

CRY

a novel

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MINNEAPOLIS

CRY: A NOVEL

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CRY

I

I try to cry but nothing comes out. I am under water; or under liquid, at least. Now I remember, and I jump out and catch my breath. Of course, I do not have a body yet and so I don't need to breathe, but old habits die hard.

I'd like to give you a name so you can call me something, but my mother hasn't named me yet. She doesn't know if I will be a boy or a girl, and somewhere inside she wonders if I will come out of her alive, and somewhere deeper inside she wonders if she wants me to come out of her alive at all. But she is young, and I won't hold that against her.

That is a joke, because I know quite well that when my future flesh meets the air, I will be pulled into this new organism with irresistible force, and I will remember nothing of what I can now feel. Certainly, some impressions will

remain, and they will manifest themselves over the course of my life. Perhaps I will be a horse trainer or a taxi driver, and when they invent a machine that can decipher the marks left by nine months in the womb, they will say, “Look, no wonder she became a submarine commander or a teacher of Spanish proverbs.”

There are no immediate signs of the time and place of my soon-to-begin fleshy life, but I do have a strong sense (always accurate, in my experience—yes, I have been through this before) that I will be born in the first half of the twenty-first century. This will be the latest, most “modern” period which I will have experienced in my several incarnations. Of course, given the non-sequential nature of time, I could very well have chosen to be born to a woman in the year 3941 or 7322, and perhaps I will choose that experience next.

But perhaps I won’t, because perhaps there will not be a next time for me. Don’t look so sad and horrified—that does not mean “The End!” Despite what some of your religions may tell you (and I include “Science” in my list of religions), the personality does exist before and after physical death, the personality does experience multiple physical lives, and we are most definitely not condemned to be reborn again and again. When and how the cycle of rebirth ends is not important right now. Let’s just stop at the “we all live multiple-lives” bit for the time being. This is not a physics lesson, and it certainly isn’t a lecture on religion or spirituality.

So let me continue by saying this: I will need your help. Whoever you are. I am putting these words out there for some enterprising, or perhaps unaware, person to stumble

upon and make of them what feels right. They will hang in the ether as amorphous energy. Perhaps they will serve as the raw material for a song, a play, a painting, a discounted-cash-flow model for an insurance company, a new type of oven-mitt, a fresh flavor of bubble gum, a pleasing pattern of wallpaper, a higher-potency toilet bowl cleaner. Perhaps.

Most likely, however, they will find their way into a book, and that book will find its way to you, my helper.

The kind of help I need will be clear later. For now, all I need is for someone to listen. And yes, I'm talking to you, oven mitt designer, bubble gum chemist, playwright trapped in the million-dollar-a-year job of an investment analyst . . . I'm talking to you.

Although I can imagine you quite clearly, you may not be so clear on who or what or where I am. Let me say one or two things about it.

Right now I am simply a personality without a body, a packet of consciousness waiting for my vessel to be readied and launched out into the physical world where I will take command and do my best to navigate the seas of three-dimensional experience and accomplish what I have set for myself. My “plans” might seem trivial to some of you, ambitious to others. I will get to that later. For now let’s stick with the where and what.

Now, I have chosen to join my new mother at a fairly early stage in the development of the fetus, though by no means is my choice atypical. Some personalities are very anxious

to get back “into it,” so to speak, and may choose to take up residence in their new home at the point of conception itself. Others may not be so enthusiastic about “real world” experience, and might wait until the last possible moment to plunge in. And many—myself included—fall somewhere in between these extremes: We prefer to be around the mother but also remain at arm’s length from her and her changing body.

The fetus itself is the focal point, and so when I chose to find my way to my new coordinates, I was drawn directly into it—quite rapidly in this case, which is why I experienced the momentary sensation of being submerged. Now I am focused at a point outside the mother—my mother, I suppose.

It is a nice vantage point, this no man’s land. The experience of being within the womb itself is interesting and vivid, but I have been through it before and have no need to live through it once again. The in-womb experience is intimate and narrow in the sense that cellular-level consciousness is very dominant as the limbs and organs begin to develop, and so the experience is, shall we say, very introspective in a physical, visceral, fundamental way.

This time around my experience is set to be broader, and so I am playing a much more active role in both my own development as well as . . . actually, let’s keep it focused on me, on my past.

Previous comments about the illusory nature of sequential time notwithstanding, there are some correspondences between various lives a personality experiences as it develops. Certainly, we all experience each side of human relationships and sexuality, and so in our foray into the flesh we

experience being male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, mother, father, sister, brother, friend, and enemy.

My early incarnations are only hints of memories to me now, like faded old photographs perhaps, but more like last month's milk in the back of the pantry: useless to me now, but still adding an unmistakable flavor to my environment. See, the first few incarnations are very focused on the most simplistic forms of manipulation within space and time, using physical matter. You know these kinds of people—the kind who seem inexplicably eager to work with their hands, to build things, sometimes to break things. Like a child who is fascinated by its own urine and feces, a “fresh” incarnate is often consumed by wonder at the feats he or she is able to perform with just a little bit of imagination and some forceful action.

This is not to say that such cosmic “children” are less intelligent or capable. Indeed, in many cases, these people may turn out to be extremely enterprising and successful in the right fields—they are equally likely to be world-class architects, engineers, or artists as they are to be mediocre bicycle mechanics, bricklayers, or welders.

My first few incarnations, unfortunately, contained no such experiences. The earliest one I care to think about was as a rather bland, homely French girl in the late 1400s. Sometimes I wonder if it was a mistake to choose that particular experience. But I know now that although destiny is not as rigid as one might think, it is still accurate to say that there are no real “mistakes” when it comes to such things.

I died at the age of thirteen, without ever kissing a boy or

reading a book or even wandering beyond the boundaries of my small village in the northeast of the country. We had a wretched little farm, and most of my time was spent in the field with my brother and a three-legged cow. We grew a few things, but our land was fallow, with many barren patches. Cursed, my mother used to say. She'd say that about the land, but maybe I thought she spoke of me, because on the ninth day of May I drowned myself in the stagnant pool at the end of our property.

It was a fairly exciting end to a very boring life, and I can now recall watching my mother and father and brother and even Brie, my little crippled cow, after they found me. (It is odd that I only care to remember the cow's name.) No one cried, but I could "see" their sadness from where I stood. It was pleasing, in some strange way. And looking back now, I suppose the experience was educational in some sense. Maybe the message was: "Life is dull and barren and then you die."

Hah! No such luck with the next set of lives. After a few more nondescript incarnations that I'll spare you from, it is clear as I review things that the next big leap in my development was when I lived as a woman in India in the late 1800s. I grew up in a town called Nasik—really just a village (what is it about being a woman in a village that has stuck with me after all these lives, I wonder). My childhood was hectic and loud because I had several siblings and even more cousins, all of us crammed together in a large (but not large enough) bungalow on the main street (just a dirt road) of Nasik. My father was a landowner, and he owned several acres of space that was rented out for warehousing and

retail. (Nasik was a popular stop on the way to Bombay, and many travelers passed through, and many businesses kept some inventory there.)

I was married off at age thirteen (not unusual) to a boy almost five years my senior. I actually knew him from the area, perhaps because his family was of similar stature in the neighboring village and our families got together once or twice when I was younger. He was a nice boy and we were married almost four years before I got pregnant.

This was a fairly big deal, I can see now. In that time and place it was expected that a girl deliver her first child within a year or two of marriage, and when this did not happen, it caused some worry in the families, especially my birth family.

See, I was lucky enough to have married into a family where my husband and mother-in-law were decent and reasonable people with enough fire in them to defy tradition to some extent. My new mother-in-law had three sons, and I feel like she was pleased to think she had an actual daughter, so she treated me like her own. She placed me in a separate room that adjoined her own, and told both my husband and me in no uncertain terms that I was to remain a virgin until age seventeen.

