

A Confession of Love and Emptiness

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Living half a century is no great accomplishment; I've done it and more. Living through tomorrow may be something much bigger. Tomorrow a group of people, every one of them younger than I, will take a great saw and rip through my sternum, and insert steel claws, and crank my rib cage open, and spread me like a lobster.

I don't believe in priests, so I'll make my confession directly to God, who hides in the pure white expanse of this blank page.

If I live, I will live a new way. I am ready to say this not merely because of the grim surprise with which I realize daily that I am precisely what I thought I'd never be, a middle-aged man, a man growing old whose body is failing, who may die soon. And not merely because deathbed repentance is attractive and convenient, even to someone like me who has always rejected such pathetic whimpers of fear, but because today I received a message of redemption. In the face of a little girl, I saw forgiveness.

The story is easy to remember, but not to tell. It's about love and emptiness.

The year I turned forty, I begged... or, rather, demanded, rudely, that a Voice speak to me, that He stop hiding in spiteful silence behind that grand impenetrable drapery of blackness above my head.

I was standing at the side of a hospital bed where my wife lay dying of ovarian cancer. The steel rail was cold in my fists. The machinery hummed, whooshed, beeped. Now and then her brow folded up like a fist, but her eyes stayed closed. She was shriveled, unrecognizable. All I could think of was the hypnotic glitter of the Milky Way and how desperately, bitterly, I wanted to understand Eternal Space. I behaved like a thoughtless imbecile. I shouted up at Him, at God, at the ceiling.

An angry nurse blew in like a gale gusting through white curtains, hissing, threatening to have me removed, forcibly if necessary. Later, in one final rush of pain, my wife died. I never received my revelation.

For over fifteen years since, I've slept on my side of the bed, with an empty space beside me. I believe that's what was meant to be. My reward. God is just.

The trouble is, people disappear all the time. They just vanish—poof, gone. This is not startling news; everybody knows it. And if you want the return of the disappeared, then that's in the Miracle department. I used to believe it was utterly impossible, back in the years before I met Rico, that sweet, crazy old crooner. But these days, I'm thinking that

maybe the gone can come back. In their own way, unobtrusively, they return. If you're watching.

In my life, there were Billy Brock, and my mother, and of course Alice, who left those gaping vacancies. But it started with my uncle, my mother's younger brother, who lived with us, who rode me on his back like a horse so that my clearest memory of him is the thick shiny tangle of the back of his head, wet ropes the color of coffee beans, and the sweet scent, like a fruity wine, of Wildroot hair tonic.

Then, before I was eight, he was gone. He came home alone one day, home too early from his job with my father, wearing a fat white bandage around his right hand. His face is dim in my memory, but I know his skin was pale, a white forehead spiked by a dark lock hanging down. He was thin, young, couldn't have been more than twenty-five, I realize now. That day, he came in tense, pacing, silent. He scared me. I escaped to the back yard and while I sat under our willow, reading, their voices, his and hers, my mother's, shouted in distant echoes from inside the solid bricks of our house, and I tried not to listen, and I remember not a word. As I tried to focus on the page, a page full of diagrams of rockets, I heard the front door slam. That was my Uncle Davy leaving. I never saw him again.

Somehow I knew even then that that was the beginning of the end of our family.

My name is Jonson Burgess. Not the old standard John, but Jonson, after Ben. My mother, in love with her own sense of irony, wanted to make a statement about negative capability, perhaps her own, perhaps my father's, perhaps mine, and so I was named for Britain's most admired playwright of the seventeenth century, who towered and gloated over, who praised and patronized, his failing friend Shakespeare, but who today is lost in the Master's shadow, all but forgotten, merely a minor player. And in his dim beginnings, before all his avid self-promotion, Ben Jonson was a bricklayer, like my father. Maybe she knew my father would rise above sweaty labor to his own higher plane of banality, too. She would chuckle low in her throat; she thought such contrivances were funny, like a jazzman tossing a riff from "Mary Had a Little Lamb" into his solo, a sort of inside joke, her personal comic subversion in a humorless, dark universe.

When I was six, my uncle's secret name for me was "Muscles," since he said, with a name like Jonson, some might think that my father's name was Jon, but no, it was Sam, and Samson would hardly do now, would it? But I could be like Samson someday, he said, with a wild wicked girlfriend, and biceps, and hair, and a fatal flaw. I didn't know what he meant by all that, but I did know about Samson, since my father read me Bible stories every other night at bedtime. My father and mother had an arrangement, a sort of alternating current that powered all my perceptions then. Then and, I suppose, now. On my mother's nights, she read to me stories of her choice, and I suffered through them, often yawning or dreaming but sometimes enthralled, adrift, sunken in a syrup of words, in her soft deep voice, Dostoevsky and Kafka, and now and then Dickens, for a bright note.

Odd how just now I felt a sudden longing, a deep twinge like the flex of a muscle, somewhere near my heart, a longing for her to be here at the side of my bed, reading to me, reading anything, I don't care, caressing soft syllables with that voice like whiskey on velvet, filling with its deep folds this sterile hard room where, now, without her, every

sound, even a rustle, a whisper, clangs and echoes like a bloody bullet dropped in a surgeon's pan.

