

My Life as a Mystic



ONCE UPON A TIME, I was very religious. I saw angels in my bathwater, and when I opened the front door birds would roost upon my shoulders!

Well, no.

I can't tell you that, not truthfully.

I was *prepared* for it, however—the birds, the angels, God speaking to me in a hushed and confidential tone, me and Him, He and I, with secrets to share—that was the life I had envisioned for myself. Now and again, driving to work on a bright and sunny day in early spring, I was sure that God would step out onto the highway and flag me down, illumination as hitchhiker. In those moments my head would get so light, my mood so euphoric, I feared for my sanity, but a doctor friend, a shrink, claimed that these incidents were nothing more than a manic phase. “Wait a bit,” he told me. “It’s early yet.” My wife, on the other hand, insisted that I was experiencing an electrolyte imbalance. “Drink some Gatorade. You’ll feel better.”

I felt fine, I insisted. The air was nectar, the sky ambrosia. God was dancing in the peach blossoms.

She patted my hand as though consoling a stroke victim.

“Jesus,” I said, “give me a break.”

“Not now, dear,” said my wife, assured of her hold over me. “Maybe later.”

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This went on year after year. If I saw two sides of an oak leaf dancing back and forth on its branch, I knew God lived on the other side of the breeze. Surely. But He always stayed that one breath away.

On occasion I acted less than responsibly. According to my wife, at least. One evening, I drove into a pasture by accident while looking at the moon. A fat, silver disk swimming in aquamarine twilight, it looked like a doorway into another dimension. Then the car went up and over a barbed wire fence and tipped, nose-first, into an irrigation ditch. My head hit the steering wheel, and the lights went out. When I woke, water was lapping at my feet, and the car, a Buick, my father's

last before he died, was beginning to shift against the current. His displeasure—with what I had done to his inheritance—was palpable, the taste of blood coating my mouth.

"I was distracted," I said, scrambling out of my seat belt. The bank was packed dirt, but wet and slippery, and climbing it was no easy matter. A primitive form of life rising from the ooze, hands and feet, elbows and knees. Three cows stood placidly by, thoughtfully observing from the other side of the ditch bank. Thank God for cell phones.

"Moron," I heard my father say. "Space cadet."

"I'm open to new experience." I spit out a tooth. "Is that such a bad thing?"

"You never could focus. Always lost in your own little world. Nothing but fantasies."

"I could never figure things out. Not like you could."

"Ha," he snorted, one of the courtroom tactics calculated to rattle me, his most recalcitrant witness. "You just didn't apply yourself."

An old argument, my failure in law school, where I couldn't get through the most elementary course in contracts. I sat in classrooms late at night, surrounded by the drone of precedent and statute but listening for a melody no one else could hear. I lasted most of the first semester until I started having breathing problems. The classroom door closed, my chest tightened, and I'd have to get away, a prisoner escaping his keepers and cell.

"You had the mind," my father grumped.

A tow truck idled next to the ditch, red lights blinking above the cab, the driver hooking cables to the undercarriage of my father's former car.

"But not the heart," I said. "I never did."

The one decision that pleased my father was my marriage. Jenna, he said, had enough gumption for both of us. My mother approved of Jenna as well, for similar reasons.

"She'll keep your feet on the ground, Charlie," my mother said. We were sitting on the patio across from each other, our drinks on the glass-topped table serving as intermediaries. "You need that, you know. Otherwise you're liable to float away. I've been afraid one of these days I'd look up at the sky, and it would be: 'Oh, look, there goes Charlie.' Jenna won't let that happen."

A tax attorney for Nieboldt, Brand, and Marcus, Jenna spent that first evening tossing back slugs of Johnnie Walker with my father and trading stories about the worst judgments they'd ever received while my mother started a preliminary guest list for the wedding. I wandered the backyard, watching the shadows of the palm trees make fingers along the back fence, before taking off my shoes, rolling

up my pants legs and sticking my feet into the swimming pool, hoping the water would be more than just wet.

It wasn't.