My father-in-law grumbled about this, but he was a busy enough man and did not interfere with matters of the family and household to any great degree, especially if it involved going up against his wife. And my husband, although a bit disappointed, was also relieved in some way, I feel. I do remember being a very slight girl with narrow shoulders and narrower hips, and even to a horny teenage boy I must have looked like a child.

Still, I was becoming a woman too, and soon enough my husband and I became better acquainted with one another to the point that I actually got pregnant when I was still sixteen, several months before the seventeen-year mark set by my mother-in-law. She did not mind, though, because it was clear by then that we had fallen in love (which, oddly, is often the case when you are given no choice about whom to love—a wonderful thing, in some sense, because it means that any human is capable of developing love for any other human).

News of my pregnancy was received with great relief by my own father, who had written me off as damaged goods after two full years of sulking that I had not produced anything. (My mother-in-law had not told anyone outside her immediate family about the situation—sometimes it is better for the gossipers to blame biological determinism rather than tradition-mocking free will.) At one point my father told me point blank that if my new family demanded more dowry as payment for handing over a barren girl, he would say no. I did not ask what that meant because I was not worried. But I can see now that it did register, it did leave its mark.

Many children followed, one each year for three years, and then a set of triplets—very unusual in those times and taken to be a sign from Laxmi, the town's favorite goddess. So by age twenty-one I was the happy mother of seven children: two boys and five girls. Needless to say, the next decade-and-a-half was a collage of the smells and sounds of childhood. I felt like a cow, and was shocked at how much milk I could produce, at times almost wishing I had another set of nipples for my hungry babies.

Those were joyful days, as I examine them now, and al-

though I can reach in and pull out specific events and occasions, dilemmas and decisions, I much prefer to view those years from far above, like looking down on a cloud, breathing in its mist, taking delight in the wonderful shape and texture of the cloud in its entirety and not dissecting it for individual raindrops or hailstones.

The rest of that life had its share of ups and downs, ins and outs, curves and straightaways. Still, it was an overwhelmingly positive life; I lived until I was well past sixty, and I died with many children and grandchildren around, all of them crying. There was sadness in the room, but it looked nothing like the sadness I had seen when I died alone in that pond during that first set of incarnations. This sadness was like what one might feel at the end of a satisfying book or film, when the story is done and any attempt to prolong it would only diminish its effect.

This story, on the other hand, is only just beginning, and so please indulge me as I reminisce a bit more.

3

Reminisce is an odd word to use, it now occurs to me. The word itself has mostly positive connotations in normal usage—one typically reminisces about good times, of happier days, perhaps running in the park with your first dog. You wouldn't "reminisce" about the day you came home to find old Spot convulsing in a pool of his own urine now, would you?

Forgive me. It is a rude image. My point here is this: Many of my previous lives were filled with pain and grief, loss and want, anger and unfulfillment, and although it is hard for anyone to call such experiences "positive" (and thereby reminisce about them), the truth is that now I can look back and see how those lives have contributed to the composite entity that currently forms these words in the secret space of my new mother's bedroom. So it is an odd word to use, but still apt.

And so perhaps it is also apt that I illustrate this by “reminiscing” about a particularly difficult early incarnation, and one that set me up for a series of comfortable and reticent subsequent lifetimes. I paid some dues on that one, so to speak.

The dates for this are hard for me to state with any specificity, but you can safely assume it was well over a thousand years before the experiences just described. (Now, it may be confusing that a lifetime that “follows” one set in the 1800s can actually be lived in 1081 A.D. or 54 B.C., but even if I fully understood the intricacies of how time and consciousness interact, I doubt I would be able to explain it in words. Still, because we are all in this same cosmic soup, I think many of you will intuitively grasp how this seemingly illogical sequence can be possible even if you cannot explain it. Like my old friend Nietzsche once said—and I paraphrase—“You might see the answer in a flash of insight, but it could take your entire lifetime to write it down in a way that others might see what you saw.” Well, it has been many lifetimes and I still cannot adequately explain what I feel I understand. For now, just bear with me. And for the record, Nietzsche was not really a friend—I only saw him once, at a banquet, and he was very rude to me. I was working there as a server and had just spilled something red on his white shirt, and so we did not meet in the best of circumstances.)

But just so I do not veer too far off track: It is old Greece and we are on the banks of the Mediterranean sea, on the outskirts of Athens. I am a slave—a boy of thirteen or fourteen, very pale and thin, certainly not suited for much heavy labor in the moist sunlight of the countryside. My owners

are a middle-class couple. The master is a travelling tradesman and the mistress spends her days idle in the home. I was offered to the master as partial payment for a shipment of goods, and from what I remember, the master was happy to receive me. The man who gave me up as payment was happy too, and so perhaps I was one of those things that makes both parties of a trade feel like they got the better deal.

Truth is, I wondered at the time why my new master was so pleased to get me. After all, I was clearly of very weak stock, and had been told this repeatedly by my previous master as he cursed me for taking up valuable space in his slave quarters:

“You are too weak to lift stones or dig the ground, and your skin is so white that you will not last even one afternoon in the open,” my old master would say as the other slaves, many of them tall and thick and brown and bronze, laughed as if it were a fine thing to be complimented for their ability to be good slaves. “You are too ugly and stupid to be useful as a house slave, and you barely speak the language of the country. To even have a chance of selling you for a good price would require me to first feed you more and then invest in some education, and I am willing to do neither without guarantee of return. I will try and sell you at the marketplace over the next few months, but most of the slave-buyers in these parts are smart enough to see that you will be more of a burden than anything, and I wonder if I will even be able to give you away.”

I often felt like asking him why he had acquired me in the first place, but it would have been a rhetorical question because I knew how I had come to him: He had murdered my parents when I was twelve years old.

My old master ran an inn with his wife on the road between Sparta and Athens, and my parents and I had stopped there to rest. At my father's insistence, we were walking from our village (a place called Theros) along that famous road to Sparta as a show of faith to the gods.

Now, things have not changed so much from the Greece of a thousand years ago, and showing your faith to the gods by voluntarily undertaking something difficult and painful is usually done when you want something from the gods. And we did want something—at least my father did.

See, my father had been a soldier in the Greek army. He was stationed in the northern reaches of the empire, where he met my mother and where I was born and raised, which is why I did not speak Greek very well. After a career-ending injury received in a training accident, we moved back to Greece, and my father started to spend a lot of time at home, a lot of time with me, watching me grow, assuming I would fulfill his aspirations of greatness in combat (or something!). *His* aspirations.

But whatever weakness had made my father susceptible to a devastating injury during routine training had been passed on to me and perhaps multiplied along the way (or so my father said), and he decided that my height and weight at age eleven (or twelve or thirteen—the numbers are not so clear now, but let's call it thirteen) were alarming and needed some intervention by Zeus and the pantheon. It would be a four-day walk from Theros to Sparta, the city-state of the legendary Spartan warriors, and this seemed like sufficient hardship for the two of us to bear under the approving eye of the gods.

My mother had insisted on accompanying us, despite my father's violent protests. Truth is, he protested so loudly because he was somewhat relieved that she would be there. See, my mother was the healthiest of the three of us at the time (healthier perhaps in both mind and matter): I was still a child and my father had limited control over one side of his body, and so he shuffled as he walked.

My mother, on the other hand, stood straight and sturdy, and she glided rather than walked, it seemed to me. She was not Greek but from the northern tribes of Europe, a small group of which had made their way down and past the borders of the empire. The Greeks called them Varangians, but you would know those Norsemen as the Vikings. Perhaps this explained my excessive paleness, although I was significantly less ruddy than she.

