, because she needs the company of men, but then they want to do this thing with her, and then she finds out that her body wants to do it too... damn it..., and the whole thing becomes a betrayal and, well, hell, a goddamn violation. She never tells her therapist about it, because she senses it's pretty abnormal, and she pays Vivian to sit there and listen while Sharon pretends, like, she's messed up, but there's nothing really abnormal about her, no, there's nothing really, really bad. Just an average kind of bad it takes \$6,000 a year worth

of therapy to address. This is as much bad as Sharon can afford on her budget, and she's afraid of raising the bar. She senses that really bad problems could become quite unaffordable, and she would have a hard time saying no to Vivian, who is now by default the primary authority figure in her life, if she demanded more appointments.

Now she sees Douglas, half out from under the sheets, sporting the erratically bulbous semi-erection that he usually has first thing in the morning. It looks somewhat comical to her, but Douglas himself looks different in general. For the first time in her life, she has some sympathy for him. It's never occurred to her before, but maybe he's afraid of being close to her, too... can that happen to men? Or is sex always mindlessly easy for them?

They don't talk about things like this. It's too dangerous. They are both middle-aged, paunchy, and not that attractive anymore. The glory days are gone, and they're not coming back. Finding another partner at this point could be very difficult. All the money is on keeping everything very calm and balanced, not ever going near anything that could upset the apple cart. They both agree, secretly, that bad sex is better than no sex at all, and every compromise in their relationship starts with that premise.

He rolls over.

"What's up?" he asks.

Unshaven, with the dense hair that covers most of his upper torso, he looks more like an animal than anything. In her mind, she compares him to Quetzalcoatl. It's like comparing a slug to a diamond, and yet, she realizes that she is a slug too. Here they are, two slugs, doing their best to put up with each other's slime, because at this age putting up with your own slime alone is far worse.

She suddenly feels an enormous wave of gratitude towards this man for being willing to be with her, knowing how difficult she can be, and how hard life is in general. In a single instant she forgives him for all his low standards in accepting her, for all the times he hasn't done the dishes, or forgets to flush the toilet.

"Nothing," she says, "I'm just getting dried off."

It's easy to lie at this time. So many remarkable things are going on in her right now, now that the idea of this tiny little green lizard bird lives inside her somewhere, that lying seems like the most natural thing in the world. It would be much too complicated to explain what is actually happening. Sharon has always prized herself on her honesty, but now she sees that lying can be an immensely valuable tool.

"What are we doing today?"

"It's Saturday. We've got to do the laundry. That's what we do every Saturday. Laundry. Groceries."

She remembers that Saturday is also one of the two days a week they have agreed to have sex. Sex, like everything else, has been boiled down to a repeating entry in the Microsoft Outlook calendar. It's the only way to guarantee that it happens. By now, Sharon and Douglas are pretty sure they like each other (after all, it's been nearly 2 years) but both of them are afraid that sex is the glue that holds everything together, and that without it, affection may collapse out from under them like a waterlogged embankment.

Sex, in other words, has become a business matter, and now has to be scheduled.

For once, though, the idea of sex doesn't bother her. It occurs to her that it might even be possible to look forward to it, a thought that is so surprising she stops drying herself for a second. It's the first time, possibly, in her life that she realizes an attitude could change if she wanted it to. Up until now, every attitude has seemed to be irrevocable and inescapable. It's as though a little light has turned on inside her offering her a new possibility.

She turns around and drops the towel seductively, so that one nipple peeks out from behind the white cotton terry loops.

"And there's something else we do on Saturday." She smiles.

Douglas's eyes are riveted on the nipple. His erection visibly intensifies, and his hand moves towards it instinc-

tively, in a reflex that implies he, too, sometimes finds it safer to satisfy himself. But not this time. This time, he has a different idea.

"Why wait until tonight?" he asks. And he pulls back the sheets, inviting her to return to bed.

Despite the fact that she has already taken a shower, Sharon moves towards him. This may be the first time in her life sex hasn't looked scary to the scared part of her, and she wants to act now, before it changes.

For the first time in her life, sex is good. There's no fear. And as she goes over the top, reaching the most intense orgasm she's ever experienced, she realizes that it was only because she met death in a dream that this has become possible.

Felicia



There's always a catch.

Having this little green, airborne piece of life in her quickly begins to make Sharon uncomfortable, because she knows the difference. Exactly what difference she knows is hard to say, but there definitely is one.