No matter that it chucked against the tiles like laughter, the pool lights playing hide-and-seek in the folds of its surface, or that it burped in the skimmers, the water was only wet.

No more nor less than the water that poured from my father's Buick when the tow truck lowered the back end down in our driveway. Why should I have expected anything different?

Jenna watched from the front door, her hands on her hips. "Forget to look at the road again?" she said. "Take the turnoff for the highway to heaven?"

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Which is not to say I was so otherworldly that I neglected everything, Jenna's feelings notwithstanding. I'm not some kook who, certain that the end of the world will happen on January 17, sells his house and heads to the mountains to wear buckskin and eat berries. As you know, I had a wife, but I also had a job, a mortgage, and after this last incident, car payments. A life like any other. Maybe that was the problem. The ordinariness, the conformity. Maybe I was just looking for something to make life different.

I drove to work every day. I paid my bills. Did I mention that I'm an appraiser of vineyards and orchards, ranches, and other small farms near the foothills of the Sierra? No? Forgive me. After my failure in law school, I went to work for a bank. I was supposed to become the assistant appraiser, but the man assigned to train me had a heart attack and died. There were several mix-ups in the wake of his death, and to make a long story short, the bank manager sent me to evaluate an orchard in Sanger. This, in spite of my protests that I knew next to nothing. I tromped through the trees and in and out of barns for three hours, I sweated rivers, and I was no closer to an appraisal than I was when I arrived. I totaled estimates twelve different ways and never arrived at the same answer twice. Finally, at my wits' end, a figure popped into my head with more authority than any of the numbers at the end of any one of my columns, and I penciled it in with a shaky hand, deciding I could update my resume later.

Imagine my surprise when no repercussions were forthcoming. The manager nodded to me the next morning and each morning thereafter, and within a month my paycheck included a substantial raise. Herein the other part of the problem: the bank and those who employ me believe that my assessment is based on acreage, soil quality, condition of the outbuildings, equipment, etc., but in reality, I rarely do more than step over a fence and sniff the air and run my fingers

through the field grass. It doesn't take long to know whether or not an acre of Thompsons is worth the investment. The verdict announces itself in the air. It sounds rather precious, I know, and I can no more explain my method to myself than I can to anyone else, but after fifteen years, although they can hardly be called rational analysis, my appraisals have become the standard by which other appraisals are based. I am successful—*wouldn't that be a surprise to my father?*—an accomplishment without intention.

So day after day, I drive into farmland, an expert who knows nothing but his own intuition, and risk losing consciousness over the sight of a brown horse foraging in the green tufts of spring, certain that something essential is about to be revealed. (Though, to be honest, I have always been disappointed.) And at night, I drive home, tracing the rocky course of the Kings River, and watch the sun set, a deflated old basketball disappearing into the purple veil of dust and haze. Is it any wonder that some evenings I come home convinced that I *almost* saw something beyond the thing itself?

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And yet this is what's puzzling: sometime last year, I had an appointment with an elderly widow. She was buying an orchard from the grandson of old friends, Nathan Albright. I knew Nathan. We had gone to high school together, where he was known as something of a shmuck and a fool. He burned off his eyebrows in chemistry class—twice. His girlfriend turned up pregnant our junior year. He quit school, got a job, and his girlfriend gave birth to twins. His grandfather died, and with the inheritance, he bought a doughnut shop which went bankrupt six months later. His mother died, and he bought an orchard, although he knew nothing about farming. Mrs. Caldwell had no interest in the orchard. She was only buying it so she could lease it back at a fraction of its true cost. He needed the money; she needed the write-off. What could be better?

However, she insisted that I meet with her before doing the appraisal, an irregularity that caused Jenna to raise her eyebrows.

"The old lady has her hooks out for you," she said, laughing. "You'll be hanging onto the doorknob and she'll be throwing bedsheets over your head."

"She's seventy-two," I said.

"And you are naive."

"She has a dozen grandkids."

"All the more reason," she said, snapping shut her briefcase. "Be careful. Be very careful."

I backed out of the garage in my new tank of a Navigator, Jenna's gift to me, the peal of her laughter ringing in my ears.

