

Mark Wallace

Crab

Chapter Two

On May 12, 1998 at approximately 10:15 a.m., a man walked to the ground level front door of the Library of Congress Adams Building, the main library building where the general public can go to look at library holdings. He came through the door, pulled out a pistol and fired, instantly killing the guard, John H. Jenkins, 42, who in giving directions to a patron had momentarily turned his back to the door. The few patrons milling in the area of the doorway scattered in panic. The man took a right past the metal detector, then another left, firing a few shots, almost haphazardly according to a witness who had gotten down under a table and watched. One man, 25-year old Reginald Chase, was hit in the leg.

The second security guard stationed near the metal detector, 31-year old Stanford Rowe, had been in the bathroom when the firing began; hearing screaming and several loud pops, he looked out onto the chaos of the hallway and ducked back into the bathroom, where he immediately called for help. He later reported hearing about six or seven shots fired. After calling he went into the hallway again, but the gunman had moved onto a stairwell, headed, it turned out later, for the second floor, the main floor of the library.

The main floor of the Library of Congress has on one side of the central hallway a room full of computers where one can look up books; a door on the other side of the hallway leads to the main rotunda of the library after one passes through a small reception room. The gunman didn't fire any shots when he came onto the main floor, and the building walls were thick enough that no one on the floor knew yet that anything was wrong. The gunman entered the reception room, where several patrons sat at desks and the on-duty librarian, 47-year old Sheila Murphy, stood behind the reception podium. He pulled out the gun, fired a shot into the wall and grabbed the librarian by the shirt,

dragging her around the reception podium while people scattered from the room and the floor erupted into screams and chaos. The gunman pushed the librarian towards the door to the main rotunda of the library. People coming out of the rotunda were forced back into it by the gunman, who was waving his gun around and fired a single shot which cut the hand of patron Cynthia Dupree, 35.

Upon entering the main rotunda, the gunman closed the entrance doors and passed through the short hallway between the stacks into the open center of the rotunda. Some people had managed to flee into the labyrinth of the back stacks; others were still running or had ducked under the heavy wooden tables surrounding the rotunda. At the center of the rotunda sat the round circulation desk at which people turned in their book requests. No one stood there any longer, the on-duty personnel having dispersed throughout the room.

According to Sheila Murphy, at this point the only witness, the gunman took her behind the circulation desk, stood there and began a long, mostly incoherent rant. He made no attempt to seize more hostages or fire more shots. According to Murphy, the gunman kept repeating “You’ll never have dreams again; I’ve taken back the dreams you stole from me,” and words to similar effect, when, that is, his words were coherent. In later testimony, Murphy was convinced that she understood the deluded plan of the gunman--understood in the sense that his words made it clear what he believed he was attempting. Somehow, Murphy reported later, the gunman believed that by seizing the Library of Congress he had cut off people’s dreams, and he believed as well that his own dreams had been stolen from him and he was attempting to steal them back.

By this time, police in significant numbers had circled the front entrance then entered it. The several useful first floor witnesses knew only that the gunman had disappeared elsewhere in the building. After climbing the stairs cautiously, the police came out onto the main floor, where continuing panic was more pronounced--yes, the gunman had been seen to enter the main rotunda. Police found the doors to the rotunda closed, of course, but not locked; when they attempted to go through, several gunshots brought them back out again. They didn’t know at the time whether the gunman had hostages and if he did, how many.

The standoff between police and the gunman lasted nearly ten hours. At 8:27 p.m., the gunman surrendered his hostage, and two minutes later walked out of the rotunda unarmed and into police custody. According to Sheila Murphy, some half hour before finally surrendering the gunman had grown calm; she seemed to think that whatever he had been seeking to do, he believed at that point it had been done.

The gunman, 33-year old Oliver Lowell from Bloomington, Indiana, was an unemployed former truck driver and electrician with a history of mental illness but no prior arrests. His parents, Frederick and Minnie Lowell, were longtime, well-liked residents of Bloomington who had repeatedly tried to help their son, to little avail. He had been refusing for some time to take his medication or to continue psychiatric care. Because he seemed clearly delusional, he was immediately packed off for psychiatric evaluation.

The incident captured a great deal of media and political attention, perhaps mostly because of the location of the attack; the Library of Congress was used by hundreds of members of the public daily. There was immediate outcry about whether public buildings in D.C. were safe for tourists and other users. Calls were made for firmer security, more powerful weaponry in the hands of guards; actual response included adding several more security guards to public buildings in the area and instituting a new security routine that involved more movement between posts and more double-checking.