When she gets up and goes to work in the morning, she knows she is going to work. When she gets to work, she knows she is there. When she goes home, she knows she is going home.

In point of fact, a great deal of the time, she is not only where she is, she is aware of exactly where she is. This is terribly uncomfortable. It was much easier when everything just happened. Now things come in and demand her attention. She has to look at them. This is an unfamiliar activity, and it quickly makes her panicky. Maybe she's sick. Maybe there is something wrong with her. Are people supposed to know what is going on in their life? Everyone talks about knowing what is going on, but if you actually start to know what is going on in your life, isn't that a disease?

Is there something wrong with her brain? It feels like it is swelling up with newness, and she doesn't know how to drain it.

It becomes apparent to her that every fact, every piece of information, and every single thing that comes at her—her whole life, that is—is like a series of little metal wood screws. Sharon is a plank of wood, and the wood screws are getting

twisted into her and tightened all day long. Every single one of the wood screws is trying to pin her back down to where she came from. Her life doesn't want her to be alive. Every Lilliputian event and circumstance in her life wants her screwed down to the beach, prostrate and helpless, in front of an endless incoming tide.

Her board is studded with an unbelievable number of screws, and they hurt. Every single one of them adds more weight. She has been lying on the shipwreck beach of her life for 45 years and the gravity has been adding up the whole time. By now, there are so many screws in her, she couldn't sit up if she wanted to.

Sharon tries to put these thoughts aside. They aren't productive, and, like the sexual tension and fear, they look very expensive when measured against her therapist's fees.

She has coffee with Felicia, her coworker and sometimes best friend. They always get coffee at Starbucks, even though it's twice as expensive as the downscale little delicatessen right across the street from the office. The two of them used to share an unspoken agreement that paying more for coffee makes life more meaningful, but today it occurs to Sharon that all they are doing is getting a fancier paper cup.

The coffee smells good. It's hot, and the steam rises off it. How much she paid for it and what kind of cup it is in somehow seems meaningless right now. Felicia is saying something about her boyfriend, credit cards, and a 50" flatscreen TV, but the sound is muted and seems to come from far away,

like her aunt's laughter in the dream. Her thinking process has gotten thick and slow, as though her brain was filled with the same ritardando-producing gel that filled the dream room. Everything has collapsed down to two things. All Sharon can think about is how satisfying the steam coming off the coffee looks, and about how she finally had a really good orgasm for the first time in her life. It is a personal perfection, a tiny, intimate seed of epiphany in a life of repetition.

She goes down inside to it and nurses it.

She wants to say something to Felicia about it. She ought to. They're both women, and women talk about these things together. After all, when she had bad orgasms and bad sex, they talked about it all the time, trying to figure out why this kept happening. They came up with a million theories. Felicia is her best friend, and that's what you do with friends, you come up with lots of theories about why things are the way they are. Or at least Sharon thought that was what you do with friends. Now, she's not so sure. Coming up with theories reminds her of Annette's theory about not taking medication when she was in pain and dying. It occurs to her that believing in theories may leave you screaming in agony if they are wrong.

But now she has an almost physical urge to talk about the orgasm. This is something real. It has nothing to do with television sets or how much money is in the bank. This is something that happened inside her, in her life, and it represents the first piece of currency she can put on the table of

their friendship which might be of tangible value. But she hesitates.

Maybe you're not supposed to spend this kind of money.

It's not really a problem. Felicia is adept at small talk. She's like a windup toy with a very, very large spring. When she is wound up, if you let her go, she can carry a conversation solo for long periods of time. She's always bright and chipper, always positive, even when things are going badly wrong. This has always struck Sharon as being kind of stupid, but you don't stay stuff like that to your friends. Or do you? The temptation is growing. The endless stream of noise coming out of Felicia is another large baggie filled with wood screws which are being screwed into her, each one tightening. She wishes that Felicia had a zipper on her mouth so that she could just close it up and the two of them could sit there quietly enjoying their coffee together.

It's a relief when they're done with their coffee. This is another surprise. Sharon has never felt relief before when their coffee break was over. Up until now, she's always felt a regret at having to go back to the office, to the endless streams of e-mail and phone calls and the fluorescent lighting that hums like it is trying to attract insects and electrocute them. Now, getting back into the office is a relief. At least the routine is familiar, unlike the feelings she has been having for the last month.