Mrs. Caldwell's house was in Fig Garden, an unincorporated area within the city limits of Fresno. Dwarfed by its tall, unmanaged cedars and without the severity of sidewalks or curbs, Fig Garden does not resemble the cookie-cutter neighborhoods elsewhere in town. The houses, set back from the street by deep lawns and thick hedges of oleander, have aged gracefully, slumping a bit at the corners, perhaps, like your uncle's mustache, but managing a cheerful senescence nonetheless.

A note on Mrs. Caldwell's front door informed me that she was in the backyard, and that I should come through the gate by her detached garage. From somewhere deep inside the house a dog began to bark. I stepped off the porch and around to the back where a radio was playing and water was running.

Mrs. Caldwell was swimming laps in a black keyhole-shaped pool, a slow water-churning stroke followed by an arthritic flip turn at each end. I let myself through the gate and sat in one of the Adirondacks on the patio, watching her plow the water. Back and forth, back and forth. The robotic nature of the exercise seemed somehow futile and without hope.

"Oh, Charlie, you made it. So good of you to come. And so far out of your way."

She stepped out of the water, nearly six feet tall, and pulled a robe around her shoulders. Once considered elegant, she was now, however, only skeletal, with gray, gun-metal hair clipped schoolboy short. Seeing her, I might have been looking at a preview of Jenna thirty years hence. Have I mentioned that Jenna was once a model? That her posture is always correct? No? Forgive me yet again. Jenna was once a model. Which means that, like Mrs. Caldwell in her prime, she is tall for a woman and extremely thin, a narrow waist and hips, and if it weren't for a surgical enhancement, little more to her bust than there is to mine. She can wear anything, and if shoulder pads are incorporated into the design so much the better. You should see her, thing of beauty that she is, in front of a judge; with her high cheekbones and her honey-colored hair pulled back, she appears severe, ethereal, but she has a way of turning her attention over to others in a way that hands over her beauty as well. Impossible to resist. She was once a model, until she encountered a tax problem that cost her five thousand dollars in tax money and twenty-five grand in legal fees, and then she became a lawyer. A ferocious one, so I've been told.

We met during my brief stay in law school. She had given a lecture on the history of tax law, and there was a reception afterwards in the faculty commons. I should mention, by the way, that not only is she three inches taller than I am she is nine years older, and although she has no more illusions about my abilities than my parents had, she has a tolerance where I am concerned that must be love. Of

some kind anyway. I had been hired for the evening to serve hors d'oeuvres, and she saw me in my white waiter's jacket, standing in a corner of the room by myself, eating the canapés before I could circulate among the guests.

"Hungry?" she asked.

My mouth was full. I nodded, offering her the tray.

"Well," she said, "this has been a lovely event."

I had not attended her lecture, and my sense of imprisonment was in full gallop even here at the party. There was no way I could have faked agreement. And then there was this surreal creature accosting me in my corner.

"I hate law school and every single one of these people," I swallowed. "It's choking the life out of me."

"A common reaction. We all suffer from it."

As it turned out, the lecture had been anything but lovely. The audience had been dull and uninterested, and the professor who had invited her to speak, an old boyfriend from whom she had parted unpleasantly, had acted badly, and if he started anything at the party, she swore there would be consequences.

"Let's get out of here," she said. We had polished off the last of the shrimp, and she handed me a napkin. "Wipe your mouth. Do you have a car?"

"Sure."

"Dickhead picked me up. He probably knew I'd bail out of here otherwise. Let's go."

We left through the kitchen; I kept my jacket, she left her coat, not quite an even trade, but there was no way in hell she was going back to retrieve it tonight.

I unlocked the passenger door of a Buick Regal, just one of the many cars my father gave me over the years.

"This is your car? This is something Nixon would drive. Jesus Christ, Nixon's car."

"My father gave it to me."

"Of course he did. And he's never owned a convertible, has he? Here, give me the keys. I'll drive."