Funeral services for John Jenkins received national attention and extended local television coverage. Jenkins had twenty years experience with government security organizations; he had served long and generally well, although his record was not distinguished in any particular way. He was divorced, and although this information had not been made public, his administrative superior had been privately worried about a recent increase in his drinking, which perhaps had caused several absences from work in the last six months. His son, William Jenkins, 18, was currently working as an assistant manager at an area grocery store. Even more thoroughly kept out of the record was the private complaint of several congressmen that maybe Jenkins and Rowe had not been paying attention on the job; one was in the bathroom, for God's sake, although that was hardly against regulations. But if the congressmen and their allies suspected that the guards were simply part of what the congressmen felt was the longstanding problem of

D.C. and government employees failing to do their jobs, they voiced these suspicions mainly as rumor and innuendo that reverberated around Capitol Hill for several weeks then faded away.

Even with one security guard dead and two people wounded, one seriously, the incident was not of a kind to stay in the media eye long; in a world with no shortage of murder, insanity, war and natural disasters of all kinds, the incident was for almost all Americans hardly more than a blip on the daily screen of events. Indeed it wasn't long before the Library of Congress again assumed daily normality, patrons moving in and out to get books, security guards at key entrances engaged in occasional watchfulness or chatting with those entering the building.

The incident did appear on the national news several more times after the funeral, the first about six weeks later, when psychiatric transcripts regarding Lowell were released to the press. What those transcripts showed was that Lowell, undoubtedly insane, had developed one of the most sophisticatedly paranoid scenarios of any random assassin in recent memory, a scenario which in its detail, vividness, and subtle twists and turns actually impressed his doctors as the creation of a first-rate, though completely delusional, imagination.

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Marinda had tried to paint all afternoon, but it hadn't gone well. As far as the outside world was concerned, she had definite talent and even larger potential; she'd had a couple pieces displayed at shows of some significance, and several area commercial galleries had featured her work. But the outside world didn't feel the lack of motivation that lately overwhelmed her when she made an effort to create new pieces. The moment she would gather herself and her materials to start, she would find herself making a phone call, or running an errand, or discovering she couldn't live without watching Oprah Winfrey.

She had never painted with thorough discipline; instead, she had painted in fits of rage, boredom, distraction, anxiety, or unresolved tension sexual or otherwise. Painting happened to her, that is, more than she decided to undertake it. But if it had happened to her fairly frequently in the past, now it seemed to happen mainly by abandoning her.

Partly that was because she was older, had more things to do, more ways to distract herself, so that painting, which had been a distraction, now was no longer needed so much as a distraction but hadn't found another way to come back consistently into her life. So she'd been trying--for three or four months now, really trying--to set aside an hour or two every day to paint. Maybe once a week she did paint something or other, but they were just fragments of pieces, possibilities with no clear direction, and their wasted, unfinished skeletons lay scattered about her back studio in various states of abandonment.

The problem was, she could see, that she didn't feel intense enough about anything to find the necessary energy to push a painting through to a conclusion. She didn't have discipline and she didn't have focus and even knowing that didn't give her discipline or focus. And there was something else. Sometimes, she would be working and actually starting to do something worthwhile when the idea would occur to her that there was not a single person in the world who she wanted to see her paintings, and her motivation would evaporate. Why paint when there was no one to paint for? Often she had painted because someone wanted to stop her from painting, or made it clear they didn't approve, and then she would feel an anger that could push her all the way through several pieces, leaving her exhausted and victorious in the aftermath. But there was no one's disapproval to play off these days, and no one's approval to play off either. Was the goal of her painting really to prove her genius (not that she felt she had any, but that wasn't the point) to the void, whether of the present or the future? Why bother? No one cared about her painting, herself included, and here she was pretending she wanted to be a painter.

She dialed Jerry again, but he wasn't home and that meant he was on his way, as he said he would. She moved fitfully around among the materials, opening this and closing that. Eventually the bell rang.

"Where should we eat?" Jerry said when he was thoroughly inside and holding court from the couch. "No more Italian, please. I've had it with Italian."

"Are you going to open that wine or just sit there complaining?" Marinda said.

"I think I'll sit here and complain, if you don't mind. Besides, you're hardly the one to give out crap. You forgot your money again last night--that's three times in two weeks."

“I know,” Marinda said, opening the wine herself. “I’m trying to remember.”

“Try harder,” Jerry said. “It’s a good thing I have extra.”

When their glasses were full, Jerry said, “So you were painting, huh? Your hands are a little bluer than they should be, you know. Little Marinda has dirty hands and needs to clean her nose.”

“Aren’t we the king of snot ourselves?”

Jerry’s face beamed pleasure. “There’s no type of king I’m unhappy to be.”

Despite herself, Marinda laughed, though she cut it short quickly. “What’s the king been doing today?”

“I think I’m starting a magazine,” Jerry said. “Some articles on culture and entertainment, but mainly just a lot of advertisements. We could give people advice on restaurants and night clubs and little fun spots that nobody knows about. I talked to my Dad and he’d have no problem fronting me the money, and I know a couple people I could get to write articles. You could even do some if you wanted.”