That, however, doesn't last long either. Newness is stalking her, and every single thing she gets used to results in a change of the rules, until she begins to understand that newness doesn't have any rules. Now newness is causing her to see how tiny she is. There's a fly near the ceiling, circling the fluorescent lights, and she understands that that fly is a whole person, just like she is, with desires, needs, wishes. The two of them aren't that different; both stuck in the same office, milling endlessly about, wishing they were somewhere else.

Maybe, she thinks to herself, the fluorescent lights will electrocute both of us and put us out of our misery.

The thought cheers her up in an odd sort of way. She opens another piece of e-mail.

Vivian



Vivian Alsterbach, MSW, has an office in a prewar building next to an old brownstone church on the east side on 78th St, just off Madison. It's a third-floor walkup. When Sharon gets up to the block, it's late afternoon, and the edge has just come off the summertime. The dank, clammy layers of overheated carbon monoxide that fill up the street like syrup all through July and August have dissipated. The sun is falling at a slightly different angle which improves its color and saturates the façade of the abandoned church with an orange hue. Everything is glowing like gold. There is cause for optimism.

She's not sweating when she reaches the third floor. This makes it easier, because when she gets to her therapy appointment sweaty, it always makes Sharon feel nervous. She hates looking bad in front of professionals who make more money than she does. At least she thinks Vivian makes more money than she does. She dresses in ratty old sweaters and jeans, looks like an aging hippie, so there's no absolute guarantee she's raking in as much as one might think. The important point is, Vivian dresses down, probably to avoid looking like she's competing with her clients.

Vivian has extremely short brown hair and precise silver jewelry, including several extra piercings in one ear that make her look daring. Or gay, that's a possibility too. One more reason Sharon doesn't want to talk about sex with her. Come to think of it, it's downright weird, how Vivian knows almost everything about Sharon, and Sharon knows next to nothing about Vivian. There was a time when it seems to make sense,

but in Sharon's brave new world of collapsing paradigms, today, it seems like bullshit.

Usually, they talk about fear of relationship and Sharon's ineffective, helpless mother and overbearing (but dead) father, but not sex. Maybe Vivian senses that this subject ought to be off-limits. Maybe she's just waiting for Sharon to bring it up, and is extremely patient. Seven years worth of patient. Or maybe (Sharon fantasizes about this once in a while when she masturbates) Vivian actually wants to have sex with her. Sharon is certain she isn't gay, and she's never had gay sex, but fantasizing about it once in awhile seems okay, especially if it's been sanctioned by someone in authority. Whatever else, these occasional fantasies are certainly less threatening than real sex with a real man.

Today, however, Sharon finally wants to talk about sex. She's been having a good—hell, excellent—sex life for three months now. Maybe she shouldn't talk about this miraculous experience with her friend Felicia, but surely it's exactly the kind of thing you use in therapy if you want to get your money's worth out of it. Sharon is pretty certain that this, along with all the newness, represents a breakthrough of some kind. She's proud of herself. Her life is actually better than it used to be, and all because she knows she's going to die someday. In point of fact, it looks like most of the improvements have nothing to do with her therapy, but she wants approval from Vivian. Vivian represents health, represents sanity, represents sobriety and purpose. She gets paid to represent these things, and when something good happens, she damn well

ought to exercise her therapeutic authority and grant Sharon psychological knighthood, or ladyhood, or what ever honorific it is that professionals dispense when you finally claw your way out of the gutter you have been looking up out of for years.

Vivian looks relaxed and has her legs crossed when they start the session. Her jeans are a stretchy designer brand that cost well over \$100, reinforcing Sharon's impressions of deliberately understated wealth. She's got a pen and a notepad, standard props and she almost never uses. Sharon starts talking about how different she feels. She doesn't say why. She just explains how she finally had a breakthrough orgasm, how her sex life has blossomed into a glorious flower, how she actually loves her relationship with her man, something she never expected could happen this late in life.

Vivian is professionally attentive as Sharon begins the story, but her professionalism is replaced with a mild look of distress that gradually deepens as Sharon shares her story. She looks more and more unhappy. At first, Sharon doesn't notice it, because now that she's finally talking about this incredible, miraculous gift, she's on a roll. She's never had the opportunity to tell anyone that things were going right in her life this way before, especially a professional she has felt intimidated by for so many years. But at a certain point, Vivian cracks, and an audible sob bursts out, followed by several tears that course their way down her cheeks, chasing one another along the same path like drops coming off the tip of the leaf.

Sharon hesitates.