And the rustles, the whispers I hear, are my heart wheezing to force my blood through an ever narrowing space, a gate where some freak twist of DNA raised a lump that year by year has gathered coats of calcium, layered like geologic sediments recording the history of my heart, my life. A congenital aortic stenosis, thank you Mother, thank you Father, thank you God.

Now I know, so I can say, my sin is this: I have lived a life obsessed by emptiness. On a quest for absolute vacancy.

Consider this cup, made of plain white styrofoam, from which I've been taking meager sips of water as I stare out the window, over the parking lot, past the trees to the highway, stare and sit, sit for hours as I do every day, trapped in this hospital bed. The cup is empty now. Once full of water, now empty. Now ready, you might even say willing, to be filled again.

What is the truth of a cup? What is the shape of an enclosed space when the enclosure is taken away? What remains here after my fingers clip and fumble in a flurry of fervent deconstruction? After I break away white chips like dry little ice floes, snapping them off one by one to end in a papery jumble on the table, mere flakes, capable of nothing, what is left? There's no answer in the tiny hill of polystyrene stones, an airy white ruin. No, but beyond it there, still wavering like heat in the peachy afternoon light, I see the emptiness of the cup. I see its shape, its essence. Its essence is absence. Its center lacks a center. A cup without a yawning open cavity like a wound is no cup at all. A receptacle must be receptive. The truth of a cup is vacancy.

Like the antique blue bottle we found in a trash can, Billy Brock and I, loitering in the fall sunshine on the way home from school.

"Break it," I said to Billy.

"No way man, it's cool, I'm gonna put it in my window."

He held the bottle up to the sun to see its cobalt flash, its sapphire shimmer. I grabbed it from his hand and smashed it on the street.

Try it. Break a beautiful blue glass bottle, shatter it on the sidewalk, watch the azure diamonds explode in a spray, then search like I do, search in delight for the space that was in the bottle. You'll never find it, oh no, and that's the secret, that's why it's so beautiful, so perfect, its filtered light transcendent as moonbeams, sublime as starlight, far beyond your grasp, beyond the capture of the carnal and mundane, the mud of flesh and stone. But it's there, that shape of air, it's eternally the same, the delicate phantom of some impeccable interior, untraceable without its bounds, the Abyss in embryo, the laughing quicksilver spirit of Hermes, god of enclosed spaces like gardens and tombs and bottles full of indigo light like the womb of a saint.

Billy was angry. He shoved me and I sat heavily on the asphalt. "You dumb shit, why'd you do that?" He walked away, shaking his head. I looked for the bottle, the flawless empty shape of the bottle, there, where some infinitesimal thickness of summer air wavered and was gone. I sat still and watched a flicker of sun glint off a knifelike shard of blue. I felt happy.

This afternoon, the little girl came into my room as I sat staring out the window. I don't know how long she stood in silence before I realized she was there. When I turned to her, she gazed solemnly at me with big dark eyes. She looked like Alice.

Maybe a woman is like a bottle. Born with a sacred space inside, given to be filled. Not shattered to let in the light.

Alice was my wife. We met at the old Bleecker Street Cinema at a double feature, *The Bicycle Thief* and *Miracle in Milan*. She came in alone just after the lights went down, and the only seat left was next to me. I didn't get a good look at her as she squeezed past me; I didn't think about her at all until I became aware of little sounds, little sighs, little oohs and aahs and gasps and giggles, all faint as whispers, the barely audible bubbling-over of her heart as father and son search for the phantom bicycle, and then it was snuffles at the end, and I felt that I'd invaded a private place with my intrusive ear.

After the lights came up between features, she asked me how I liked the film. I was embarrassed, tongue-tied, her eyes were red, and I didn't know what to say because I hardly remembered the movie at all. I remembered soft sounds, and I remembered black and white images lurching across my optic nerves, against my concentrated resistance, because I wasn't there that day to see the film. I was there to *not* see the film. I was there to find darkness.

It was an experiment, a test of will and focus. I was looking for control, the type of control over my own psychology that would let me break through the rules. I wanted no rules. I wanted to be free of such physiological laws as "persistence of vision." I was looking for kinship with, or rather I was looking to defy like a father, a man long dead. It was Peter Roget, of Thesaurus fame, the man my mother claimed was her great great uncle, the ancestor I could never live up to. Medical doctor, lecturer, inventor, chessmaster, civic engineer, university founder, who in 1824 laid the foundation for motion pictures by postulating that when the image of an object registers on the brain, it continues to exist there for a moment after the object has moved on. So if another image is fed to the eye while the first still persists, they will appear to blend into one. It's our mind lying to us. It's self-delusion, it's the tyranny of the unconscious, and I wanted to rebel.

The projector in the theater had just shown us a two-hour film, twenty-four still pictures per second, a non-stop whirr of gears and wheels shaped around a blinding beam of light, as each picture jerks into position in front of the lens, holds there for less than a blink, then jerks away.