“That’s awfully kind of you. I’d expect to be paid.”

“Money’s not the problem, you know that. The question is whether I feel like doing it. I felt like it earlier today. Now I feel more like deciding where to eat.”

“Would this magazine cover the queer scene too?”

Jerry stared at her harshly. “Would it have to?”

“If you want to do a foo-foo magazine successfully, probably, yeah. Unless you’re planning your how-to-do-the-city book for outdoorsmen, the best duck-hunting spots in Manhattan, that sort of thing.”

“I suppose I could hire someone to cover the queer scene. I don’t know anything about it, though. Say, what do you think about this Asian mail order bride thing? She’d cook and clean for me and submit to my every whim because she’d be so happy to be out of servitude back home.”

Marinda looked at him, stem of the wine glass between his fingers, his plentiful stomach spilling out over the front of his pants. Yes, he was serious, to the extent that was possible. “Why are you thinking about Asian mail order brides?”

“I’ve got a friend with a connection, that’s all. It’s easily done. And I have needs that need taking care of.”

“Why don’t you just buy a hooker? To prove to yourself you’re not interested.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... oh, just that relationships based on money maybe aren’t that fulfilling.”

“Listen to you,” Jerry laughed. “Come off it. Everything’s based on money. Wow, you really have been painting today. You better watch out, or you’re going to become some moony-eyed hippy romantic and marry a folk singer or some guy who makes pottery.”

“And that would be wrong because...?”

“Because you’re spoiled. We both are. That’s what we have in common, Marinda. Only the difference is I don’t fight it. I like having things my way. I like going to restaurants and drinking good wine and meeting chicks and...”

“...and having sweet smelling soaps and the right coffee and lots of couches,” Marinda finished for him.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Jerry said.

“Nothing,” Marinda sighed. She took a large sip of her wine. “Where *are* we going, Jerry? If I hang around here much longer, I’m going to kill one of us, and with my luck lately it won’t be you.”

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It had been a long day of work for Steve already, and he still had another hour or two, then the subway ride out of Manhattan to his apartment in Williamsburg. I wonder where Marinda is, he thought, then turned back to the article he was writing, some stupid piece on frequent flier miles. He told people he was a reporter because that was his job title but as far as he was concerned, he was an ad copy writer. The magazine he worked for--a local entertainment offshoot of Playboy--wrote little articles detailing little things of interest to the people of little interest who read the magazine. Why couldn’t he be somewhere exciting, doing something important, instead of having to put up with this endless parade of little bullshit he couldn’t even make himself get angry about? About once a week, he would call a travel agent to see about flight prices to Paris, Japan, even places in Africa. I should just get up and do it, he thought, I should just go. But he knew he wasn’t going to.

“Hey,” Cynthia came over to him, and he sensed again that feeling of wanting her. She had class; she was wearing a long skirt that looked good on her, and her hair flowed loosely, without too much professional uptightness, which he hated. He even would have asked her out, except Marinda had ruined everything. If only her parents hadn’t been such religious nuts, he thought. Between Marinda and her parents, they had ruined everything.

“Hey yourself,” he said.

“What are you doing after work tonight? A couple of us are going for a drink in the neighborhood about seven. Want in?”

“I was hoping to change out of my work clothes before I did anything,” he said. “But I’d have to go all the way to Williamsburg. So maybe, yeah. Where are people going?”

She told him the name of the bar, said it was only a few blocks away. “Have you ever been there?”

“I’m pretty sure not,” he said. “I’m not all that keen on bars. I’ll have one or two drinks at most sometimes.”

“Really?” she said. “That’s pretty interesting. Everybody I know drinks, some too much. It’s boring, actually.”

“It’s bad for you too. Besides, don’t you think most people drink because they can’t deal with their lives? They can’t look things straight in the face so they need to get bombed.”

“I don’t know,” Cynthia said. “That sounds a little harsh. But I know what you mean.”

“Is it harsh?” Steve said. “Maybe. But I don’t want to be the kind of person that thinks other people or things can solve his problems. I mean, don’t you think that’s one of the reasons we’ve *got* so many problems? Because people always want to blame somebody else, or look to something else to save them?”

“You could be right,” Cynthia said. She leaned against the edge of his desk, getting a little closer, and the sweet smell of her skin floated up around him.

“I mean, that’s what religion is, isn’t it?” Steve said. “Something people can hide in, so they don’t have to look at the way things are. So they make up some silly little

belief system and follow its little rules and listen to what its little leaders tell them, and that way they don't have to know anything about what's going on in the world."

"You're kind of funny, you know that?" Cynthia smiled.