“Viv. What's wrong? Are you okay?”

Vivian tries to respond, but the words get stuck in her throat because they are competing with another sob. She struggles and finally chokes it down.

“No, no,” she says. “Everything's fine. It's okay.”

But it's obvious that everything is not fine. Vivian is about to break down again. Big time. That perfect, absolutely professional, I – know –everything façade she has maintained for the past seven years just went down the toilet, and Sharon has absolutely no idea why. In a flash of paranoia, she thinks that it's her fault, but then she comes to her senses and realizes that that's simply not possible.

Nonetheless, this is embarrassing. Terrifyingly embarrassing. But the shock of seeing Vivian—cool, professional Vivian—losing it completely easily overwhelms the embarrassment.

Something else is called for. Something new. Sharon reaches down into the newness that has been penetrating her for three months and discovers a new way to be a human being.

“What’s wrong, Viv? You can tell me. I mean... I know... I mean, I know I’m the patient, but if there’s something wrong, you can tell me. It would be okay.”

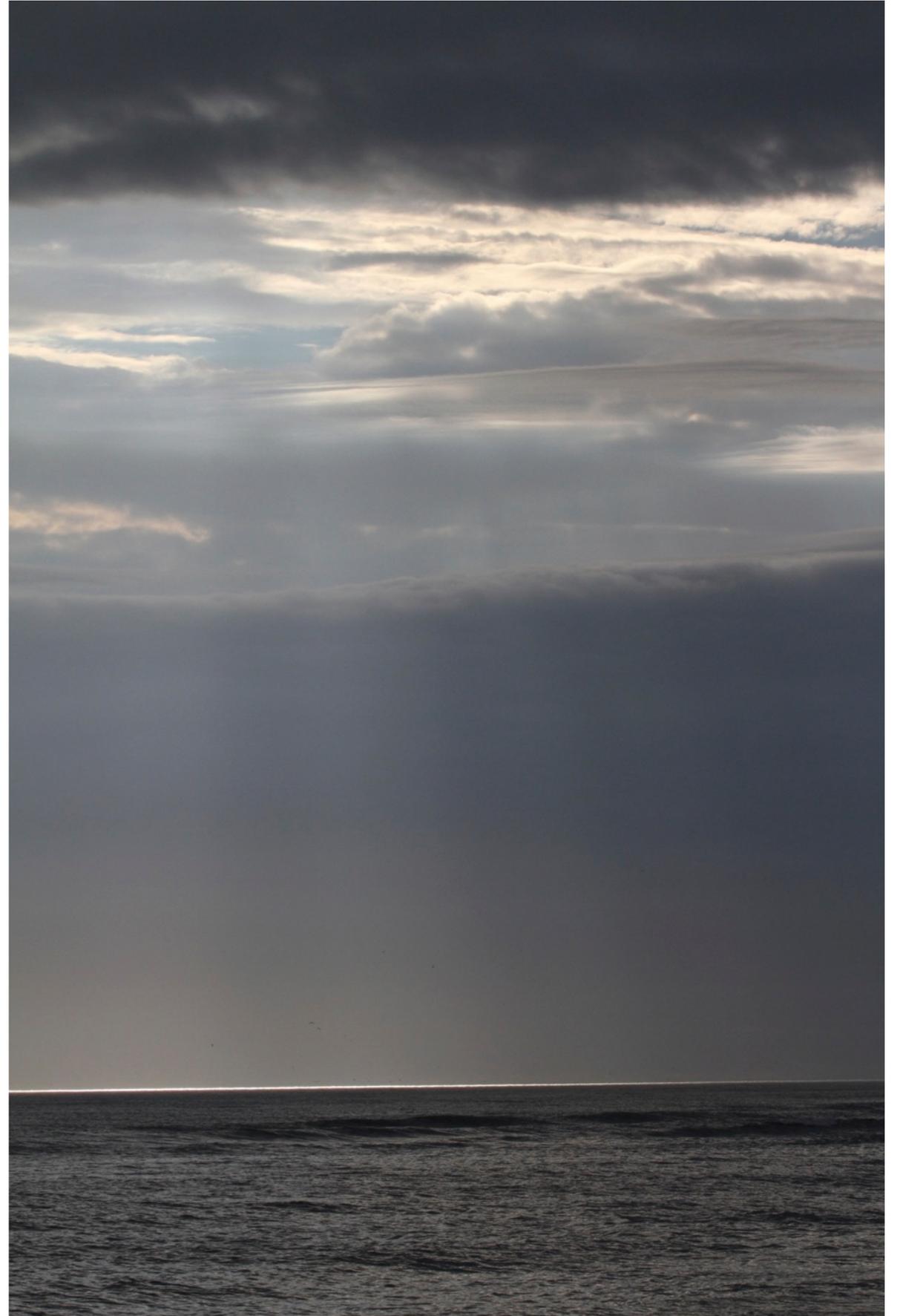
“It’s my husband,” says Vivian, confessing everything in a manner so unexpected that both of them are completely bewildered. “He’s leaving me. He... he... he told me I’m no good in bed, he hates me, he’s felt that way for years.” She surrenders and bursts into tears, unashamed, welcoming the release.