And to disguise the flicker, a three-bladed shutter whirls past the lens, flashing light-dark, light-dark, light-dark, next frame, light-dark, light-dark, light-dark. The screen goes black seventy-two times a second. Half of the time spent watching a movie, the audience is sitting in darkness, staring at nothing. "Where are you between two thoughts?" was the Zen koan echoing in my head. Where are you between two frames? Answer: in a room full of humans all facing forward in wide-eyed silence, intently watching a wall of blackness, tapping into the collective unconscious, swimming in the dark ocean, sampling some vast nothingness below the surface of that bright flicker of dreams that plays out on the screen in the alternate universe we call Reality.

I wanted awareness, informed participation in the illusion. But I failed. I succeeded only in missing a great film, at least Alice thought it was great, and she told me why in her small breathless voice until the lights went down again, and this time I let myself forget Roget, and melt into the charade, join in the shared staring at the parade of light and dark, the poetry for the eye, written in light, and *Miracle in Milan* with its clownish hero and silly angels, and her pure uninhibited sighs and whispers tickling my ear, made my heart feel full.

Afterward, we walked outside with the crowd, side by side, both quiet, with little smiles on our faces, stopping under the awning in a pool of light surrounded by a dark drizzle. When I said, “Would you like to go for coffee or something, talk a little?” her head tilted a moment, pale cream skin washed in a white glare, a plain face, nothing classic, eyes wide set, lips on the thin side, sharp chin, no make-up. But her solid black eyebrows, a shade too heavy, curved in perfect geometry, mathematically precise parabolas that leaped up above eyes green as moss. She focused unblinking on the light above for a long second, then looked at me and said, “Okay.”

Luckily, she had an umbrella—I never thought of such things—and we shared it as we launched out into the rain, as we walked quickly, walked aimlessly, talking. She was barely five feet tall, thin, with tiny strong hands that made fast fluttery motions and often reached up to ruffle her dark hair, cut short as mine, into funny peaks and tangles. She didn’t care, her mind was busy, her eyes wide under those perfect arching eyebrows, glancing here and there as she spoke, and she spoke a lot, quickly, with little laughs, always excited, never quite catching her breath, all in constant motion, one sentence overtaking the next, eyes moving, taking in everything around her, hands a blur, not nervous, just energetic, and then suddenly she would stop, her hands rest, her eyes land, calm and still, in a long solemn gaze at my face as she listened intently to my response. She was like no one I’d ever known.

We walked in a bubble, south past Houston, then east along Spring, our little umbrella like the peak of a Japanese lantern floating through the shiny wet darkness with us inside, bright and dry, while actually thick rivers of water ran down our little black roof and splashed on her boots, on my sneakers. We talked nonstop, words coming fast in the rhythm of our steps, double steps on the wet pavement, and she loved Italian film, Italian opera. She came from a big Italian family, Bridgeport, Connecticut, then Southern Connecticut State, and now she worked as an office temp while she pursued her real love, the theater, not as an actress, but behind the scenes—costumes, sets, lights, sound, taking any job she could find, often for no pay, moving from one tiny downtown theater to the next.

What did I have that I could tell her? I felt there was nothing, then somehow the words were coming out of me to fill the silence of her listening, somehow my life story wasn’t as dull as I’d thought, and I told her about Fort Lee, and then Rutgers, and how I liked jazz and science and birds, and about learning my father’s demolition business, and getting out of the draft with a heart murmur, and even about my absent mother, and when I was stumbling and inarticulate, she was more attentive than ever, and gave no sign of noticing my awkward pauses and clumsy phrasing, so I grew brave, and told her things that I thought about late at night in my little room full of books where I often sat for hours staring at the wall, staring straight through the floating atoms of the wall, thinking.

We stopped once, looking up at the world like out of a dream, one of us, I don't know who, asking, "Where should we go?" and the other saying, "I don't know, let's see..." and both of us staring blankly around at the glistening, shivering city, then falling into conversation again, walking again, stopping, laughing about our wet feet, wet jeans, both soaked by our blind splashing through the dark glimmery puddles on the cobblestones of Soho, and then walking again, back north to Bleecker, babbling, mindless of the hurrying people and all the bright doors that opened into dry, warm places full of the aroma of cappucino and cinnamon.

We finally came out of our fog at the West Fourth Street station and smiled awkwardly, exchanging phone numbers, then she went up to Chelsea and I went down to Broome Street, home, where I lay in darkness for over an hour rehearsing what I'd say to her tomorrow.

It was April, 1968, and we were both twenty-five. That was the beginning of my life, I can see now. If only I could have seen it then, perhaps everything would be different today.

In September we got married, a nice garden ceremony in Bridgeport, where my dad even managed to appear sober and to give no one a sermon, and where we were surrounded by fast-talking, back-slapping, dark-haired men and women who loved us intensely for that day, then, thank God, left us alone. Alice moved in with me for six months, but it was a war economy, construction was booming, money was pouring in, and my dad helped us get a sixty-year old Tudor just a few miles from him, in Englewood. On the day the men walked on the moon, we cleared great tangles of dry branches out of our old overgrown hedge and burned them, sending sparks like new golden stars spiraling into the night sky, that empty place now just a sliver less empty.