"I don't see what's funny about it. Religion ruins a lot of people's lives. Look at those cults, and the things that happens to the people that stay in them and even the people that get out. You know, my last girlfriends's parents were in a cult--it caused so many problems that things between us didn't work out."

"That's too bad," Cynthia smiled oddly. Maybe she didn't mind that he didn't have a girlfriend. "They were really in a cult?"

"Had their own little weird guru and everything. They'd have these dinner parties and bring all this weird food and these weird little objects, then they'd pray some and he'd talk, spewing some bullshit they must have thought was wisdom. Creepy."

"You actually went to these things?"

"Me? Oh no way. It's just that Marinda would talk about it all the time. Then she'd get to thinking she should be religious too, even though she wasn't. She didn't believe in God but she couldn't get it out of her head that she was supposed to."

"You don't believe in God, obviously?"

"Why, do you?"

"I don't think about it much one way or another," Cynthia said. "People are weird sometimes but you don't want to think too much about it, you know?"

"But sometimes you have to. I mean, I really went out of my way to help her. I would have gone further too, if she had let me. But she got too freaky for me. I just had to get out."

"What did she do?"

"It wasn't that she did all that much, really. It was just the way she was thinking. She would get it in her head that I was trying to control her thoughts."

"You mean telling her what to think?"

"No. Controlling her thoughts. Putting ideas in her head then she couldn't get them out."

"That's crazy."

“Isn’t it? I mean, she seemed like a pretty ordinary girl. A little California style flaky maybe, but no more than typical for people out there. But she was pretty nuts. Only you wouldn’t know it. I mean, that’s the thing I learned from the two years we spent together. It’s not even that you can know people casually and not see the deep weird problems they have. It’s that you can know them *well* and not see the deep weird problems they have, not for a long time, anyway. It’s made me cautious. I wasn’t ever the kind of guy who goes out with girls just to fool around; I’m in it for serious or I’m not in it for long. But now I think more about it--I think more about how many people walking around who seem normal might be crazy, it’s just that no one’s seen it yet. I’m not going to fall again for somebody until I know a lot more about them. The next girlfriend I have, I want it to be the right one.”

“I think that’s an admirable attitude,” Cynthia said. “I know too many guys who just think about trying to get laid.”

“I’m not like that,” Steve said.

“So are you going with us?” Cynthia asked. “It should be fun.”

“Sure. As long as it’s not one of those things where everybody drinks until they can’t see straight.”

“It might be for one or two of them. But it doesn’t have to be for you and me--if we don’t like the way things are going, we can take off for somewhere else.”

Steve looked at her--it crossed his mind that maybe Marinda had sent Cynthia after him, to distract him. But no, it seemed unlikely. Besides, Cynthia was nice enough and he could maybe have some fun with her. Sure, Marinda had ruined everything, but he’d show her she wasn’t completely in charge.

“Sounds good to me,” he said.

“Great,” Cynthia said. “I’ll come get you when it’s time to go.”

“I’ll be here,” Steve smiled and turned back to his keyboard.

A moment after she was gone, Steve had second thoughts. This was the kind of thing Marinda might use against him; she could be totally arbitrary, and maybe she had talked to Cynthia about him, getting Cynthia interested in going out with him just so she could later say he was running around behind her back. That would give her an excuse to break off with him entirely. Okay, sure, he hadn’t seen her in awhile--it couldn’t really be

a couple months, could it?--and the last time he'd seen her, she said she didn't want to see him at all. But even though she'd ruined everything, she didn't mean it, he knew--it was just her parents' phony religion talking through her, as if she didn't have her own voice. It was amazing how religion could do that, could turn someone into a sick puppet motivated by obsessions she had no control over, saying things that had no basis in fact but came directly out of some insane fantasy world. It was pathetic--indeed it was amazing he still loved her at all, given her foolishness. Ah well, that just proved he was the right one for her, the one who loved her and could make her well again. It was only a matter of getting her to see that, to listen to him.

“And if you're tired of the food on these odd hour flights that are the only ones the airline will honor for frequent flier credits,” he wrote, “here are several easy tips on how to make the service work for you.”

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It was nothing like waking from a long dreamless sleep. It wasn't like going from a place to a place, a past to a present, a present to a future. It was nowhere to have been, and it seemed at first nowhere to arrive. It wasn't like having a body, or losing a body and having one again. It wasn't like leaving home, and it wasn't like going home. It wasn't like being able to compare. Experience is always elusive--so present when it occurs that one can feel utterly absorbed yet understand nothing of that absorption, yet so gone later that even the most serious reflection can't bring back one small piece of it. But it was not experience, and so it was also not memory.

It's impossible to explain hopelessness to those who haven't experienced it, and it's almost impossible to explain it even to those who have. The moment I use the word, I want to run away, to drink for weeks, to throw myself into the arms of someone I don't know and don't want to know--things I have done many times, I imagine, if only I could bring myself to remember. Even to confront the possibility of remembering drives me away from myself into distraction, for among much else, hopelessness is the state that one doesn't even want to know one could have been in. How to recreate that long desperate blank one can wish only to deny, in a way that others can feel but not immediately wish to deny also?