We barreled north on 99 as far as Merced with the windows down and the chill February air pouring in. The only reason we stopped was Highway Patrolman Cardenas, who had clocked us doing one hundred and ten and watched us weaving back and forth among the semis and tractor-trailers. Jenna pulled to the shoulder, rolled down her window, and beamed a smile into the darkness. Soon enough we were on our way south, albeit more slowly, with only the mildest of warnings.

"Would it surprise you to know I've never gotten a ticket?" she said. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty-two."

"A baby," she sighed, "who hates law school."

"Yes."

"Poor little snookums."

Once off the highway, she stopped the car in a new development on the north end of town. Hers was the only completed house on the street, and the framed skeletons of houses-to-be stood outlined against the dark sky like the aftermath of disaster. Earth movers and backhoes posed like museum dinosaurs underneath the streetlights.

"Well, you are coming in, aren't you?"

There was something a little frightening about the insistence of her invitation. "It's pretty late."

"Oh, please. There's a hot tub on my back deck and a beautiful view of the stars." She threw me the car keys. "I could use a little pick-me-up, but it's your choice."

Is there anything more flattering than being seduced? To be wanted by someone else, in this case, someone so beautiful I found myself rubbing my eyes lest she disappear.

I followed her into the house. She led me upstairs to her bedroom, where she tilted my face up to her own. The kiss was sweet, but—forgive me, Jenna—tainted by the tired breath of a long evening.

She disappeared into the bathroom, and I inspected the books by the side of her bed, paperbacks in glossy, metallic covers that one buys in supermarkets then throws away half-read, while on her dresser was a litter of make-up—tubes and jars, little pots and squeeze bottles—a graphic reminder that even the most angelic creatures must leave their gross residue behind.

Emerging from the bathroom in a thick robe, she indicated with yet another kiss that it was my turn, that she would be waiting for me out on the deck.

Unbuttoning my clothes, my fingers shook. I ran water in the sink and splashed my face, yet nothing relieved my sense that I was about to faint or that my next breath would be my last. Think what you will. I stumbled back into the bedroom, my eyes straining to make out the bed, the dresser, the frame of the sliding glass door now opened to the deck outside.

Her disembodied voice murmured against the darkness: "Lose the boxers, please. We don't need to stand on ceremony, do we? I thought we were friends."

Obedient to her wishes, I shrugged off my shorts and stepped into the spa aware only of the tingle of cool air and hot water on skin, but to watch Jenna rising from the steam and the dark circle of water was a revelation beyond the capacity of language, my senses cascading toward meltdown. I couldn't have told you whose mind I was in, never mind the hot tub, the stars, my own stiffening flesh, and although the sensation did not and could not last, fifteen years later, I catch myself on occasion disbelieving my good fortune, even if I can now admit to myself that Jenna's choosing me was closer to a random act than otherwise; I was simply the first male who wasn't pursuing her, my foolishness so awkwardly displayed. Despite the power she wields over others, she believes such effects dubious, a counterfeit of the truth, her faith reserved for anyone but herself. How else to explain this permanent rendezvous, a one-night stand of fifteen years' duration?

When she straddled me that night, she did not understand that in our coupling I was prepared for translation, hers or my own, that the air like opaque glass might shatter, revealing heaven for itself. We yelped and trembled, quivered and moaned under the patient dome of inky night sky. But even I knew that, although nearby, God would remain safely disguised.

Jenna herself provided the coda for the evening. We were spent, drowsing in her bed, when she yawned, saying:

"You are a very nice boy, yes, very nice. And very much a boy. I'll never need to have children."

And if over the course of the years we have disappointed each other by what we hope or expect to see, it is no one's fault, neither one of us to blame.

We are, after all, only human.

* * *

Where was I? Jenna, yes. And Mrs. Caldwell, who, upon rising from the water of her pool, reminded me of my wife.

"I apologize for bringing you all the way out here, but there was something we need to discuss before you inspect Nathan's orchards."