I began to take over more of my father's job, to steer the business toward heights he never seemed to be able to see. For him, success had been luck, a series of fortunate stumbles. From Burgess Builders, Fort Lee, New Jersey, he had remade himself into Burgess Wrecking Company, with a small management office on 8th Avenue and 52nd Street, NYC. A few very lucrative contracts came his way, but with him at the helm, it seemed a constant battle to move in the right direction. He just didn't have the vision. After I joined him, we gradually transformed ourselves into Burgess and Son Demolition Engineering, grew our staff, and set out on a path that, had I stayed in the game, might have made me millions.

His big break, and the planting of the seed of my future, had come earlier, when I was in the middle of high school, back when my mother was still around, when his company won the contract to take down the row of old brownstones that stood on West 63rd between Amsterdam and Columbus, to make way for Lincoln Center. It was a hot, bright morning in May when the job began, and my mother and I, in celebration of the prosperous times to come, drove in across the G.W. Bridge to watch and wave to my father and, she said, to be wild sophisticates free of home and school for a day.

It was a role she played often. When I was younger, she had gone alone, my father determinedly uninterested, to the premier of John Cage's work called 4'33", in which the pianist sat on stage and played not a single note for four and a half minutes. She was avidly reading Kerouac now, and buying Miles Davis records, and sarcastically imitating, in her deep voice, the vapid conversations of suburban housewives.

I remember squinting at her that day as she stood in the still glare, wearing sunglasses and red lipstick and a crisp white blouse and sharp-creased slacks, dangling her cigarette from two fingers, palm up, elbow tucked at her waist. One corner of her mouth always curved up a little, perpetually sardonic. I thought she looked pretty damned good for an ol' mom.

We peered through a hole in the plywood wall, looking for my dad, but seeing only the big crane with that great gray baseball hanging on a cable thick as my arm, poised above the sidewalk in front of number 158. She stood close behind me, I could feel the smoke of her breath on my ear, and she said in almost a whisper under the growl of engines, "Somewhere in this block was the childhood home of Thelonious Sphere Monk."

Sphere. The word sounds hollow, like a ball of glass, full of air, not like the dull ball of heavy lead that now swung on its tether from that steel tower, slowly arcing back to a point of stasis, a frozen moment, then forward, slow, slow, gathering speed but still seeming to be in slow motion, a ponderous power that met the stone wall with a thump deep in a well, like an underground bomb, and with a big dry splash of dust, bounced back. The old house shuddered down to its heart, and the dust rained down, and then I saw the crushed stones, the caved-in wall, a hole where there had been no hole before, and the ball swung again, and the wall imploded in great cascades of dust.

My mother said, a little dreamily, "Master of silence... I wonder if he's watching?" And the crane roared, belching a burst of black smoke, as it swung the ball again.

"Maybe he's nearby... or maybe he's uptown somewhere rehearsing... I heard he's putting together a new quartet..." Her voice was smooth and close. "Maybe right now, as his home crumbles down, he's hunched over those ivories, playing and playing..." She went on, and I was glad I understood. I'd been listening to her records, too, every day lately, loving them, and now an ineffable spell came over me, something I never could have expressed. I imagined his blunt fingers hammering keys, and the half-beats of silence riding there, tipping over the edge into the next bar, as his dark hands come down hard again, and the notes and chords and riffs and runs pop up, fall down, roll over, just off rhythm, with a breath of delay, with canyons of emptiness suddenly gaping and a round sound of cymbal or sax glancing in just off-center enough to declare this to be the music of Monk, no music like Monk, T. Sphere Monk, master of silence.

Beams screeched and ripped and splintered, glass burst and clattered and splashed like showers of crystal daggers, glinting in brilliant sun. My mother blew soft smoke past my cheek and hummed inside my ear, a low, lazy version of "Straight, No Chaser." I was grinning wildly, stunned.

Every day after school I was there, watching a clear, clean gulf of air take over the tangled dirty ruins of rooms, until an unsullied vacancy stood, echoing invisibly the shapes of corners and curves, of stoops and sills and archways and carved cornices, of square enclosures stacked one upon another, now just box-shaped phantoms of rooms, the spaces where people had lived.

Ten years later, Alice and I sat in the Metropolitan Opera in Lincoln Center, watching LaBoheme, Rodolfo singing to Mimi that her beauty is like the sunrise, and Mimi, dying, crying back, no, like a sunset, and Alice was in tears, but I was seeing all

around us the faint outlines of buildings, brownstones with light in the windows, and through the shimmering walls I could see the rows of finely dressed New Yorkers in a grand golden hall. It was like those Kirlian photographs I've seen since, where the image of a leaf is whole, unharmed, although its tip had been torn off before the photo was made, and I thought: build and destroy, build and destroy, that is the way of the universe, the way of God. All things built, once destroyed, leave their imprint forever, ghost shapes that linger in the gaps, made of quarks and neutrinos and photons, everywhere, like the memory of water that hides in ice, like the possibility of ice that hides in water.