I know I walked a lot, that is, my body moved around, doing its business. The presence of any place, the actuality of any possible thing, had about it a constant unbearable drone--if one cannot stand that one exists, one cannot stand the existence of anything else. I would say that the presence of other things burns, if it weren't true that such a description has too much passion, connection--even if only with destruction. But it's not such passionate burning that's unbearable, it's the lack of heat or anything else. You see a thing and it means nothing and it won't go away and you can't go either.

Nor was it a feeling of grief, although one could sometimes, in lucid moments, remember that one had grieved. Grief is a kind of body, a living presence that cannot take the place of the living presence that has gone, but nonetheless becomes a marker of one's own realness. Look in that corner, and the person is not there; look out the window, and the person is not there, look in the sky, the bed, the kitchen, at the street, and the person is not there and never will be again. Everywhere you look, the person is not there, but the person's shadow is, because you *are* their shadow--for what is grief other than the shadow of someone who no longer exists? And although there's no comfort in being that shadow, no relief and even perhaps no hope, there is the shocking ache of realness, and grief therefore is the intense opposite of the intense presence of love, and just as on that day when one loves more than one knows what to do about and the world becomes so overwhelmingly present that anything could immediately come true, on that day when one grieves more than one knows how to bear, the world has that same overwhelming presence and connection, even if that connection consists solely of what has been torn away.

The city was still there, of course, and people, and newspapers and organizations and money and government and weapons. There were restaurants, clothing stores, book stores, office buildings and corner vendors. There were parks and trees and sidewalks and cars and streets and traffic lights. But they were utterly empty of themselves, and we were empty of them.

But if I can't explain how hopelessness moved me around, how it was me so much that I didn't exist, how can I explain to you so many people who had become that way, cities and suburbs, country towns and fields empty of everything except delusional bodies? Because you have to understand I have no idea whether any of those things were

real. You have to understand that what I'm trying to tell you is all I don't know about. Because when the veil of hopelessness intervenes--and you must understand it is not a veil--then one can't see anything other than the pain one cannot bear, and of course one can't see that pain.

So who am I to say, really, what anyone felt, or how or why they felt it? Certainly there was chaos--fighting and shooting and abandoned frenzies and public mutilation. Do I recall it correctly? I don't know. What does it mean to recall? Do I remember cars burning in the streets, people screaming at each other, rocks being thrown and riots beginning? Or do I remember quiet ordinary days in which I couldn't tell whether anyone but me felt hopeless beyond sickness?

I imagine sometimes, you see, that when the world became hopeless, everything that had been meant to stay the same actually changed, and the order that was supposed to be maintained crumbled because of the very measures taken to ensure it. When I'm imagining this, I'm imagining that a world controlled by hopelessness is a world that falls apart. But do I know that it would, or that it did, do I know anything other than that I fell apart, that I ceased to exist in any relation of familiarity to any part of my body and mind?

And I imagine at other times that when the world became hopeless, everything that had been meant to stay the same actually stayed the same. That, of course, is the far more terrible thought--that a world of total hopelessness involved people going to work or staying home, having conversations in kitchens and bedrooms and offices, touching each other or not touching each other in kitchens, bedrooms, and offices. I wonder then whether that hopeless world even recognized its own hopelessness, or whether it had learned, in fact, not only to feel what was unbearable, but simultaneously to deny that unbearableness so thoroughly that it couldn't recognize it. Was it possible that a world of hopelessness would still not know itself even if hopelessness extended everywhere?

I don't know the answer to that question. I'm mostly aware, now, of all the things I don't know. That's why, when I found myself again in some place where I had a sense of who I was, the adjustment was terrifying, even as I began to see how it might liberate me. I recall now, with no certainty, that I must have heard rumors of the existence of an underground rebellion, though to me such a rebellion meant no more than anything else.

But I'd had, before the hopelessness came, some connection to the world of protest politics, although I, like many people whose inklings of fear did not trouble them consciously enough, had submitted to the public procedures not out of devotion or patriotism but more with the sense of having an unpleasant task to get over with, like one would get a smallpox or flu shot or stand in line for a new driver's license. But the connections I hadn't paid sufficient attention to now got word to me even through the total stupor of my despair. There were some who hadn't submitted to the procedures, who even though they had become outlaws were still walking with a clear head through the streets of a city fogged with delusion--in fact, although they had to be careful, the government that had made them outlaws was itself in deep disarray; the absolute distortions of the procedures had gone vastly further than anyone had been prepared to handle.