"Mrs. Caldwell, I really can't talk about an appraisal before—"

She waved one hand in the air. "Of course not. I wouldn't presume. But I'm not asking to benefit from the situation, Charlie. Nathan is the grandson of my best friend, and sometimes I think he must have been born under a dark star. Everything falls apart for the poor boy. But he's something like a godson, and although he's a terrible farmer—so terrible, even I can tell he's terrible—and I would like to do as much for him and his family as I can within the bounds of business. Charity is not good for a friendship. You do understand, don't you?"

She was asking me to be as generous as possible with regard to my evaluation of his property.

"I know Nathan," I said.

She sighed. "You don't have to warn me about the possibilities. Or the consequences. I will be an absentee landlord with unimproved property, and Nathan will not know who owns it."

"The higher my assessment, the higher your taxes will be. You can pay whatever price he'll accept, you know."

"I'm aware of the ramifications, but I'd rather I was compelled to pay his price."

"I'll have to be reasonable."

"Of course. And remember: Nathan is not to know."

"I'll see what I can do."

Nathan would not realize that his godmother was not the fairy variety, but flesh and blood. Or he might suspect Mrs. Caldwell's role, but choose to believe in good fortune instead. Either way, metaphor is a lie, clouding instead of illuminating. I left Mrs. Caldwell's backyard, assuring her of my best intentions all the while harboring a sense of oppression. A sense that was not lifted by the sight of Nathan's orchards. I could tell you that the loveliness of the spring day was replaced by dark clouds and the threat of rain, and that the weather acted in accordance with my mood, but that would only be a convention and untrue. The sky was blue. One cloud, a lustrous white, sailed like a balloon above the mountains.

But standing along both sides of the highway were orange groves whose floor was carpeted with the damaged fruit of last December's freeze. The temperatures dropped below freezing for a week and thousands of laborers were left without their usual subsistence. And on the southwest corner of Nathan's orchard there was the blackened hulk of the former owner's house; consistent with Nathan's luck, the house had burned down three weeks after he and his family moved in. Faulty wiring, investigators said. They have neither knocked it down nor have they rebuilt—there was some problem with the insurance—and they have lived for the past five years in a single-wide trailer in the opposite corner of their parcel. One reaches their door only by a dusty, two-track path that leads a half-mile away from the ruin that was all too briefly their home.

I stopped the car before I was one hundred feet down Nathan's driveway. Dust billowed around me on all sides. Without my opening a window or a door, without a single look at soil or branch, a number, impossibly low, was already suggesting itself. Mrs. Caldwell would not be pleased. On one side of the car track

were peaches, on the other nectarines. Both sides were equally neglected, poorly pruned, nearly wild, their blossoms in this time of noisy color looking impossibly glum. Even the bees, hovering above their boxes, seemed dispirited, uninterested in the mean fare above their heads. Ahead through the trees, I could see the trailer and hear the piping of high voices. Besides the twins, who are long past high school, Nathan has two more children under the age of five, and I could imagine the scene: the children at play, their dilapidated trailer the backdrop, rusty farm tools their props, acting out roles their lives would never offer.

I backed out onto the road; if anyone saw me, I was just a stray motorist who had made a wrong turn. I stopped on the shoulder of an orange grove littered with damaged fruit and filled out the appraisal form, including an estimate of worth that was at least twenty-five percent higher than the truth. Even at that, the figure would not entirely satisfy Mrs. Caldwell's wishes, but it would have been impossible to do more. Generosity has always seemed to me to be a noble thing, but the gesture gave me no pleasure.

Near Nathan's farm, Riverbend Road runs up and over the fingers of the Sierrita foothills. The orchards here are well-tended, beautifully cultivated despite the undulations of the topography. In a valley so flat as ours, deviations from the typical landscape are welcome and inviting, and teenagers take advantage of these minor hills to race their cars where—on the downhill side of the crest—it is possible to get all four wheels off the ground. I understand the impulse, the sense of freedom, of translation, when one loses contact with the earth, but every spring there is some bloody accident involving a cheerleader or a member of the debating society or student body secretary, some child in a ten-year-old Camaro with primer spots who for one moment listens to his or her blood rather than parental caution. The newspaper will run a photograph of twisted, jagged metal against a backdrop of fruit trees or vines. A body bag may or may not be seen, but the message is clear.