Sharon gets up off her chair just as Vivian jumps up, jumps up to leave the room, to go to the window, go anywhere where she doesn’t have to confront her patient and this terrible faux pas and the awful fact that her husband is leaving her.

Sharon catches her in midstride, grabs her, turns her toward her, and hugs her, holds her tight, and abruptly, she finds that that she’s crying too.

They hug each other a long time, desperately, like the hug is the only thing keeping either one of them alive, until the crying finally stops.

Ascension



Some people, like her aunt, get plenty of advance notice that they're going to die, but that's not the case with Sharon.

Yes, she's known she was going to die ever since the dream with her little Queztalcoatl in it, but even though this was a concrete and definite piece of knowledge, she has outsourced it well into the future, under the assumption that she will live a relatively normal life span. There are some disquieting elements, like the family history of breast cancer, and Alzheimer's disease (which, she figures, would pretty much ruin everything) but like everyone else around her, she figures she has a straight shot to her mid-70s or even 80s.

Besides, everything has been going almost perfectly. She and Douglas are engaged—engaged!—which is totally unbelievable. She never figured she would get remarried late in life. She's had a promotion and a considerable raise in income. They have moved into an appealing but small single-family home in Fort Lee, New Jersey, and Douglas bought her a dog. Sharon never would have bought a dog for herself, but she has discovered pets are a lot of fun. It makes her wonder what else she has been missing, all the time she thought she was living.

Things have been going so perfectly that it is impossible to believe that the universe has aimed a panel truck, a lumbering old thing driven by a delivery man from El Salvador who doesn't have a license and isn't even here legally, directly at the driver's side door of her car.

She is alone in her brand new Civic, listening to 1010 WINS, stuck in a line of cars waiting for a red light on 9W. The panel truck comes shooting out of a side street, uncontrollable, because the brakes have failed. There is no way to gauge the speed of the truck as it hurtles towards her, but she catches it out of the corner of her eye, and she can gauge the size, and the size is huge. A giant object, coming straight at her with no escape possible. There isn't even time for her brain to fully register the fact that this is a truck. She can see that it is brown, and that it has a grill on the front, and that the paint is peeling off it and one headlight is cracked, but the synergy that can put that together and say "truck" is unable to express itself in those last few seconds of conscious impressions. In the last second before it hits her, both the truck and the situation appeared to be completely alien objects, uncomputable, incomprehensible.

Instead, Sharon observes almost clinically, the brain has computed one thing, and that is that right now, she is going to die. At that exact moment, 1010WINS is announcing traffic conditions at the George Washington Bridge. They are favorable.

The truck hits her.

The impact spins the car around as she sees the shell of her vehicle collapse in around her. Thinking has completely ceased. There is a blankness where all of the ordinary things that occupy her mind used to be, and the only things that exist are the incoming impressions of her world as it is crushed.

There is not even time for pain. Everything takes place as effortlessly as switching off a light.

And, indeed, light suddenly ceases to exist.

Unbrokered by time or events—with perfect continuity, as though the light had switched back on—Sharon is in the house she saw Annette in.

The house is empty. There is no one else there. She looks out the window and sees the grassy embankment she lay on. The imprint of a body is stamped in the grass, exactly where she was lying the last time she was here. She looks down at her clothing and sees blades of grass clinging to it. It's as though she just got up and walked in here, and everything that took place between when she woke up and the car hit her was the dream. Now, this is reality. It has replaced what she thought was life.

She understands that this is forever and that she can never return to where she came from.

A burbling, trilling sound erupts from the windowsill. Her little green familiar is sitting there, preening his wings, pacing and chatting like a budgie. He seems very cheerful, but Sharon isn't. A vague but irrational feeling that he is somehow to blame for this monumental cock-up rises up in her. She opens her mouth to accuse him directly.