When I was nine or ten, I spent long hours looking at the summer night sky with my friends. In those days the Milky Way was real to me, more real even than my family. My friends and I watched it sparkle above us, a delicious mystery, a dazzling trail of spilled sugar leading across that endless obsidian plain to some fantastic city of ice and fire spinning in the black wastes of space. Someplace far better than here. We whispered, all full of awe, as children do.

"I keep thinking, the universe has gotta end out there somewhere." I spoke staring straight up. "But then I think, what would the end look like? A brick wall? Then what if I tore down the wall?" I lay flat on my back, sleeping bag tucked under my chin, helpless under the vastness, struggling with infinity. Falling in love with the void.

"Yeah," came a reverent whisper from somewhere down the row of sleeping bags, "just empty space, forever and ever." Then we were silent for a long time, until we slept.

It was always on Billy Brock's lawn that we spent those nights wrestling with the great unknown. Billy was the oldest, the tallest, the coolest. It was Billy who taught me how to cut a hole in the center pages of a thick book, the perfect way to smuggle Halloween candy past the eagle eye of Mrs. Schwobey. But nothing made Billy bigger in our eyes than his Tarzan yell. It was the absolute best, the pinnacle of excellence; try as we might, none of us could even come close. He contorted his lip like Elvis, raised his face to the sky, and let loose a high, pure tone that broke and wavered in just the right places. Its echo down the block at dusk would send shivers up your spine.

At twelve, I moved away. At fifteen, I learned Billy had died in a car crash.

I hadn't seen him for years and hadn't cared, but suddenly a space opened up in my life. A hole where there was never a hole before. A vacancy like an empty hotel room where the guest has just checked out. But it was more than that. It was real, yet it was nothing. Not a space that I could see, not a thing that I could touch, no walls, floor, ceiling. That was what scared me... or, not scared exactly, more like thrilled. That was what thrilled me about it—what could be more purely, perfectly empty than an empty hotel room in a hotel that never existed?

My mother had a pet canary, a frail wisp of pale gold in a little white cage in the kitchen window. It would sing when the morning sun cast a bright pattern through the lace curtains. At eighteen, I pretended to be annoyed.

“Mom, that bird’s gotta go! It’s gonna wake the dead, for God’s sake!”

But if the day was gray, the canary was silent, and the kitchen felt strangely empty. It never sang at night.

It was just after midnight in late November, Thanksgiving weekend, that I came home from a party to find my dad drunk, crying. I’d seen him drunk plenty of times, but I’d never seen him cry before. Usually he just got mean, but sometimes he walked a circle in the living room, shouting about the wrath of God and the second coming of Jesus. Now, his face was crumpled into a new face, someone I didn’t know. I started to walk back out the door, like I’d entered the wrong house, but he said, “Jonny, she finally done it. She took off.”

This was no surprise. On Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, my mother had slammed out the door in the middle of all that cooking, no explanations, not a word, and she didn’t come back until late, after the 11:00 news. Dad said grace, then he and I served up our turkey and dressing, sweet potatoes and cranberries, in silence. We ate and watched football and never spoke.

Something had been going on for months, something serious, but I never asked. They spent long hours shut away in their bedroom, muffled murmurs punctuated now and then by little sobs or a shout like “I don’t give a damn!” or “Stop this lying!” or “You could do a hell of a lot worse!”

He handed me the letter she left, scribbled on an envelope.

The part addressed to him said, I’m gone on the train Don’t try to find out where. The part addressed to me said, I’ll always love you honey I just couldn’t stand the emptiness in this house and I’ve gone away to start over Please understand Love Mom.

“I swear, Jonny, I done my best. It’s just God’s will, that’s all it is, God’s will, and we have to, we have to accept...” My dad slurred his words. “Shit!” His voice wavered, then grew thick. “She’ll come back. Goddamn her to hell.”

His pinched-up, teary face was suddenly repulsive. He turned my stomach. I walked into my room, shut the door, and turned on the radio, loud. I lay on my bed and looked at the ceiling. After a while I stood up and punched a hole clean through my closet door, cutting my arm and smearing blood on my best jeans.

I never found out the whole story. I saw my mother one more time, twenty-two years later, at Alice’s funeral, after I’d spent a month tracking her down. She seemed tired, but happy enough. I met her husband. We spoke about the weather and politics. But how could she not have known that her absence would be a giant thing, a vacancy not merely empty but violent and twisted, a gaping, bottomless hole that would swallow our home from basement to chimney? I guess she knew, but she didn’t care. I guess she knew that she’d taken a wrong turn, that for people like her there was only that straight ahead open road, no attachments. I don’t know. Whatever my father knew, he kept it to himself. He refused to even mention her name. She never called. Her occasional letters were cryptic, irrelevant, typewritten. My only clue was scrawled on an envelope.