None of which is to say I leapt immediately into the ranks of the opposition. I had no sense of there being anything to oppose--if I'd had any hope left, I might even have claimed that it had something to do with my ridiculous belief in "seeing all sides of the question," a desperate bankruptcy that I had long masqueraded as my greatest philosophical strength. But the members of the group must have had the sense that I was reachable, or at least more so than many others. And I must have been so, because one evening, a shot of adrenalin making me wide awake, I found myself in a basement meeting hall in an old decaying building in an abandoned part of the increasingly abandoned city.

The outlook wasn't good even for those who had not submitted to the procedures. They were under constant if erratic threat, and they didn't yet have anything with which to counteract the procedures, although there were odd, incomplete and conflicting rumors about various possibilities. Certainly they didn't have the strength, militarily or ideologically, to fight back against the government, which despite its disarray still had on its side all the money and weapons and television and radio stations, with enough coherence among its police and military forces to round up any who were still suffering from the "disease," as it was everywhere proclaimed and as most people believed, that is when they were coherent enough to believe anything. But nonetheless there were secret

networks of information, and their ranks were growing, as the resistance discovered here and there others who had escaped the procedures.

But what about those of us who hadn't escaped, I asked, a fog coming over me again. For some reason I don't understand, you're able to give me a moment of coherence to listen to you, but all I can hear you telling me is that you don't know what to do for me in any more permanent way. What are you going to do, give me shots of adrenalin forever?

How much are you willing to risk, one said to me--I wasn't aware enough to remember names.

I don't have anything to risk, I said. I don't have anything.

Then you could hardly have an objection to leaving the world behind?

There's no world to leave behind, I said.

And if I told you there was some other world you might go to--some other world where your condition might, I can only say might, not exist?

I wouldn't even have to consider it, I said.

As simply as that, I became the first subject of a new procedure. I didn't know much about how it worked--why ask? Because even if it killed me, that solved my problem too.

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"So are you going to go out with Geena?" Marinda asked Jerry as soon as they were seated, drinks in hand, at a table near the bar. The place was relatively crowded, although here and there stood an empty table because a lot of people were choosing to stand.

"She's pretty hot for me, isn't she?" Jerry said.

"I didn't say that. But she does seem to like you. Beggars can't be choosers, dear."

"There's no way I resemble any kind of beggar," Jerry said, "even metaphorically. If this wasn't such a good martini, I'd throw it at you."

"You're not answering my question." Marinda saw, out of the corner of her eye, a small group of people standing very close to her, to the side and behind her.

“I don’t know. Do you think I should?”

“Yes. She’s nice, she’s pretty, she’s even smart, although for some reason she’s not smart enough to see through you.”

“You just can’t accept that other women might find me charming. It’s because you’re in love with me yourself.”

“Oh please,” Marinda said. “Are you going to go out with her or not?”

“I don’t think so,” Jerry said. “She’s not my type.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Marinda put her hands on the table and pushed, for emphasis. Her chair slid suddenly backwards. “No woman’s ever going to...”

At that moment, one of the guys in the group standing close by stepped back and tripped over Marinda’s chair where she had pushed it. He floundered into her lap. She shrieked with surprise. “Oh hey,” he said as he continued to fall, so that he was sitting on her knees but his head was dipping back into the space beyond her. She reached out her arms to catch him, while Jerry pushed himself away from the table with a frown of distaste. The guy’s shoulders dropped into her hands. His legs flopped upward into the air for a moment, then aided perhaps by the fact that she had caught him, they found the floor again. Stunned, he didn’t get up right away.

“That’s the first unexpected thing that’s happened to me in weeks,” the guy in her lap said.

Marinda noticed that the skin of his face, so close to hers, was pale, that there were rings around his eyes. “Up you go,” she said.

“Then in a moment all will be normal,” he said, “and none of us will notice anything.” He grabbed the table and stood up off her lap. “Which is much better, because noticing things is incredibly annoying.”

Marinda laughed. “I think I’ll keep noticing you a little while, seeing as you’ve probably broken my knee.”

“An actual injury!” the guy said. “I wouldn’t want to say that’s good, but at least it reminds us how to be in pain. Otherwise we might almost be happy.” Jerry was still pushed away from the table, still frowning.

“Pain pretty much reminds me of everything I know about,” Marinda said. “It gives me something to do on weekends.”

“I’ve given up noticing that weekends exist,” the guy said. “Once I realized the calendar was an arbitrary trick, I decided to ignore it. Monday Tuesday and so on; Friday Saturday and so on; it’s a game that somebody made up because they didn’t know what to do with themselves. Now everybody else is playing too because we can’t think of another game.”

Jerry cut in, “Well, it’s been real, but if you’re done falling down...” Marinda could tell he wanted the guy out of the conversation, which spurred her on.

“What other game could we be playing?” she asked.