No sound comes out. Or, rather, sound comes out, but it doesn't make any noise. It has become something material,

and it drops to the floor like a stone. Unlike the first time she saw this happen, the metamorphosis is irrevocable. There is nothing left to pick up, just ripples spreading out through the floor itself as though a stone were dropped in a pond.

Quetzalcoatl displays a complete indifference to this dilemma. He hops on her shoulder, nibbles at her ear until it tickles, and then takes off, flying into the next room. Sharon, tempering her irritation with pragmatism, follows him. Part of her says to herself that she knew all along this was the deal.

She has no idea what to expect. There are stories about lights, going towards them, there are stories about tunnels. And then, of course, there are all the stories about brimstone and hellfire, but she's reasonably sure she's not in that category. If she was, everyone else she knows would be too, and in this place would be far more crowded than it appears to be.

What she finds is a long corridor. Quetzalcoatl has flown a long way down the hall, and is no more than a dwindling speck of green. The hall seems a good enough approximation of a tunnel, so she follows him.

The walls are yellow, and not like any walls she has ever seen before. They are soft and covered with a thick layer of some frondlike, feathery material. She passes her hand over it, feeling a sensation of thousands of tiny leaves brushing against her skin. It is then that she realizes that she still has a body. Is that right? Can the soul be incorporated, even in heaven?

She grasps one of the frondlike projections and pulls it off the wall. It's rectangular. To her astonishment, she realizes it's a Post-it note. She takes a closer look.

The Post-it note has writing on it. The writing is her own handwriting. With a shock, she realizes that it is a single notation of her life, a single thing that happened to her and that has been recorded on this note. She pulls another one off the wall. It is just the same. She walks faster, pulling more, every one of them another record of who she is and what she has done, until she is running down the hall, grabbing handfuls of them, leaving clouds of them behind her in the air as she shreds them off the wall. Everything that she has ever been and said and done, every single impression that has ever entered her, every signal sent by every neuron in the body that she had on earth has been recorded on these billions, maybe even trillions of trillions, of Post-it notes. Everything that she thought was real was made of words, and all the words have been sucked out of her, but she sees that everything is still real. Without the words, her being is still real. She doesn't need the words anymore.

She has been drained of everything she is. Her life, with all of the weight that pressed down against her, has been removed. In a shock of revelation, she realizes that every metaphorical screw that was ever tightened into her plank is gone. All the pain of being has been sucked out of her, and it's pasted on to the walls of this corridor. Everything she ever thought she was was just a footnote, a sticky piece of paper glued to her insides.

As she runs down the hall, feeling freedom, feeling liberation, it amuses her, how trivial everything that life put into her was. Everything that happened to her, translated into words, all of them useless.

None of it matters now. She will never need to open her mouth, to use words again. This emptiness, this absolute, utter emptiness, is sheer perfection. There is nothing to do. There is nowhere to go. There is no one to see or be seen, no one to satisfy, no one to be afraid of.

An inexpressible surge of joy fills her body, and as it does so, the hall begins to tilt downwards, more and more, pointing into an impossible vastness that is not light, not dark, but that consists, completely and absolutely, of the unknown.

Chapter 12

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee van Laer was born in Yonkers, New York, in 1955, and spent a good deal of his childhood in Hamburg, Germany. He has spent the majority of his adult life in the Gurdjieff work, and is an active member of the New York Gurdjieff Foundation.

Lee is an import professional by trade, and has traveled extensively worldwide, particularly in the Far East. He holds a degree in fine art from St. Lawrence University, and is a fine artist, musician, photographer, poet, and writer.

At the time of publication, he is a Senior Editor for Parabola magazine (www.Parabola.org).

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Additional books by Lee van Laer available on the ibooks store include:

Books about the Gurdjieff work and esotericism

Chakras and the Enneagram — the relationship between Gurdjieff's enneagram and the ancient yoga system of chakras.

The Law of Three— Essays about the Trinity, from a Gurdjieffian point of view

The Universal Enneagram— a collection of essays about meanings of the enneagram according to the system of the Names of God.

Glory, Grace and Mercy— Essays on Christian esotericism

Books on art:

The Esoteric Bosch— The first of two books about artwork of Hieronymus Bosch, this volume treats the Garden of Earthly Delights, the adoration of the Magi, and other important

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