The week after she left, on a Sunday morning, the canary sang madly in the kitchen window. The sound hurt my ears. Lacy patterns of blinding sunshine splashed across the room. The bandage on my arm felt tight and scratchy. I felt sorry for the bird. It occurred to me that maybe it should be set free, to fly through the sky, singing, towards the sun. Yes, Mom would like that.

It fluttered and fought as I reached into the cage. Finally pinning the tiny wings against its trembling body, I folded it into my hand and dashed for the door.

Out on the lawn, in the glaring light, I watched my fist slowly open, expecting a sudden leap of living gold like a tiny sunbeam. But it just lay there, a lump of yellow feathers. A dead thing, stiff and still. A frail, precious life crushed into nothingness by my stupid thick hand.

I dumped it in the trash. Later, I told my father it had flown away. For months the cage sat in the kitchen window, empty. White wire like my skeleton defining a space that held nothing. I decided I liked it that way. Vacant was best.



One day Alice said to me, in a soft voice, dreamy but with a faint tremor, “Jon, I think I’d like to have a baby.”

We were lying on our backs on our lawn, my arm around her shoulders. It was a warm afternoon in autumn, my favorite season, and I was looking up at our maple, a giant explosion of gold backlit by the sun. I was focused on one leaf near the top of the tree, silently willing it to fall. As she spoke, the frail golden thing caught a tiny gust and flew away, leaving a hole through which I could see the endless blue sky. We were silent for a while.

Then I said, “I just don’t see how that would be possible. We both have our careers...”

“But I could quit. I don’t make that much anyway.” She hugged me as she spoke. “And wouldn’t it be wonderful to bring a brand new little person into the world, someone who’s part you and part me, a beautiful little miracle?”

I felt cold and afraid. It was true that my business could have supported a family easily. By that point I had guided my father’s little suburban company into a leader in New York City’s demolition industry. Dad was thinking of retiring, leaving it all to me. I had begun to invest. We were doing well.

As she looked up at me, an image seemed to flicker in back of my eyes—out there past the golden maple, beyond the blue sky, was a black hole in space, focused funnel-like on this very moment in time. The rest of my life hung there on its lip, breathless, waiting.

But I could feel a tiny dead body, soft and still in my clumsy fist. Inside the cage of my ribs, I felt comfortable with emptiness.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think it would work. I’m not cut out to be a father. I’m sorry, sweetie, really.”

Another flicker, and something shining slipped away, over the lip into blackness. I told myself this: fatherhood is not my role in the universe. I refuse to choose the wrong path. That’s the mistake my mother made.

Alice lay there, silent. Another golden leaf fell, then another, opening more holes to the empty blue sky.

Her shoulders began to shake. She stood and ran into the house, leaving me to lie there until the stars came out and the Milky Way dashed itself across the blackness, cut only by the bare branches of trees.

We were not yet thirty. When we spoke of that subject again at later times, in later years, there was anger, then tears, then silence, then smiles. I was immovable, solid as bedrock, while I told myself I loved her more than anything. Eventually, she covered her pain with cheery resignation, and the distance between us grew. She hid her emptiness, hating it, and in return it killed her.

I am struggling to capture the truth of things, while all around me, the boundaries blur between hard objects and their shimmering potentials. Inside the depths of an atom, there is more space than substance. Void is dominant. Tiny nubs of matter whirl in oceans of pure emptiness. All this solid world of blood and earth, tears and bone and steel, even the purest, most invisible pane of clean clear glass is a buzzing swarm of atoms, electrons screaming in wild arcs around bundles of vibrating protons and neutrons, and all swimming in vacant space. My body is mostly nothingness. My hand that writes this is a moving shape full of space, like the styrofoam cup, an illusion, and the perfect hand-shaped space that exists there, moving, without the gray burden of flesh and bone, without the clutter of cells and molecules, without the dirt of sub-atomic particles—that living invisible fire of perfect open space that is the soul of my moving hand, *that* is what writes here, writes truth here, writes unutterable names of things that never were, writes them in invisible ink on an insubstantial page, a page so blank it is merely the thought of a page.

I am learning what I need. I grasp for the solid, the real.

For a month after Alice's funeral, I was numb. The first night, Saturday, I slept. I slept through Sunday and woke at four a.m. Monday, starving, feeling empty, so empty that the black coffee I drank felt like pouring a tin cup of rain into the Grand Canyon.

I went to work. Everyone was silent, glancing at the floor when I spoke. I drowned in sameness, day after day. The ConEd job, the 54th street job, the meetings at City Hall, the papers signed, it all happened without me, with just my flesh present, my mind somewhere I can't recall even today. Weekends I spent in the back yard, binoculars to my eyes, watching birds. When there were no birds, I watched the tangled geometric patterns of twigs shifting, gray on gray, in the cold breeze.