No doubt my brief visit to Nathan's farm was the reason behind my particular impulse: I floored the heavy Navigator, and we were airborne. My own cautions were alerted for an instant, but only for an instant, and then it was too late. Visions of tragedy appeared unbidden: a retired farmer crossing the road to check his mail; a dog warming himself on the asphalt; a pickup two feet over the center line; a car turning left into an orchard driveway. A price would be exacted, I was sure.

But as it turned out, my visions were only the shadows of reflected fire, nothing realized. My only witness was a young woman with a bright yellow knapsack, her mouth agape, watching my flight from the safety of an orange grove, a young

woman who waved her arms at me, running after me to flag me down, until the Navigator, bouncing on its stiff springs, skidded to a stop.

"That was beautiful," she shouted when she reached my door. "You were flying. Really flying."

"I don't know what came over me." The landing had left me a bit breathless, and perhaps I was more truthful than I had intended. "It was a stupid thing to do. I'm usually very cautious. I'm not a good driver."

"Oh?"

"I sometimes forget what I'm doing."

Below the knees, her blue jeans were full of orchard mud, and her jacket was ripped at the shoulders and elbows, fiber fill leaking out like the Scarecrow's straw in *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Listen," she said, "I don't suppose you're heading to town, by any chance? I was just about to start walking, but then you came over the hill."

"I need to sit here for a moment."

"That's fine with me. You just say the word, I'll sit all day long. Inside, that is."

She walked around to the passenger side and climbed in, muddy boots and all, threw her knapsack into the back and closed the door. Cut short, her dark hair stuck up in dirty spikes around her face. An angel made out of mud.

"There," she said, folding her hands in her lap, "all set. My name is Maria. And who might you be?"

* * *

Shortly before he died, my father asked that I come see him. In the last stages of liver disease, he had fired off orders and issued directives, bullying everyone equally: doctors, nurses, my mother, myself. He had rejected the idea of a transplant ("You must be joking"), refused hospitalization, and forced my mother to set up a sick-room in his study downstairs. He sat up in bed and wrote threatening letters to the doctors who cowered and catered to his whims. The only person who was allowed to touch him was a three-hundred-pound hospice nurse by the name of Orlando.

"Look," he said, "don't get me wrong. You're my son all right. But you're nothing like me. And I want to know why."

I sat down next to his feet. "Jenna says I have your nose."

"Big deal. A schnozz is a schnozz."

"We share other qualities."

"Oh, come on."

"Seriously," I said, but any comparisons I could think of were pretty far-fetched.

Who was I? My father had wanted to know, and I couldn't tell him. An immortal soul encased in flesh? Or was I merely a genetic mutation, the mysterious sum of my parents' determined parts?

A few weeks later my father died, remote and furious to the very end. I inherited his Buick, which I drove into a canal. So when Maria, this little slip of a dark-haired, muddy-headed girl, asked for my name, I heard my father's voice reproaching me by the light of a wintry moon, and the question seemed more complicated than normal. The silence that followed was unbearable.

"I'm a seeker," I said at last, my voice constricted by the sensation that I was about to choke. "A watcher of the skies. A pilgrim and a wanderer. I don't know, I couldn't stand law school."

"You're a nut," she said, "but that's okay. It's sweet."

"Charlie. It's Charlie."

"We all have to take a part, you know. Take me, for example. I wanted to play for the oranges. The trees were hurt so badly, they were weeping for their children. They make a very high, keening song. Have you heard them?"

"Now who's the nut?" I said. "You're speaking metaphorically, I assume."

She sat up straight and squared her shoulders. "I have never lied to anyone," she said.

"I spend every day out here," I said, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice. "They've never sung to me. And I don't expect they ever will."

"You never know, Charlie," she said as though promises could be made. "It's so beautiful out here, so lovely. We wept together and sang together, and they thanked me for sharing their grief. Then you came flying over the hill, and I knew it was the right time to leave."