The guy’s face lit up briefly, then settled back into the expression he’d had since he stood up--an expression, Marinda decided, that had elements in it of amusement, confusion, exhaustion and something else she couldn’t put her finger on. “The thing about games,” he said, “is that nobody knows how many of them there are to play, because the only limit is how many you can make up. Sometimes I think it’s possible we could live in a world where people made up new games all the time. As it is, of course, we don’t even have to outlaw games because everybody’s so busy thinking they know what the game is already that it never occurs to them there might be others. Saves us effort at least.”

“So you play games?” Marinda said.

“As consciously as possible. But I’m not, sadly, all that conscious. I’d rather be distracted by circumstances that leave me empty and upset. There have been occasions when I’ve not been upset, but they scared me. Give me a problem I can’t solve, a love I can pursue but don’t want to have, indeed any small thing to keep me disturbed, just so long as I don’t have to confront the possibility of having no major and immediate crisis. I remember one time I wasn’t having a crisis--it freaked me out.”

Marinda laughed again. “I’m not sure I can remember the last time I wasn’t having a crisis.”

“You’re a lucky woman,” the guy said.

“I don’t feel lucky. I feel like I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“Have you tried long hours of boredom and insecurity?” the guy said. “They can fill one’s days beautifully if well matched with the occasional moment of blinding agony.”

Jerry frowned into his drink. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

Marinda pointed at him. “This is my friend Jerry. He represses a lot.”

Jerry snorted.

“And I’m Marinda,” she went on. “Who are you?”

“Call me Herbert,” he said. “It’s not my name.”

“Why don’t you sit down and join us, Herbert,” Marinda said.

“Would I be interrupting something?”

Jerry said, “Well, actually...”

“No,” Marinda said.

“Oh well, I’ll sit down anyway. It’s not as good as if I can actually interrupt something. But as long as you promise to keep forgetting the subject, I’d be more than glad to join you.”

“Aren’t you here with your friends?” Jerry pointed at the group of people Herbert had been speaking to a moment before--after briefly watching Herbert fall down, they had gone back to talking among themselves.

“I never see my friends,” Herbert said. “It’s why I have so many.”

“So the people you’re with are...”

“At first I thought of them as suggestive shadows. Or perhaps as small farm animals. Just a minute or two ago, they started to sound like people. Upsetting.”

“Do you always talk like this?” Marinda asked.

“Like what?” Herbert asked. For a moment his expression seemed quite serious.

“Oh... never mind.”

“What do you do?” Jerry asked. “For a living, I mean?”

Marinda said, “What do you do, Jerry?”

“I’m in the beginning stages of running a magazine,” Jerry said.

“There aren’t any issues yet?” Herbert asked.

“Not yet, but there will be soon.”

“Why? What could be better than a magazine without issues? You know everything it says without reading it.”

“You have a job here in the city?” Jerry continued.

“I do this and that, yes. All of it’s unnecessary, I’m sure. I’m an expert at doing unnecessary work. It gives me constant opportunity. I used to want to do something important, and found myself unemployed all the time.” He looked at Marinda. “You’re an artist of some sort, aren’t you?”

“Painter. I mean, I think. I can’t get anything done lately. How did you know?”

“Because you’re not pretending to be too strange, but on the other hand you’re not pretending that you’re not too strange. Then on the third hand, you’re hardly acting like yourself, thankfully. You’re a perfect show of insincerity. I hate it when people act like themselves--they’re almost always wrong.”

Jerry said, “I need another drink. I may go check out who else is around, so if you guys want something you’ll have to get it yourselves.” He stood up. “Got any money tonight, Marinda? Don’t want to have to worry about you when some other woman’s all over me.”

“Got some right here,” Marinda pulled some wadded bills out of her front pocket. “I walked out without any, but as soon as I was out the front door I remembered to go back.”

“At least you’ve got the routine down,” Jerry said.

“I don’t want to break up...” Herbert began.

“No, you’re not,” Marinda said. “Not at all.”

“Shame,” Herbert said.

*

She never stopped being amazed how different words could be on different days. Some days--like yesterday--they seemed like labels, other days like casual side comments or intentional non-sequitur. Still other days they were intensely focused and angled, related to their sources but tangential in ways difficult to decipher. Sometimes at poetry readings like this one, which had just ended, she would be overwhelmed with the

physical thickness of words tossing themselves around, and would have to leave. Other times they were restrained, dim, moody in unexpected ways.

She was receiving a flurry of attention because she hadn't been to a reading in six months. Everybody's intentions, good and bad, seemed transparent, and none were too insidious to bear, although she was amazed, as she often was, that the aura of people at these readings wasn't clear to them, or at least not much more than to people who didn't care so much about words; she had to remind herself frequently that other poets didn't see words like she did, although sometimes at least they would believe that *she* saw them.