It was a Thursday when I went to lunch at Ralph's, skipped my usual eggplant parmigiana, and drank a pint of Killian's Red instead. Then another. Halfway through the third, I decided to take a walk in the park. I hadn't been drunk since college, even at my wedding; I didn't allow myself. Now, as I walked uptown, my limbs seeming to swim in the air just a moment behind themselves, I pondered physics problems. The red and white checkered tablecloth at Ralph's had looked precisely like the grid of the fabric of space and time, so I asked myself whether coordinates plotted on the X and Y of an Italian tablecloth bear any relationship to the carefully calculated arc of the sun that counts days from one year to the next, the perfect parabola that traces the route from the state of being married to the state of being alone.

Gradually I became aware of the air around my skin growing cooler, and I smelled foliage rather than stone, and I sat on the first bench I found. Then I lay down.

I woke, I'll never know how much later, to the grating screech of an old man's voice, wailing nonsense syllables as loud as he could sing, approximating the melody of "Strangers in the Night." From time to time a word could be understood, so it sounded like "RayjadaybaNIGHT, rujayladatchez, wumberdumbleNIGHT, rururrdakatjez, beebeeshurnaLOVE, efurnaditesfroo!" I couldn't tell whether he knew the lyrics and simply didn't enunciate, or if he thought the gibberish he bellowed was actually the song. Was the defect in his speech, his hearing, or somewhere in the synapses between?

He was bald except for a tangled dirt-brown fringe, and his beard was long and thick and streaked with gray. His name, at least the one given him by the others, those shadowy denizens of the park, was "Rico"—short for Enrico Caruso. But I found that out later, after I'd become one of their cronies, one of their ragged, smelly, bench-sleeping compadres.

I still don't know just how it happened, how I came to believe that that was the only future left for me. But some strange logic took over. I never went back to my office. I called, told my secretary Grace that I wouldn't be coming back, talked to my best foreman, Carl DeSilva, and got his reassurance that he could take up the slack, went to my bank and withdrew everything but a hundred dollars, and went back to Central Park. I'm sure Grace and Carl were just patronizing me, assuming I'd sleep it off and be in the next morning. When I didn't show up, they probably thought I needed another week. After that, I don't know what they thought. They mailed several salary checks to my home, which came in very handy months later, when I finally showed up at the Post Office to collect my undelivered mail. But as the weeks went by, perhaps they assumed I'd done away with myself, so they mourned, took care of the legalities of new business ownership as I'd instructed them to do, and went on with their lives. There was a time when I felt guilty for the lie, but I believe today that that was the only course open to me—I was merely following my path. The path that has led me here, to the mystery of whether I will be alive or dead in another twenty-four hours.

That first time I saw Rico, he sat on the next bench singing until he'd gone through "Strangers in the Night," "What's New, Pussycat?" and something I couldn't recognize that just may have been "Up Up and Away." Then he smiled at me, said very clearly, "Thank you," and shuffled away.

The second time I saw Rico was about a week later. I had been asleep on a bench again, turning and shivering most of the night. It must have been seven o'clock, a damp and chilly morning. I came slowly out of my restless sleep into semi-consciousness and squinted into the sun as it rose over the trees on the east side. Six feet away from me, silhouetted so it took me a moment to recognize him, his wild tangle of fringe and beard rimmed in ragged fire by the sun, Rico stood. He had his right hand raised high, above a trash can full of food wrappers and newspaper. He began crooning lowly to himself, something that might have been "Yesterday." As he sang, he moved his right hand strangely, turning it at the wrist, and as he did, I was sure I glimpsed a flash of light in his palm. It all seemed a little foggy, despite the bright sun, and I thought of some ancient evil wizard casting spells. It occurred to me that I was half-awake, I must be dreaming, but it seemed too real, and my heart suddenly felt tight, struggling to go on beating.

As I cleared my eyes, Rico kept turning his hand, and I saw in his palm a tiny image—green trees, buildings, blue sky, and sun. I was seeing right through his hand, as if through a lens. Then it flashed, a hard beam right into my eyes, and I had to close them. When I looked again, Rico was still holding his hand above the trash can, staring at the papers on top. A small plume of smoke was rising. His singing grew louder. Suddenly the papers burst into flame. He chuckled, rubbed his hands together over the blaze, and beckoned me closer. I swallowed my silly panic and forced myself to approach, and as I did, he lifted his right hand as if for a handshake and proudly showed me the cheap magnifying glass he held in his palm. The hand he extended toward me was a mangled remnant, a claw-like thing with only a thumb and two fingers, and a palm that was a dirty mass of twisted scar tissue. And right in the center, the size of a nickel, was a hole, a round, clean hole through which I could see the sidewalk below.

Rico became my constant companion. He sang his whole repertoire to me many times and incredibly, I grew to love it, his wacko music, its jazzy turns, its ever-fluid soul, its surprising Monkness. He played silly tricks with the hole in his hand—peering through it with a startled eyeball, making a penny disappear, dropping acorns or dribbling water—goofy kid-stuff that at first seemed horrible, but before long had me cracking up. When the weather was good, we slept in the park, but I soon learned that Rico was a resident of a homeless shelter at the north end of the park, and on rainy nights I got a cot there as well. Rico oh-so-seriously taught me the finer points of picking food from garbage cans, but of course I repaid him by occasionally buying us a comparatively nice fast-food meal. Most of my money went to beer and cheap red wine. Despite Rico's gesticulating, scowling, mumbling expressions of disapproval—through some sort of innate wisdom, he was strictly alcohol-free—I stayed pretty well sloshed most of the time. I could never drink hard liquor and maybe that's what saved me from tumbling down all the way into inescapable degradation. Or maybe it was the sweet care of this decrepit old guy with the sunny mind of a child.