I started the Navigator, and we pulled slowly away. It was so unfair! All my life I had longed for some sort of affirmation that connections could be made, that a certain rapport might exist between myself and the spirit of God. My passenger, Little Ms. Doolittle, was singing to the trees as part of the choir, whereas I had ruined an entire, fully-functioning American car for the sake of the moon!

She retrieved her yellow knapsack from the back seat and pulled out one of those wooden flute things. A recorder, I guess they're called. "They particularly liked this," she said, "and they suggested some different arrangements."

I can't tell you the melody she played. I'd never heard it before; I've never heard it since. I didn't hear much of it anyway since about three bars into the piece I began to cry. Like the orange trees? I couldn't tell you. However, my weeping grew so violent that I had to swerve off the road and into the parking lot of a little coun-

try store that seemed to leap suddenly out of the ground in response to my need. In front of the store was the stuffed and padded figure of a man, dressed and painted as an Indian, the waves of political sensitivity having missed this backwater, his stoic countenance the witness to my unraveling.

Maria patted me on the shoulder. "Listen," she said, "I'm going inside to get a couple of things. I'll be right back."

"Fine, fine," I sniffled. What she might need I couldn't possibly guess.

"You'll be all right."

God's choice is capricious and without regard for fairness. I knew I would never be all right. I've seen *Amadeus*. I know how Salieri ends up.

* * *

Would it sound naive if I said it was my first taste of true bitterness? It's the truth and nothing but. I have been a good-natured and honest seeker my whole life. As a child, my mud pies might become birds if only I imagined them so, but I wasn't offended when they didn't rise and take wing. In college, I read all the oracular literature I could get my hands on—the Vedas, the Kabbalah, the so-called Hermetic writings—and although baffling and mysterious, such works held me in their sway. My mother was probably right: without Jenna I might have floated off for good. Not the best training for law school.

In the second book of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Poemander, the mind of the Great Lord, the most Mighty and absolute Emperor, answers the narrator, young aspirant and seeker, who "would Learn the Things that art, and Understand the Nature of them and know God":

"Have me again in thy mind, and whatsoever thou wouldst learn, I will teach thee." When Poemander had thus said, he was changed in his Idea or Form and straightway in the twinkling of an eye, all things were opened unto me: and I saw an infinite Sight, all things were become light, both sweet and exceedingly pleasant; and I was wonderfully delighted in the beholding of it.

Likewise, when Maria had played her recorder, I had understood—*straightway, no less!*—that nothing had been opened to me, and in all likelihood nothing would ever be revealed: sweet, pleasant, or otherwise. I would be muddling along for a lifetime, a blind man without a stick.

Maria returned from the store with a bulging grocery sack and a worry line denting her forehead.

"Here," she said, opening a container of orange juice and a box of Saltines. "You look like your blood sugar's a little low."

"Thanks," I said. It had been a bad winter for oranges, but you would never know it by the juice, so cold and sweet; I could feel it spreading through me like light in a dawn sky.

"Better?" she said.

"I think so."

She gave me a handful of crackers and an address in a neighborhood not far from my own—"If it's not too much trouble," she said—and lightly touched the keys hanging from the Navigator's ignition.

"Yes," I said. "We're going."

Whereupon she promptly fell asleep. As soundly and immediately as I have ever witnessed in another human being. Her head tipped back, her mouth dropped open, and a gentle snore issued forth. Her shoulders and back turned to jelly. She must not have slept for several days, and she was making up for lost time.

There is something quite profound about driving while another human being, riding alongside in the passenger seat, sleeps. A measure of trust in the good will of fellow human creatures. Putting one's fate in the hands of another. I had never spoken with the trees in anything but the most metaphorical of ways, and yet Maria saw me as the one selected to carry her home. I flew, then landed at her urging, part of God's divine order for her life. The miles slipped by. Orchards gave way to horse farms, horse farms gave way to tracts and strip malls. When I was a boy, these fields had been barren, and now they were teeming with middle management and Little Leaguers. I was ten minutes away from Maria's address when a phone began to ring, a chirping that emanated from Maria's yellow knapsack. Ordinarily, I wouldn't think of answering another person's phone, but this day had been filled with contrarian impulses.