Looking back now, I can see the three of us on that road to Sparta, my mother and I walking slowly to keep pace with my father who was shuffling and wincing (not from pain, but from self-consciousness because we were an odd trio of humanity that made a few heads turn as we moved by). I resembled neither parent, and I could tell even then that people stared at my mother—who stood a full head above my father as he stooped—and then me and wondered what connection the three of us could possibly have.

We walked all day that first day with only a handful of stops for food and rest. At night we slept at the wayside when we came across a group of travelers who had set up camp. We did not speak to them, but simply settled ourselves close enough to their group that we would be safe from robbers and such.

By that second morning I had developed a fever, and al-

though I attempted to hide it (after all, the point was to persevere through hardship, and I could see how important this was to my father), my mother noticed almost immediately when she awoke. Still, she understood better than anyone why we were doing this, and so she said nothing to my father and just smiled at me and arranged a head-dress on me to shield me from the sun as we continued our journey.

Soon it was clear that I needed to stop—clear to my mother at least. And so, at our next pause for rest, she put on a troubled expression and implored my father that we take a room at an inn we could see down the road.

“Just for the afternoon and the night,” she said, perhaps coughing a bit, maybe even holding her midriff. “I am not well and need to rest.”

“We can rest here,” my father said as he pointed at some crude seating arranged under a makeshift cloth roof not far from the stall where we obtained some water.

“I need a room, a bed,” my mother said, and she said it loud enough that others near us turned to look.

The journey was supposed to be completed without leaving the road, my father had said, and I was certain that he would not agree to my mother’s request and that I would surely faint on the road that afternoon, perhaps even die. Maybe they will be relieved, I remember thinking. Perhaps even now my mother looks at me and wonders if I did indeed come from her womb, from her line of Norwegian peasants who break through ice as thick as walls in the winter so they can fish the frozen fjords, I told myself.

Maybe it will be more of a relief to her than anyone, I sud-

denly thought as I caught her looking at me with an odd smile, a smile of resignation, an acceptance of the futility of fighting fate.

But most of all, I realized as I smiled back at her, it might be a relief to me.

The inn was a clean enough place, really just someone's home that had been converted into a boarding house of sorts where travelers could spend a night or two. As we walked in we could see a large open room with sleeping mats arranged in neat rows, a few of those beds occupied by slumbering bodies. I wanted to run to one of those hard mats and fling myself onto it and fall into sleep, but my father looked at my mother and shook his head.

"This is not a place we can stop," he said. "This is no place for a woman."

"We have three rooms upstairs," a man called out.

A tall, thin man emerged from a back room, wiping his hands with a cloth that could not possibly be cleaner than his hands. He smiled and I counted four teeth where there should have been more.

"We only need one," my mother said, quickly and with a smile.

"Oh?" the man said, and he raised an eyebrow as he eyed the three of us, studying our sun-dried faces and sweat-soaked robes. Then he shook his head. "The rooms are for two. Two people in a room. No more than two."

"Sir," my mother said. "One room will be enough space for the three of us."

"No," the man said, and he shook his head again.

My mother was about to say something else, or perhaps the same thing with more force, when my father interrupted.

"I will stay here," he said, pointing carelessly at the large open room with the lined-up sleeping mats. "The two of them will have the room."

The innkeeper grunted and nodded, almost pleased. He went to a wooden table where a smooth slate lay flat, and he made a mark on it with a piece of charcoal. Pulling a large key-ring from under his robe, he jingled it like a jailer and signaled for us to follow him.

My father made his way to the stairs, but my mother stopped him.

"We will be fine," she said to him quietly. "You rest."

He nodded as if to acknowledge being relieved of the need to shuffle his twisted body up the winding stairs and then back down again, and he touched me on the shoulder as I walked past him. That little show of affection, surprising in its tenderness, was the last I saw of my father, and is another memory that serves as a reminder to me that we are all aware at some level when death is close, and we all say our goodbyes in some way.

And my mother said goodbye in her way.

"Goodbye," she said.

She always said that to me before I went to bed. Something about how sleep is a time when you journey back to the greater reality that is your true home, your source.

She watched me from near the door. "Sleep now," she said.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"I will check on your father." She smiled. "His mind is

stronger than his body these days, and it has been a hard day on the road.”

“I should have stayed down on those hard mats,” I said, suddenly. “I will stay down. I will go down.”

“No. Remain here. It is better this way.”

“But he is in pain. The soft bed will be better for him.” I was mumbling now, writhing in my bed, the fever so strong that in my mind I was standing upright and dressing myself to go down.

“A little pain is what he came here for,” she said, still smiling. “And pain always feels better after the first days of it.”

I was not sure what that meant, or even if I had heard her correctly, for I was asleep before the door closed. And that door must have been thick, or perhaps my slumber was too deep for me to hear the sounds of what took place downstairs that day. But the truth is that there would have been very little noise, because my mother was too proud to scream as those once-slumbering beasts in the main room stood up from over my father’s broken body and descended on her.

When I awoke it was dark and hot and the smell of feces and sweat was heavy in the air. There were others around me, but I did not call out to them for reassurance or reach out to them for comfort, because I knew fear and resignation well enough to know that these people were no better off than I. Although my father had attempted to teach me Greek himself when I was younger, it had not taken well. Perhaps I was not very bright. Still, I understood it well enough to piece together that we were in a place built beneath that very roadside inn, a holding area of some kind.

That night we were led through a tunnel by some lightly armed men. We walked for almost a full day underground, and when we eventually made our way out into the open it was night once more. We travelled along the backroads and animal paths until finally we were at our destination, it seemed: a large house with high walls that enclosed open lands that stretched far into the dark.

My fever seemed to have gone, and I felt clear-headed and alert, able to see true in the night, to smell the salt of the sea that must have been far from where we were, to feel the slight movement of air as it flowed and gently eddied around my ankles, and I could even hear the sounds of insects in the trees that lined our path. There was no pain in my legs or back, even though we had been walking hard on uneven ground for hours without rest.

Perhaps this is what she meant about the pain feeling better after the first days have passed, I thought.

Of course, the first days of true pain were still ahead of me, and as I think about it the prick of psychic recollection pulls me back into the now, the present, my new environment, my new room, my new mother.

4

I have not seen my new father yet, but of course I know who he is. After all, more often than not we choose our parents and they choose us. It is not unlike the preparations for the staging of a play or the filming of a movie, and any good actor will tell you that when she is on stage or under those hot lights, she often forgets that she is willingly playing a part in a cooperative venture designed to access and release certain emotions and psychic energy from all those involved. Any great actor will tell you that she feels the love or horror or pain or sadness like it is happening to her, and in fact she might only use the words “like” or “as if” in conversation so she does not seem insane, because the truth is that in the moment she *knows* it really *is* happening to her.

But now my mother is asleep and my father is not here,

and it is pointless (and boring) for me to attempt to describe this dark, empty bedroom in the midwestern United States in February, with the window kept open a crack for some fresh cold winter air to whisper its way in and join with the gentle hiss of the radiator in the corner. This will be a cold day, I think.

Hah! That is a joke, because although I am speaking with authority about the past and future (soon!), even I cannot predict the weather.

Still, before I move on, I should at least finish my little story of that white-skinned, half-Scandinavian, newly orphaned, fresh slave that I once was and still am just like each of you once was a child and still are that child is some way.

I found out later—from the other slaves—that our new master owned several roadside inns scattered throughout the land, placed just out of sight in relatively desolate spots along well-travelled roads. He would choose people based on how full the inn was and depending on the time of day—it turned out afternoons were better for him because the inns usually fill up at night. And so it was somewhat a matter of chance, like how a hunter might set traps for deer or pig, and will not complain if he picks up a rabbit or squirrel now and then.

