

## **you then asia**

The infants will not shut up. Their crying? Incessant. Their shrieking? Inescapable. I would choke them silent, every last one, for a single moment of peace. Even - yes I'll say it, the time for niceties and euphemisms is long past - even my little Maria, whose small voice I can no longer pick out from the din.

But I cannot choke what I cannot touch, and I cannot touch what no longer is. I am left with no choice but to bear witness to their wailing, to them - always hungry, gassy, lonely, scared; always something. I picture a massive bird's nest teeming with a mob of small blind baby faces. Hungry seeking mouths open. Uvulas thrashing like punching bags.

At other times (often) the tumult blocks any ability I might have to form a coherent image in my mind's eye at all.

The adults among the voices have needs unaddressed as well, questions unanswered, fears unquelled. Some articulate them. Some are kind and soft-spoken, alternately inquisitive and helpful. Others rant and vent and threaten vengeance. But one thing appears to have become commonly agreed upon among them.

*The burning*, as one named Luis told me the other day, a harsh disembodied male whisper in my mind speaking in English with a street Latino accent, while I sat alone in my cramped kitchen sipping lukewarm tea: *keep it up*.

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Popular opinion holds that the last person to have perished in the traditional sense in the United States of America was a 74-year old man named Dennis Colvin, who suffered a heart attack in his home in Tallahassee, Florida, and was declared dead, yes, dead, gloriously dead by doctors in the emergency room to which he was conveyed in an ambulance.

Mr. Colvin's story was the first item presented by every major television newscast that evening. In most markets afternoon programming was interrupted by a special report on his demise. A photograph of Mr. Colvin graced the front page of every major national newspaper the next morning. The New York Times ran a headline declaring "Man dies of heart attack in Florida."

That was nearly four months ago.

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The government knows nothing about why this is happening. Or claims it knows nothing. They stack them now one on the other in so-called "hospitals," morgues, really. Tens of thousands placed into cold sterile buildings to, what? Rot? They won't even do that.

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For those many who prefer to deny the existence of the phenomenon being labeled 'Idiopathic Post-Mortem Persistence,' the tabloid headlines in the supermarket checkout line are a relentless assault.

"Mad Genius Behind Immortality Epidemic Identified" (just below this, the photo of a 1970's television drama star, so wizened and gray as to be nearly unrecognizable)

"Is Heaven Closed?"

The checkout clerk neglects to ask me for my Pit Stop Card.

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Just imagine:

You are an expecting first-time parent. You spend the better part of nine months worrying yourself to the brink of insanity about all of the things that could potentially go wrong. You have half a dozen close friends who have had children with no major complications, you and your husband are healthy and ready, yet you reach the brink of panic daily thinking about one catastrophe or another. Still birth. Infection. An accident on the way to the hospital.

Then the day comes.

Your daughter is born barely alive, choked to the point of death by her own mother's - your - umbilical cord during labor. Her vital signs barely register: an extremely weak pulse, only sporadic breathing. She is a deep shade of blue. She does not, cannot, cry.

You hear a nurse whisper: "This one has no chance."

Your baby, Maria, you'd named her in the womb almost two months previous, is placed on life support. Machines breath for her, feed her, handle her waste, while you wait for the moment when the breathing will stop. The doctors' prognosis offers little in the way of hope.

Yet she persists. Maria's condition, such as it is, stabilizes. Her vital signs, having reached the very precipice of death, persist. For weeks, nothing changes. Her weight does not change more than an ounce either way; her height is constant as well. She shows no signs whatsoever of developing. Or of dying.

Maria persists.

To the hospital staff you and your husband seem like good people, as do most people hit hard by tragedy. You stay by her side faithfully, praying quietly, crying often. You treat the nurses well, unleashing very little of your angry grief in their direction. And you wait.

Eventually you can wait no longer. The doctors admit to being stumped, unsure of exactly what is happening to your child. The prospect of detaching the machines is broached. You angrily resist for a long time. Two months.

Then, after no change whatsoever, you agree to take the machines away and let nature take its course. You and your husband hold hands as, with a flick of an orange switch, the physician sentences your child to death.

You cry, deep wrenching sobs, but Maria's condition does not change. She still breathes once an hour or so, her heart beats once a minute, she does not vacate her bowels, does not eat or drink, her brainwave activity is so low as to indicate that she is moments from death.

But it never comes.

Maria persists.

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Soon thereafter the news reports start, hinting that others may be sharing a similar fate to Maria. Mostly children at first, then older people. The same scene plays itself out a thousand, ten thousand times: A person becomes deathly ill. His or her progression towards death continues as expected, until there is just one more step to be taken to end the suffering. That step never comes.

They persist. Soon everyone does. The global death rate falls, plummets, and finally, reaches zero.

No one is dying anymore, anywhere.

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The prospect of some kind of a virus is broached. Perhaps biological warfare. Victims are quarantined in government buildings in rural areas. They quarantine Maria.

The thought of my dear sweet child stuck forever in such a place drives me to the brink of madness, and past it, and so it begins.

After I burn the first building down, with Maria and dozens like her in it, the voices start. For some reason I seem to be able to hear them while others do not, these homeless souls newly freed from useless bodies, in-betweeners unsure not only of their future but their present.

They never sleep. Neither do I. The infants never stop crying. Neither do I.

We persist.

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The woods around me are imbued with an orange, flickering glow, provoking animated shadow dances among the trees. Before me, two more 'hospital' buildings are engulfed in flames, burning like a sacrifice to long-vanished gods, a massive funeral pyre.

I sit alone, but a lunatic frenzy of voices shares the chilly air around me with the smoke and embers. Harsh whispers of lips inches from my ear, threats and lusty vows, deferential gratitude and mirth, mad cackling laughters running like brook water through the trees behind me. Glee hope venom and freedom. A thousand other sensations, but freedom above all. Fire and freedom and an unknown, untemplated future.

I sit still, my back propped against an old tree, bearing the brunt of the insults hurled at me from thin air, absorbing the gushing thanks expressed from the same source, waiting, for what I have no idea.

Sirens, distant but rapidly drawing nearer. Fire engines and police cars. They are too late, of course. As am I. As are we all.

*But the burning,* the bodiless whisper in my ear.

*Keep it up.*

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