"Sarah, I'd like to introduce you to..." "Sarah, what do you think about...?" "Sarah, I loved your piece in..." "Sarah, I'm editing a book and I'd love to have..." She went through all of it more or less gladly, although her shoulder and back felt tight with tension.

One important male poet on the scene, who alternately gave off the words "protective" and "I want to be a leader" in between strings of more disjointed phrase, brought her over to a chair and sat beside her, asking how she was. He was "genuinely concerned" but "wanted information" a little too badly. He opened a notebook and set it on the table.

"I hear you've got a new book coming out," he said. "I can't wait to read it."

"I was having trouble channeling it all," she said. "But I finally finished."

"Could I get you to give a reading?"

"I don't know," she said. "There's a lot going on. Some of it I don't understand."

"I'm not sure anybody understands more than you," he said. "But what do you mean?"

"The words are strange," she said. "They're suddenly coming from... well, that's the point, I don't know *where* they're coming from, some at least."

"But isn't that part of how it works for you?"

"No," she said. "Not usually. People have this theory that words come from them, right? But we both know that's not the case. Words make people as much as people make words. Words don't always come from people so much as they come up out of them--I know you see the difference. People don't just speak words; they exude them. Words come from their histories and buildings and fences and houses and the things they put in

those houses. In a way, people are always saturated with language--we bathe in words more than just speak them.”

“I buy that theory 100%. Where’s the problem?”

“Lately I’m seeing words that aren’t coming from anywhere. I mean, anywhere that’s “here.” They’re coming from somewhere else.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m seeing words coming from somewhere else, and I don’t know how they got here.”

“Where else could they come from?”

“I don’t know. But they keep coming. They tear little holes in “here” and force their way through.”

“It sounds, uh, pretty sexual and violent, the way you’re describing it.”

“Yes,” she said. “Of course.” Then she paused, looked at him. “Oh,” she said.

“Oh, I think I...”

“What?”

“I get it,” she said.

“What?”

She stood up. “They’re sexual. They come from elsewhere but they’re trying to be born again. Here. Because wherever they’re coming from, they can’t be born there anymore. So they need to be born here, only they don’t know how. That’s why they keep appearing in the wrong places.”

“I’m sorry; you’re losing me.”

“You can’t impregnate a building,” she said. “Even with words.”

“That’s just fabulous,” he said. He wrote something down. “It’s like a whole new stage in your thinking.”

She stood up. “It doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Well... no, I understand that. But you’re the one who sees it.”

“I need to go,” she said.

“Some of us are walking down the block for a drink. I thought you might like to come.”

“I can’t. I’ve got to find out.” She started walking towards the door.

“It was nice to see you,” he tossed out the words at her back.

It was a warm night in the city, and she felt good on the street as the density of language at the reading started to roll off her shoulders. Then, as she had expected because it was often like this, the streets were thick with her own realization. It wasn't her realization that created the thickness, of course, but the realization allowed her to sense some particular element that had been there all along but which had now become emphasized.

And oh, the streets were thick with it on a warm spring night. Sex; sex everywhere. It left nobody out of its pull, whether they had money or didn't, had been born here or come from other countries, understood what they were feeling or didn't or only thought they did. Couples of various ages, gay and straight, walked by with ripe readiness, or a quiet fulfilled glow, or with energy mismatching off each other in convoluted knots and tangles, or with a powerful repressed fertile rage shocking in its intensity. Groups of college age and slightly older young men threw it outward in all directions, directly and unambiguously, but without any focus--as though if they threw a thousand balls in a thousand directions, sooner or later one would hit something. Young women threw things too, but they weren't balls and they threw them at angles, indirectly; under and over, to the side, glancing off this or that--or they'd throw something directly then look the other way, as if someone else had done it. Nor was it gone from the middle-aged and older people who, like her, walked the streets alone, randomly or full of intention; with them, the angles and degrees and moments of focus and low simmering burns and sudden flare-ups that vanished just as suddenly could be almost impossible to follow. The energy burned in her too--thrilling, terrifying. And then to realize that the words which she had to find, the words from wherever that were desperate to be born here, or born again here, or whatever it was, were appearing in her world, her city, in at least all these ways, suddenly, with no warning or indication to anyone other than herself--unless, that is, there were others who could feel it too--to realize that left her overwhelmed. She had no idea what, if anything, she could do about them.

Because one didn't need to be a scientist to calculate the odds of something this obvious, basic. Even in the worst case scenario--if all the words came from the equivalent of alienated and introverted male adolescents almost too shy to speak who threw in

pointless directions their endless energy--even in a scenario like that, sooner or later, some words would find a destination they could use. And if, as was practically certain, the source was far more complex, even if at such great distance that the words could only appear with total randomness, when they did find their destination and manage to be born, how could she know even the first thing about what they'd give birth to?



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