My father had been murdered immediately because he could not have been sold as a slave. At first I assumed this was because of his physical incapacities, but later I realized it must have been because he carried an old insignia of the Greek Army on his person, and this perhaps caused some trepidation amongst his would-be captors. Possibly no one in the underground market for slaves would take a former

member of the army—I do not know. It was not such a concern, however, to rob and murder an old Greek soldier, and when someone found his body several hundred paces up the road, it would be reported and eventually disposed of without much ado.

My mother was also killed—though not quite so fast, as my new master once explained. He seemed to take particular care to explain the details, as if it was part of my training or preparation (and it was, I know now, but not in the way that either of us would understand at that time).

I will not repeat those descriptions, and it would take a terrible imagination for you to accurately picture what can happen to a beautiful, proud woman at the hands of several unwashed men who are given domain over her in the world of a thousand years ago.

“Female slaves fetch high values with some of my customers,” my master said after he watched my eyes water and my mouth tremble from hearing of the last moments of my mother, “but your mother would have been too much trouble. Not only was she tall and fair and of obvious foreign blood that would attract attention as to her origin—attention that could lead to me—but I could tell she would not be broken easily. Or at all. Of course, we tried.”

I stayed silent as he waited for a reaction from me, but I gave him none. Perhaps he was testing me to see if I had inherited some of my mother’s fire, her capacity to stay unbroken. But I know now that I was a broken child even before all this happened, and if anything, all of this would fix me, put me back together, compact the soft mud of my will

into a tight brick of determination. All that would take time, though, and I was not there yet.

He wiped his mouth with a cloth handed to him by a short, squat, female slave, and I remember noting an odd curvature of the lower jaw, hidden underneath his long and coarse beard, but briefly visible as the cloth parted the gray-white hairs. I remember little else of his face—believe it or not, the faces do not stay with you in their detail.

The people stay with you, though, and this one and I had danced together over many different lifetimes. He was brother to my sad little French girl, mother-in-law to my Indian child-bride, and there in Greece he was master, torturer, puppeteer . . . teacher?

We all have several relationships of this kind of depth and meaning, personalities we reincarnate with again and again as we play in the cosmic gardens of space and time. The relationships are necessarily of a mutually beneficial nature, and so I include in my meaning so-called “negative” experiences like I seem to be describing here with that time in old Greece. As I have said before, there is no such thing as a truly negative experience when viewed in the context of the overarching development of the individual personality as expressed across many lifetimes.

But now my new mother is stirring in her sleep as dawn approaches here in Iowa, a state in the upper-middle part of North America. It is the coldest part of the night, and my mother’s skin is puckering up into goosepimples, her nipples hardening, her lips going dry, eyelids moving like the wings of a beetle in flight. Soon she will break into an icy

sweat and awake with a cry of panic and a plea for mercy, and she will shiver and wrap the bedclothes around her and thank God it was just a dream. Then she will look over at the empty ashtray beside her and scan her memory for any last hiding places of an old pack of cigarettes, think about whether there will be any half-smoked butts in the trash bins outside. Finally she will shiver again as the craving for nicotine passes and leaves her alone and angry, furious that she is forced into nine months of smokelessness and sobriety just to reduce the already-miniscule chance of me being born with a birth defect.

Not that she would mind a “defective” child *per se*—no, I am certain she is a woman capable of great love. But as I said before, she is young and her own family’s expectations (or rather, what she imagines those expectations to be) bear strongly on her for now. Her own family who know not of my impending arrival.

But more on that later. Now my new mother is falling back into sleep. She will stay asleep for perhaps another hour, but it takes me very long to get my words out, and anyway I am tired of that old story so I will finish it fast.

So, yes, I was held as a slave in that master’s home as he attempted to sell me without much success. Although Greek men have a certain reputation with young boys, this master was not so inclined. However, the other slaves had no such reservations.

And so I was raped and ravaged each day, sometimes many times a night, often by many people, some waiting in line, others going at me as a group. Once a team of slave women

took me over and had their way with my young body, and for those of you who cannot imagine how (or why) this could be, it is best if I simply repeat the universal truth that rape is an act of violence and not sex, and these women were no less brutal and no more compassionate than some of the men three times their size.

Somehow I survived, not from anyone's mercy, but because my new master separated me from the rest of the bunch for weeks at a time, like how even a gladiator needs to recover and heal before he can be sent back into the arena.

I was no gladiator, but it is another universal truth that a man can get used to anything if he is subjected to it every day, and this incredible adaptability of the human physique and psyche is why you can sometimes hear laughter within the concentration camp walls, and why once in a while you will see a tortured man with his eyeballs burned out sing a tune so sweet he will bring you to your knees, and how there are countless cases where a child born of rape is taken in and loved by both mother and stepfather.

Now, this is not the case with me in my new life—I am not a child of violence. Well . . . not exactly. We'll get there. We're getting there. Stay with me here, please.

5

My new father does not stay with us here. He is young, like my new mother, but is less ambivalent about me—in fact he was ecstatic when she told him about little old me growing inside her like a weed or a mushroom. (I know his feelings only from impressions that I pick up from my mother, and so although I know that my new father reacted well to the news, I do not know the specifics of whether he jumped for joy or clapped his hands or danced like a Russian bear in chains.)

But yes, he is young, too. Young love. I had that once—well, several times, several *hundred* times if you want to get technical.

No, stop. I should stay on track or I am afraid I will lose you. It is easy for me to lose track as I ramble on, but there is a specific sequence to this tale and you have a role to play in

it, and so I will stay on track even if I get distracted by things like young love or old apathy or fresh blood or stale vomit.

That is what those slave-quarters smelled like: fresh blood in the nights when they were done with me; stale vomit in the morning from what I had managed to throw up of their fluids (and not just the ones you think). This went on for years, it seemed, but it was only nine or ten months, because when I was traded to my new master I was still not much older than thirteen.

The trade happened in a somewhat surprising manner. It had been a particularly bloody week for me, and I could not even stand, let alone walk. I must have been near death from blood-loss and infection, and my master was having me moved from the slave-quarters for my now-customary recovery period in a forlorn (but clean and empty) building not far from the main house.

I remember seeing my master talking to the man who would become my new master. They were at the front steps of the main house, and for once my master looked like he was on the taker's end of an argument. He was looking at the clean marble steps and nodding vigorously while the other man—a travelling salesman by his dress and colors and the sight of his wagon down the path—was holding a long leaf of paper up high and running a short, stubby finger up and down the markings.

There was some more shouting and pointing as I drifted in and out of consciousness, the hot midday sun blinding me even as it gave me reason to hang on to life. Soon the two masters were standing above me as I lay on the ground,

my robes caked with dried blood and the orange residue of dehydrated urine.

“Load him up,” my new master called out to the slaves who had been carrying me. “Carefully. He belongs to me now, and if he dies before I leave this property then I will take one of you with me instead.”

It was not clear to me what was happening, but I do remember a flash of fear showing itself on my new master’s face as he looked at the other slaves’ reaction to this statement. Perhaps he was wondering whether this place was so terrible that the other slaves would gladly kill me and risk being put to death just for the chance they might be taken away from there.

Soon we were on the road—a different road this time. My new master had an assistant with him: a middle-aged man of surly nature and few words who turned out to be well-versed in the sciences of cleaning and dressing wounds. (Of course, the nature of germs and infections were not known at the time, but many observant people had the good instincts to wash their hands before and after touching blood and pus, and many of these same people possessed the common sense to vigorously clean away the parts of a wound that smelled like rotting feta cheese.)

We were on the road for days, and we made many stops for my new master to peddle his wares (earthenware and carpets, mostly, but he also traded for other goods at merchant-marketplaces and sold those miscellaneous items on the road). Only now do I realize that despite the obvious concern for my life that had moved him to take me from that place, my

new master did not cut short his travels to get me home any quicker—perhaps in some way he understood that I needed to finish my journey, and the harder it was the better.