This insanity went on for two months and today it's all a blur in my memory. One morning I awoke in the sunshine with a hangover, looked at Rico snoring on the next bench, and was suddenly overcome by a deep, choking shame. I had the means to take care of this kind, maimed, elderly man, and I was failing to do it.

Before the day was out, we were at my house in Englewood, and everything had changed once again.

It was after Rico was cleaned up, with a hair cut and a shave, that I realized he was younger than he looked, barely sixty I guessed. Summer had come, and I watched him in the golden afternoon light in our backyard, as he passionately crooned and shouted his songs, his eyes tight shut. I looked at his mangled right hand that rested on his boom box or made jerky motions in rhythm. I stared and stared, and it was then that the fantasy came over me, creeping like a hot flush up my neck, to flame my cheeks: I decided that this man, this crazy stranger, this homeless lunatic, was my long lost Uncle Davy. A whisper in my head insisted: It could be true, couldn't it? Couldn't it?

A yawning hole was refilled! One who disappeared had returned!

My life felt renewed for a while. Rico and I had a good time. I had money from investments, and I sold the house and got us a smaller, cheaper place out in Sussex County. We went birding at the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, went to the

Natural History Museum and the Statue of Liberty, drove down the shore to Long Beach Island and Cape May, hiked Tillman's Ravine and High Point. Once a week we ate ice cream cones and he laughed aloud, throwing his head back with Mint Chocolate Chip dripping down his chin. He loved everything we did. He was a child and I was the nicest parent alive. And as long as I looked at him with Uncle Davy in mind, the days seemed inexplicably suffused with some sort of beautiful magic.

It couldn't last. Rico had carried with him from his former life in the park the undiagnosed murmurs of impending heart failure. He died peacefully in his sleep the same month as my father, who apparently fell in a drunken stupor into the pool at his Florida condo.

With Rico gone, I turned back to my books, a dark room, obsessive thoughts about empty spaces, and the haunting echo of Alice's voice. Obviously, that's what accelerated my own heart's decline. And here I am, pre-op.

Today, as on every day that has led up to the Big Day, I sat alone, staring out the hospital window. Across the corridor, I could hear the laughing voices of visiting children. The sky outside hung low, colorless as concrete.

For an hour, I watched a dove with a broken wing look for food. It moved a few steps at a time, dragging the feathered limb like a broom through the dirt at the edge of a highway. Giant trucks cannoned past, their tires screaming just inches away, while the little gray bird hunted, pecked, dragged, hunted, pecked, dragged. When it ventured haltingly across the road, trailing the filthy wing, I had to look away.

I wondered, was it joy, was it vision, was it courage that sent the dove struggling against its wounds toward that green field on the other side of the highway? Or was it just bird-brained stupidity?

With my eyes averted, I could hear the blast of trucks passing. I found myself wishing I were a boy again, young and strong enough to run out to that highway, snatch the little bird up, hold it gently, heal it. Whisper to it like a baby, feed it from an eyedropper in a white cage by a sunny window, until it grew strong enough for the sky. Maybe if I could yell like Billy Brock, the dove would leap with strength and fly to me like the wild beasts to Tarzan. But all I could do is grip the arms of the metal chair with both tired hands.

I am becoming an old man, and I have learned something, and it is this: Regret is a gasping, desperate thing, a hollow inside that I now know, before God and the teeming multitude of spirits swirling unseen through His eternal void, is an emptiness that I will ache to fill, forever.

When I looked back, there was no sign of the dove. Perhaps it skittered between the roaring wheels to the safety of the other side. Perhaps it flew like an angel, full of sudden strength and light. Perhaps it didn't. No sign of death, nor of life. Just a vacancy.

It was then that I became aware of the little girl standing in my room, staring at me. She could not have been more than five years old, but as our eyes met for what seemed an impossibly long moment, she seemed wise and sad and much much older. Her

black eyebrows arched perfectly over deep green eyes, and I felt sure, for one breathless second, that Alice had returned. The child stood still in her plain pale dress, then she walked to me, put her hand on my arm, and said, "You're a good man." Before I could take it in, she smiled, her eyes flashed, and she turned and danced out the door, dark hair bouncing, her movements quick and fluid.

I sat motionless for a span of time I cannot measure, my strangled heart leaping and shivering.

I am ready now to join the world, even though my chance may be forever gone. God, wherever you are, forgive me. Whatever tomorrow holds, I accept this, this final gift from out of the immaculate celestial emptiness. And in return, I offer for the first time now, today, my everlasting gratitude, before I face my new life, the life that begins or ends with the morning light.

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