"Yes," I said, while Maria slept on.

"Lisa?" a cigarette-roughened female voice replied.

"No," I said, "I'm a friend of Maria's, this is Maria's phone."

"Maria?" the voice said.

Other voices murmured in the background: "He says he's with Maria."

"Listen, mister, if this is some kind of game, you don't know the rules."

"What game would I play?" I was becoming annoyed, and traffic was growing heavier. I should have turned the phone off. "You must have the wrong number."

"You're with Maria?"

"That's what I said. She's asleep. Maybe you should just call her later after she gets home. She'll be there in a couple of minutes."

The line went dead. The call was unsettling, to be sure, made more unsettling by the fact that I shouldn't have answered the phone in the first place. But

ahead of me was the university with its beautiful ball fields. Then shops and those medical complexes that cater to the well-to-do. Turning north, I realized that Maria was staring at me—for how long I couldn't have told you.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "You were asleep, and I didn't want to wake you. But I shouldn't have answered your phone. Normally, I'd never do that."

"Where in the hell are you taking me?"

"Home. I'm taking you home."

"Ah, shit. Shit." She began to pull at the irregular spikes of her muddy hair. "Home. He thinks he's taking me home."

We were stopped at a traffic signal one block from her address, and she began to hit me with the sides of her balled-up fists, nothing that really hurt, mind you, but difficult to understand. She slapped at my face, and my glasses flew off.

"You cocksucker," she said. "Asshole. Son of a bitch."

"What's the matter, Maria?" I said. "What did I do, what did I do to you?"

"Maria," she said, practically spitting, then resumed her work with her fingernails. "That little bitch."

The light had turned green, but blue lights were revolving behind us, and a cop was tapping his stick against my window. Maria was peeling a layer of skin from the side of my neck.

"I think," the officer said, "it's time to exit the vehicle. You're about to be filleted."

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All was straightened out after a fashion. Maria—or Lisa, Julianna, Sophia, or Diane, she had as many names as she had personalities—was escorted into one of the two waiting squad cars, to be taken back to her room at the psychiatric hospital from which she had gone on the lam. The woman on the other end of the cell phone was Maria's ward nurse, whose responsibility it was to call every three or four hours in the hope that one of Maria's better selves would respond. After speaking with me, she had alerted the Fresno police, one of whose officers put two and two together when he saw a man in a jacket and tie being beaten by a girl made of mud.

So my latest contact with the divine was nothing more than the inspiration of the mental health ward, and as such should be considered suspect. Of course, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, that supposedly ancient treatise attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, is also something of a fraud, composed as it was in the second or third century rather than being the product of our darkest past. Its evocation of wisdom and transformation is the offspring of a wish, older maybe, but no more

powerful than our own. But as my father, that old fart, was fond of saying, Wishing doesn't make it so. If wishes were fishes . . . But you know the rest.

Thank God for cell phones.

* * *

Which reminds me: I once saw an old man wearing beautiful shoes. This was in front of the opera house in San Francisco following a performance of *Tosca*. "I have lived by art, I have lived by love," Tosca sang. I have lived on illusions; is that so much different? Tosca leaped to her death from the parapet, and Puccini's dream ended. We applauded, the lights came on, we moved slowly, Jenna and I, still in Rome, postponing our retreat into the mysteries of an ordinary night.

Shepherded by a young man and woman with walkie-talkies, the old man was among the last to exit. I don't know who he was—a former senator, perhaps, or maybe the retired CEO of a multinational corporation; I suspect, however, that he only had money. Eighty years old if he was a day, he was, nonetheless, dressed immaculately—a beautifully cut gray suit, snowy shirt, silk tie—but his shoes, ah, his shoes were perfect, and although he was obviously frail, he stepped from the theater toward a waiting limousine with the light, balletic feet of a deer. I half-expected that metamorphosis to occur in a bloom of fire. But no—he merely ducked his silver head into the darkness of the limousine, settled his rump into the cushions of the rear seat, and said something to his driver, one moment nearer the blossom of death.