I did not die on the road, and in fact I recovered within two weeks and was able to walk alongside my new master and his assistant instead of adding to the burden of the old horse that tramped along, its bones seemingly creaking in time with the well-worn wooden joints of the cart.

“Your old master had not been able to sell many slaves these past few months,” my new master told me when we had stopped in the shade to eat some dried olives and fresh basil leaves. “The laws about the kinds of slaves that are permitted are getting more strict, mainly because our great army has been conquering new lands and sending back large numbers of slaves that must be sold by the state. And so the slaves that are stolen by people like your old master are not so popular now.”

I nodded as I listened to all this. My Greek was still not so good, but I could understand enough of it to follow.

“Your old master had a fine house and abundant land and many servants and slaves, but he had no coins to pay me for the new carpets I had delivered to him last month. He had asked me for some time to pay, but I am a businessman, and so I could not give him more than one month of credit.”

I nodded again as the assistant inspected the once-large bruise on my thigh which had been cut open and drained with much skill. The assistant almost looked proud at how well I had healed, and I tried to smile at him but am not sure if what appeared was a smile or simply an odd curvature of my lower jaw.

My new master handed each of us two olives and three more basil leaves as he took a sloppy drink of water from an earthenware jar.

“So why did you not take the carpets back from him?” I asked, feeling rejuvenated by the gentle bitterness of the basil.

My new master smiled. “You never take your goods back. If you take them back, then you have no longer made a sale and your customer is not a customer and he owes you nothing. The best thing for a salesman is to deliver the goods and receive full payment. The second best thing is to deliver the goods and receive partial payment. If those two things are not possible, then the third best thing is to deliver the goods in return for a promise of payment. There is no fourth thing. Anything else, and you are not a salesman. There is no fourth thing.”

This made me smile too. “And which thing am I?”

“You are nothing,” he said. “I have not forgiven your old master’s debt. You are simply an interest payment.” He patted the rump of his horse. “Come. We must keep moving.”

6

My mother is moving in her bed yet again, and I am certain she will wake soon and the day's work will begin for both her and me. What work, you say? I am getting to that, I tell you. You know, in all my lives I cannot recall living one as a true storyteller, and so perhaps that is why I have wasted so much "time" on that silly Greek boy I am doomed to never forget. The relevance of that story is only in passing, to show you how those experiences contributed to the choices I made for my next major series of incarnations where I investigated the emotions of a healer, someone who dedicated herself to those who were perhaps like that Greek boy or even that sad little French girl with the three-legged cow.

So before my mother awakens and my focus wavers, let me quickly finish that story of Greece without lingering on the irrelevant. I will just state the facts, and your imagination can finish the rest. It should be clear to you that the

life of the Greek boy was chosen (*by* me, not *for* me) so I could experience certain aspects of both physical and mental pain: the dreadful weight of unfulfilled parental expectations (and the repressed anger that accompanies the knowledge that none of it is your fault), the anxiety that comes from being in a place that is your home but yet you do not speak the language or look like the locals, the line between service and servitude, compassion and indifference, kindness and cruelty, violence and sex. My experiences forced me to cross all those lines in a single lifetime, see things from perspectives that made one highlight the other. Like drinking from a firehose, you might say now. Bingeing on drama, is what it was, and there are many of us (and by us I mean you and me and everyone else) who choose such lives every so often.

And so let me race through to the end of that melodramatic buffet of human misery:

Now, my new master, kindness and conversation notwithstanding, most certainly took possession of me with the intention of using me as a slave in his home on the outskirts of Thessaloniki. As I found out over the course of our journey, my new master was not well off in the least, and most of his wares were taken on credit from larger merchants and suppliers. He was considerably in debt, and had to travel immense distances to sell his paltry goods just to finance his journey back home. For all his generosity and talk of business and salesmanship, my master was a poor manager of his affairs, and even then I felt certain that if his horse died it would be the end of his livelihood and he would certainly end up in a debt-prison, leaving me to either be taken by a creditor or imprisoned myself, perhaps even executed.

It had occurred to me many times at my old master's

place that I could try to escape and attempt to prove I was a free Greek, the son of an ex-soldier; but without my father and mother or any family to vouch for me, I had no idea if I could do it. If I failed, I could be punished by the state itself. Certainly, looking back now I could have pointed the way back to our family home where perhaps there would be some proof of my origin, maybe even the neighbors who could say I once lived there with my father and mother. But (again, looking back now) it is so clear that these were choices I made before being born (just like I have made choices for my soon-to-begin new life that I will forget about after birth, choices that will nonetheless guide my trajectory), and so it is often impossible to take what should be an easy way out. (Do you know people that are in awful situations, situations that they could seemingly remove themselves from with a few simple choices and forceful actions but seem to always find an excuse to stay mired down? Are there not “undesirable” situations that you find yourself in, seemingly of your own doing, that you cannot seem to extricate yourself from, even though the way out is clearly marked and within reach? No, I am not being fatalistic—this is not unchangeable destiny; it is a choice . . . *your* choice.) But I digress yet again, and enough is enough, and I have already lost some of you with my meandering, seemingly pointless, disjointed tale. That is okay, because there needs to be a filtering of sorts, a culling of the audience for my words so that only the right ones remain at the end. So, to reward your patience, I will spit out the remaining facts of that life quickly and move on to happier things.

My new mistress was older than my master, and she was

pleased enough to see him. I wanted her to remind me of my mother, but she looked nothing like my mother. She acted nothing like my mother either, and in fact became quite frustrated and impatient at finding out I did not speak Greek well and knew very little about how to clean or cook or even tend to the small garden and pasture on their property.

Over the next few months I understood that her demeanor extended to her husband also, and as my Greek improved I overheard enough to ascertain that she was bored and lonely and wanted a child. I do not know why they had not had children yet: the two of them did have sex often enough—I know because the house was small and I would cover my ears to block out the sounds of skin against skin, sounds that could never mean anything but horror to me.

That meaning would change, though; because three months after my new master left on his next set of travels, my lonely mistress came into my space behind the kitchen and spoke to me with a tenderness that was no doubt owed to the jug of thick red wine she carried carelessly in her left hand.

She made me drink and she made me touch her hair and her lips and her breasts. She forced her head down between my legs, but she was gentle and I cried as she made me feel things I did not quite understand. The wine made me dizzy and I saw visions of great gods and goddesses surrounding us, laughing as they drank from their own golden cups while watching us.

This went on day after day, and soon I did not need any wine, and eventually I was discovering that sex was a wonderful thing and I wanted it more than anything. I still cried

through every moment of it, though, and this seemed to heighten my mistress's pleasure.

My master travelled for several weeks, and he returned just in time to make it seem reasonable that his first passionate reunion with his wife was the cause of the new life she said was forming inside her. It was a joyous occasion for the household (the three of us and the old horse), and my new master cried like how I had cried every night as I watched my fourteen-year-old manhood enter and exit his mistress like a wooden sword in a children's game.

Through his tears he admitted that for many years he believed he was incapable of creating a baby, and then he begged his wife's forgiveness for secretly hating her for having a barren womb that could not sustain his vital gift, and finally he thanked the gods for blessing them, saying that his act of compassion for me one year ago had been the offering that had been heard on Mount Olympus. (And so even his apparent compassion for me had simply been payment in expectation of return, I understood then.)

"I will leave tomorrow," he said later that night after I had served them dinner and taken my place in a dark corner of the room in case they needed more wine.

"But you just returned," she said, but not with much emotion, and I was pleased because I felt that her thoughts were with me. "We have enough for now, do we not?"

"We will need more," he said. "If I go now, then I can return and be with you when our son arrives. Our son will have the best in life, and I will give it to him."

"I think it is a girl," she said softly, touching her still-flat belly. "With soft white skin and long golden hair."

My skin had taken on a darker shade after months of working in the garden and pasture of my new home, but my short hair was still golden and I touched it as I tried to stop myself from crying.

“Golden hair?” my new master said with a laugh as he finished his cup of wine and beckoned for me to fill it again.

I went to him and poured, feeling a strange anger rise up as I saw the dark red stains around his mouth. For a moment I wanted to kill him: smash the half-full metal jug against his nose, sit on his neck and strike at his skull until the dome cracked open, spilling its contents up into my face as I licked my lips and screamed in pleasure. But I placed the jug on the low, wooden table and stepped back to my spot in the corner without so much as a look at my mistress, though I was confident she felt as I did right then.

“Yes,” my mistress said, looking down into her cup. “Golden hair. Like those of the gods.”

“That was no god who made you scream like that,” he rasped, his voice throaty with wine residue. “It was I.”

She chuckled, involuntarily, spontaneously, truly, and now I hated her as well, hated her for enjoying herself, for drinking wine and laughing while I sat in the corner like an animal that has neither eyes nor ears, no feelings or desires.

The hatred left me the moment she turned towards where I sat, and I squinted and willed her to meet my gaze. This is the moment, I thought with some excitement. She will tell him the truth, tell him the child is not his, admit to him that she loves her golden-haired boy and it is no one’s fault but that of the gods.

Perhaps he will go mad with rage, I thought, and the mis-

tress and I will attack him here in his own house, stab him in the neck with the knives that are still wet with grease and salt, reach in and scoop out his eyes, tear at his blubbery lips as he chews off his own tongue in pain and fear.

And then we will enjoy each other as he lies there, I thought as I felt myself stiffen beneath my robes, slipping in his blood as we roll around, our bodies sliding easily over one another as my mistress brings me to tears once more. Happily ever after, is what my old Scandinavian storytellers would say of us.

“He is strong now and his Greek is good. I have taught him to clean the floors and cook meat. He has learned to turn the earth so the plants can grow, and now that he has been here for one season he even knows which fruit and leaves are ready to pluck when it is harvest time,” my mistress was saying, and I felt some pride even as I was shaken from my bloody wet-dream.

My master nodded, finishing his wine with a glugging noise and slamming the wooden cup down hard. I rose to come to the table, but my mistress raised a hand to stop me.

“Yes,” my master said, belching loudly and filling the room with the smell of half-digested sea-fowl. “You have trained him well. He will be of good use when the child comes.”

And my mistress shook her head. “He will be of better use before the child comes.”

“What do you mean?” said my master, and I wondered the same thing.

“In the market I have been hearing talk of a shortage in the supply of good domestic slaves. It turns out the foreign

slaves are not so good for the house,” she said. “He will fetch a good price now. Our house is small and we do not need someone here for now. Sell him now. We will sell him now.”

I killed myself quietly, two days later, alone in the pasture where that old horse stood chewing on something. I think the horse said a word as I slit my throat, but perhaps it was just the murmur of blunt steel sawing through my vocal cords. There was no sadness this time—horses are much more in tune with what really goes on, and there was no human within sight. I did not wait around to see how my mistress reacted. I knew she did not care.

7

My new mother, however, is most certainly beginning to care. She is starting to show, and I watch in amusement as she stands there in the morning sun, the cold of the night still in the air, her right hand trying to cup the small belly-bulge that is the burrow of little old me. She drops her oversized nightshirt to the ground and examines herself for some time—how much time, I do not know, but it is long enough that the sunbeams have worked their way across the room an inch or two and are shining on her naked calf, as if to remind her that it is time to move on with the day.

And we shall move on too. No more nostalgia from the old cosmic traveler, who I hope you are starting to think of as a friend or at least a companion. Let us step into the story that is unfolding here and now in our shared space and time.

This yarn will have its own touches of drama and violence, but it will be a bit different. After all, you only get one chance to be a teenage boy whose parents are murdered and who is then taken into slavery, raped and beaten for months, sold to a couple who seem to be his salvation, seduced by his much-older mistress, thinks he loves her, gets her pregnant, fantasizes about killing her husband so he and his mother-whore-lover can live together in happiness, is discarded by her, and finally kills himself and traumatizes an old horse (not really—the horse did not care). You only do that once. Haha.

But the intensity of those concentrated experiences—remember, I was just fourteen when I died that time, and most of the worst took place over the span of a year or two—prepared me for several lifetimes of stability and serenity in environments that were perhaps not so stable and serene: the human equivalent of a rock surrounded by raging waters, a banyan tree in the midst of wind-blown grass, a wise old cactus watching the tumbleweed fly by.

You have met people like this (and you probably were one—or, more likely, will be one in an upcoming incarnation): the unfazed young doctor sawing off useless limbs while offering comforting words to make up for the lack of anesthetic in a bloody warzone, the smiling young virgin nun who seems to have supernatural empathy for the victims of rape and sexual abuse, the bubbly, gregarious teacher who seems to understand the autistic child, the odd little cat-lady down the street whose irrational love for animals somehow attracts wounded birds and abandoned dogs and even that coyote with the broken leg who would have surely died but

is now like a house pet. How is it that the broken and battered find their way so often to those who seem eerily and inexplicably equipped to help, to understand?

I spent several lifetimes playing these roles. Some were acted out in public arenas in places like hospitals, recovery centers, religious houses, and schools; others in private worlds where it was just me and a spouse or a sibling or a parent or a friend, my companions fulfilling their pre-incarnation goals of trying to understand the experience of allowing someone to help you (sounds easier than it is, as I'm certain some of you already know).

That is an interesting concept: allowing someone to help you. It presupposes that you place yourself in a position where you need someone's help, a dark place from where you cannot emerge under your own power and are forced to subvert your own need for independence and self-reliance and call out to someone: "Please help me. I need you."

My new mother is wondering if she needs someone's help; or rather, if she will need someone's help soon. She has some money, and that is not such a problem. Her parents (my soon-to-be grandparents) are well off and they have provided her with a healthy stipend simply because they can. She herself has rarely touched that money—not from any principle, but just from never really needing to.

I will not tell you her name, partly because it is not important and partly because it is important. Hah. No, she is not a famous woman and neither are her parents and neither is the man who knocked the bitch up.

Oh, forgive me. Forgive me. An inexcusable lapse. A nasty

way to say something. Dirty. Low-brow. It is not me, I assure you. Although as my birth-day draws near (still several months away) I will start to identify more closely with the specific manifestation of my personality and hence may display some altered characteristics of speech and thought, my impending transformation is not what prompted that statement. No, what is happening is that I am growing closer to my mother, and my consciousness is mingling with hers. In other words, this is how she talks and thinks sometimes.

But she is a high-brow woman, I promise you. Educated at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor—a fine public university. Graduated magna cum laude (one level below summa cum laude, but still very good) with a major in biology and a minor in theatre (a diverse set of talents, yes?). All that being said, she was a very average college girl, very average indeed. Smoked a little weed, but not enough to be called a pothead. Slept with a few guys, but not enough to be called a slut. Joined a sorority, but not the nerdy one and not the slutty one and not the druggie one. Did very well in her biology classes, but not well enough that anyone thought she'd cure cancer someday. Was a solid theatre major, but stuck with production and some modest directing without venturing too far out of the wings and onto the main stage. Very average indeed.

It is perfect, how these things work out. What I mean, of course, is that it is perfect when it does work perfectly, and it is not perfect when it doesn't. Because from my current viewpoint—standing on the threshold of life and, well, life—I can tell you that it doesn't always work out perfectly.

This particular woman, her singular womb, this specific point in space and time is the fourth of its kind that I have come close to inhabiting. “Inhabiting” sounds sinister (I am not an “alien”), but you know what I mean.

Perhaps I have said this before, but destiny is not quite as rigid as its common definition implies. I am “destined” to be born to this woman who is now sitting at the dining table in her modest two-bedroom rented house in Iowa, burping up some gas from the full-sugar cola she has chugged down instead of coffee or breakfast or mouthwash. Yes, I am destined to be her child, but for a while I was similarly destined to be born to three other women who would have offered me similar opportunities for the kind of life I seek in this particular incarnation.

Now, I am quite far along in my reincarnation cycle (all I mean is that I have had many human lives and there will not be many more before I move on to other non-physical lives), and so the particular experiences I am looking for are quite complex. In fact, my role in this life has already begun, and part of what I must do is work with my new mother at a deep, unconscious level even as I grow in her womb. I must help her along the path that will allow me to become what I hope to be, help her now so that when I am born she can help me in just the right ways.

Of course, this co-development of mother and child is mutual, for she herself has chosen (before her own birth) to experience what I believe is in store for the two of us. Still, it requires some curation, so to speak. Some coaching.

And this coaching went awry with the first three women

I worked with. It is partly my fault: I am still learning how to work with the unconscious, and I made some errors on those first few tries, errors that led to those potential mothers choosing (at an unconscious, or subconscious, level at best) to literally change their destinies and take their own lives down a different path. Nothing wrong with that. It just meant that I wasn't going to get what I was looking for, and so I had to move on. In case you are curious, this does not necessarily mean that those pregnancies ended in abortion or miscarriage. No, in fact all three of those pregnancies were carried to term and the children are alive and well in different times and places, having their own experiences. Different personalities who happened to be looking for experiences offered by those women's new choices simply switched places with me. (Not quite as simple as that, but for all practical purposes, it is a good enough picture of what happened.)

So now I am much more aware of the kind of manipulation I need to effect on my mother to get us both to where we need to be over the next few months. (I dislike the word manipulation because it implies that my mother is being misled or deceived, but I use the neutral form of the word, and I only use it because at this juncture it is fair to say I am more conscious of what is happening than she.)

And so it is time that I focus entirely on the here and now, on the her and me. Eventually we will get to the you and I, but for now I hope you are interested enough to follow along.

My mother is thinking about cigarettes again now, and this time the cravings are strong. It is not so much the need for nicotine (she has not smoked for almost two months now, and the physical aspect of nicotine addiction is eliminated within three weeks) as it is the crash from her soda-induced sugar-high from earlier this morning that makes her want a pick-up.

I make it sound like she is some kind of trust fund brat with a drug habit, but she is none of these things. Like I said before, she has never used anything harder than marijuana (which she never really liked), and her only addictions are nicotine (almost beaten it now) and sugar (will never beat it, but it's not so bad). She does have a bank account that is filled with what must be almost two hundred thou-

sand dollars now (I don't know the exact amount because my mother has not checked its balance in years) and gets a monthly deposit (the stipend I told you about), but that is not quite a trust fund and is only that large because she has never touched it.

She got a half-tuition scholarship to Michigan (good, but not a full ride, and so perfectly average!), and although her parents paid the remainder, she worked on campus a solid twenty-five hours a week and made enough to cover her own books and supplies and miscellaneous expenses.

But you know all this, and I am simply delaying telling you more about my father, I realize. There is truly no reason for the delay, although perhaps you believe now there is something mysterious and special about the man. That is not the case. Not at all. In fact, the lack of anything mysterious and special about him is why he hasn't been in the picture much, and why my mother doesn't want him in the picture much.

Truth is, she never meant to sleep with the guy. He is her cousin, younger by almost ten years (my mother is twenty-five now). "Scandalous!" you say. "Horrendous!" you cry. "Incest!" you mutter as you look away in disgust (or perhaps you roll your eyes because you thought we were done with the melodrama).

Well, it was certainly not incest, in that the cousin is not related by blood, and so there is no question of incest in the strict biological sense. Now, I recognize that there is incest in the moral sense, like with two close (no blood) cousins who live and play together like brother and sister. But this wasn't the case either.

They met three times last year: Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. On Easter they talked and pretended to hunt for eggs with the neighborhood children. On Thanksgiving they ate turkey and pretended to watch football and ended up sneaking out back to smoke some weed (third time ever for my mother), and they talked about stuff that kids might talk about and they kissed each other on the mouth and went back inside and gargled with mouthwash and sat on opposite ends of the room in mutually exclusive but shared hazes.

And then on Christmas they pretended like they didn't know each other and it was awkward. It was awkward until dinner was done and some wine was drunk, and then the grown-ups went to bed so they could wake up early on Christmas morning, and then my twenty-five-year-old mother and her fifteen-year-old cousin suddenly remembered that they knew each other, and they ended up quietly having sex in the basement with the television on.

It was a sweet enough thing, she thought at first, even though my mother knew it was immoral and illegal. A twenty-five-year-old is an adult and a fifteen-year-old is a child, and even though it seems less like rape when the fifteen-year-old is six-foot-three and has a hard penis, it is still rape. It took some time for my mother to understand that, but eventually she did.

So now she is pregnant with a child conceived by rape, but rape committed by her. Does that make it better? Worse? Better than what? Worse than whom?

She started smoking cigarettes on New Year's Day. It took her some time to learn how to smoke them (because they

are really disgusting until you get addicted), but she got the hang of it and chain-smoked just long enough to get addicted before she found out about me and had to stop. Sorry, Ma.

Although it is an unprovable (and sexist) hypothesis, many women know they are pregnant at the very moment of conception, and it is clear as I access some hidden parts of my mother's mind that in some way she had hoped the smoke would kill me while I was still an unnamed zygote. No, that is not true. Not entirely true, at least. It is equally true to say that she hoped the cigarettes (one month's worth of them) would kill her before she had to face what she somehow knew was coming.

She had already stopped smoking when she took the home test (bought with cash from a drugstore on the far end of town—she took a bus there), because she was already late and she knew it even before she was late. She cried a little, but only because she thought she should cry a little. Really, she didn't feel anything, didn't feel different. She didn't feel different because she was already changing. She was already becoming my mother.

What does that mean, you say: *Becoming* your mother? Well, as most of you know on some level (even those of you who are currently male or childless), the mother is changed by her pregnancy in more ways than the obvious (it is more than just pickles and ice-cream). Just as the fetus dreams of its upcoming life and the connections it has to other existences, the mother often begins to have dreams that will help prepare her for the relationship with the new personality who has chosen to be born to her. Most of these dreams occur at

deep levels of consciousness and are not remembered, but they leave an emotional imprint, and as these emotional imprints build up, they eventually effect small changes in attitudes and behaviors, likes and dislikes, choices, decisions, the way she smiles, how she reacts when the door slams in the middle of the night.

Now, in my case, since I am a relatively advanced personality (oh, please—as I have said before, all that means is that I have had a lot of practice with life), I am taking a much more involved role in my mother's dream activity. This is a crucial time in her pregnancy and so I have been quite busy at nap time (hee hee!).

There is going to be an upcoming crisis that I have been preparing my young mother to handle. Of course, this has something to do with my father (if you can call him that—he is a child, for heaven's sake). Or rather, the crisis is my father.

My mother is currently washing the breakfast dishes, and she is ruminating on what a terrible choice it was to have told the kid that he had gotten her knocked up. She is telling herself now that she was stupid to do something so important without considering what she hoped to get out of it. (Of course, that is really her father talking—he is a very logical and cautious man—but we will get to him later.)

“Really,” she is saying now, looking at a precocious sparrow that has planted itself on the sill outside the window facing the sink. “I mean, really! What the fuck did I expect? What did I hope to get out of it? I don't love him. I can't love him. He's a fucking child, for fuck's sake. Could I go to jail for this?”

Excuse the language, but that is how my mother talks

when she is alone. It is the one way in which she has rebelled against her very average upbringing and very average education and very average . . . well, everything. Of course, she rarely uses the f-word around others, and has never dropped one in front of her parents. I could attempt to censor her, but it is much easier for me in my current state to simply let the words flow through me and to you, and so I trust you can handle it.

Anyway, she is still talking, and so let us listen some more (this is fun!):

“Yes, Ms. Sparrow?” she is saying now, smiling at the bird (she has never really liked birds). “Will they arrest me for statutory rape? Put me in a jail cell with butch lesbians and Mexican gangbangers? I’ll have to eat pussy in exchange for cigarettes? Then use those cigarettes to buy secret cellphone minutes to call my underage baby-daddy? Then I’d call my real daddy? Tell him I have sores all over my mouth from crotch bacteria? Will that turn him on, you think?”

Now she *screeches* and takes the wrought-iron frying pan she is cleaning and slams it against the stainless-steel bank of the sink, going at it for several seconds until the steel is dented and bruised. I count six solid bangs, and the sparrow has long since fled for its life, and my mother is now on the floor, seated, that frying pan still in her hands, her face red and pink like the inside of a seedless watermelon.

“What is wrong with me?” she is saying now, and she looks down at her own hand and loosens her fingers and lets the wet frying pan slide silently to the yellow tile of the kitchen floor. “What is happening to me?”

But this is not as serious as it might appear, and I am cer-

tain that many of you scream and shout and make some noise when there is no one else around to call you crazy. My mother is a very stable woman, and I am not in the least concerned by the fleeting thought I picked up when she looked at her wrists and wondered if she should slit them. She is not the type to kill herself.

She did consider killing me, though, but again I was not worried. In fact the thoughts of abortion are critical to her development, because they will add a certain ingredient (guilt? Self-loathing? I don't know—I'm not a psychiatrist; I just know what works) to the mental soup I am helping to prepare.

So, yes, she did consider an abortion, but not for much longer and not any more seriously than she considers suicide. Truth is, my mother is one of those people who have always wanted a child, one of those people who have never allowed anything to corrupt that pure desire to give birth.

In fact that was one of the things that scared away the two or three serious suitors: her early and often-stated longing for a child. Of course, those suitors were young men in their early twenties and with too much drinking and driving left to do before settling down, and so, even though all three of them truly loved her (but not enough, of course), they were scared off by the thoughts of split-level houses in the suburbs and PTA meetings and minivans. Too bad, because if they truly understood my mother, they'd have seen that although she certainly wanted all those things, she didn't particularly care if the guy wanted to be part of it. She was always happy with her own private dollhouse. No need for playmates when you've got the doll, right?

Yes, I know. I'm the doll in this metaphor. Don't like the image? You picture me as a wrinkly old man? A smelly old woman? Well, I have been all those things, as you know. But enough about me. Back to Ma.

The abortion idea was dropped before it even really became an idea, partly because of what I just told you about my mother, but also because of my father. When he found out about me, he was actually happy. Can you believe it? A fifteen-year-old boy in the modern United States is somehow happy that he's going to have an unplanned child out of wedlock. Anyway, he was happy, so happy that when my mother mentioned she was probably going to have an abortion so they wouldn't have to deal with the scandal and the drama (she wasn't serious, but she thought she was, if you know what I mean), he swore to her that if she insisted on an abortion he'd go straight to their parents and tell them everything.

I want to be a father, he said to her when they spoke on the phone. I want to take care of you and our child, he told her very earnestly when they met a week after that first phone call. I think I already love you, he whispered to her as he reached out to touch her (then flat) belly.

Of course, my mother recoiled at these infantile proclamations of love and commitment, and the boy disgusts her to the point where she literally feels sick when she thinks about his young, eager face and adolescent smile. She has kept him away for the most part by saying that she is busy or sick and that she can't kiss him because she burps all the time and she certainly can't have sex because she feels like peeing when she does.

High school started back up again in January, and so he was busy enough that he seemed happy with a couple of phone calls and video chats a week. And though he was still as excited and eager to be a grown-up daddy-boy, after my mother expressed a healthy amount of paranoia about the legal repercussions for her if anyone found out, he had stayed quiet about the sex even when in the midst of dick-measuring contests with his “bros.” (Interestingly, she was able to successfully threaten to abort me if anyone found out, just as he had been able to successfully threaten to tell everyone if she threatened abortion. You work it out . . . I am not a logician.)

But let us not spend too much time talking about this father-child of mine. He is a minor character in this drama, and he will soon be gone.

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“Gone?” you say. “Where? Boarding school? Foreign exchange student program? Dad getting transferred to the Albuquerque branch office? Mom got a new job in Jacksonville?”

Come on. You knew where this was headed. You’re only on this train because you know where it’s going, rubberneckers. But in case some of you have been following along in innocence, let me say this quite clearly: My mother (though she doesn’t “know” it yet) and I plan to kill my teenage father. (There’s a reason Sigmund Freud is famous, you know.)

Well, plan is such a big word. Too big of a word. Might make some of you think back to the little bit of religion that may have been beaten into you as a child—God’s Plan and all that. (No offence intended—in my lifetimes I have cycled through most of the world’s great religions and one or two

of the not-so-great ones, and those experiences were rich and meaningful. But in this life there will not be much focus on religion; and besides, my mother is, like many young Americans, vaguely opposed to it.)

But I digress yet again. Back to the plan. Yes, the PLAN. Such a big word. Look, I've said this before and I'll probably say it again, but these plans are loose at best—destiny is simply a set of probabilities that are constantly in flux. The circumstances are right for me to work out a lifetime of experiences that I desire this time around, but things could easily go awry, especially in the early stages.

Still. I'll call it a plan, but of course to my mother it is not even a fantasy yet. No one—not even the murderer who stalks his victim and murders with method and meticulousness—truly admits that he or she has planned to kill another human. But I have been busy during the sleep hours, when my mother and I interact in a place closer to my current reality than to hers, a place where we temporarily gain insight into the bigger picture, the overarching good that will come out of what seems pointless, wrong, even evil on the surface.

The concept of evil is another one of those things that came from religion and is a commonly used word. Certainly the men and women who do the terrible things we read about and see on the news appear to fit the definition well enough. After all, if evil is a thing, then aren't these people that thing? If not, then who or what or WHERE is evil? Or could it be that evil isn't a thing at all?

My mother is back on her feet now and she is examining the dent in the side wall of the sink. But it is just a dent and

not a crack (stainless steel bends well) and now she laughs and turns the faucet back on and lathers up the sponge once more. The warm water feels nice to her, and she is smiling big now and even that sparrow (probably a different one, but who knows) is back on the window sill and singing its annoying little song. It is like a commercial for something warm and nice, an advertisement for a world in which evil is barely a word and certainly not a thing.

And now I have digressed from my digression, and I will wrap up that point so we can focus on my mother and the rest of her day.

So the point of that little spiel on evil is this (a question, really): Even if evil is real, a thing that exists, is it truly undesirable or does it have a legitimate place in the world, in our world, in your world? If you say it is undesirable and given a single wish you would choose to banish it, then let me ask you this: What of the men and women who find true joy and happiness in compassionate communion with the victims of evil? What of them? And when I say them I really mean us—both you and I—for we all go through lives where the meaningfulness of experience is comprised of acts of helping, healing, talking softly, listening carefully, sharing a cry, offering a hug, understanding someone's anger, easing someone's pain. Banish "evil" and you take away all possibility of these undeniably rich and profound experiences, experiences without which life would be a flatline of drudgery. Sugar tastes sweet, but just like my mother gets restless and impatient after her sugar buzz has worn off, an evil-deprived world would spiral back into its natural state of

cosmic balance, roll itself back to a point where it can keep spinning with vigor and energy, energy generated by creativity and passion that originates equally from both darkness and light, happiness and sorrow, laughter and tears. We all need to cry sometimes. We all need to cry.

And so there will always be a place for those who make us cry.