



DAY 1
XERXES' TEARS

When Xerxes, King of Persia, reviewed his magnificent and enormous army before starting for Greece, he wept at the thought of the slaughter about to take place

That first morning I was reading about another child—a news story about a boy who ran and ran. ‘Incredibly Motivated Kid Takes Flight!’ hollered the headline. A breathless tale of how some urchin in San Francisco fled his broken mother, stole a car, outran the cops, made it to the airport, appended himself to a strange family, boarded a plane, and then got himself busted on the other end in LA as he scoured an airport phone book for evidence of his long-done daddy. The kicker? The boy was ten.

It brought tears to my eyes, though I don’t know why. When things really move us we never know why, not really. I do remember loving that ‘incredibly’, though—thought it wonderful that the headline writer’s enthusiasm had managed

to poke its snout through stale newsprint and sniff my air. A 'kid', not a 'child'. And note that exclamation mark! The headline alone was a masterpiece. I imagined some late night editor leaning back in an empty newsroom and contemplating her handiwork with a wry smile.

The piece didn't have a real ending. It just stopped dead, as news stories do, when the action tank ran dry. The truth was that, beyond story, beyond my flickering interest, that boy was still out there somewhere, enmeshed in some sort of 'care', trapped in Eternal Denouement.

Tanya materialized in the kitchen doorway and pulled me from my daydream.

'Morning.'

'Hey.'

I got up and went over to her. My first thought was that she looked like hell, but I had it backwards. Tanya was heaven; I just didn't appreciate it often enough back then. But my blindness was nothing unusual—in fact, it was almost a good working definition of what it meant to be human. I did know she hadn't slept because she'd kept me up half the night with her sighing and quilt yanking. Now, wrapped in dawn, her warped sheets of hair and the bruise-like black beneath her eyes made her seem both innocent and debauched—a silent child over-filled with knowing. She leaned against the doorway in her nightie—such a strange word, like 'panties'—watching me, leggings not quite directly beneath her torso. Torso. There's no infantilizing that word.

She came over and we kissed with pre-brushing tentativeness, brought together by soft intakes of air, by care. Her hair

brushed against my cheek. Hair—she had sheets and sheets of it. Auburn hair that never stayed put. When she pinned it up, it flopped down, when she combed it straight, it curled and twisted. My nickname for her was Medusa.

'I didn't sleep a wink,' she yawned.

'No kidding. It seemed like you were up half the night.'

'Half a night's sleep would have been amazing. It was really fucking weird. I didn't even feel sleepy.'

And it *was* weird. Tanya always slept like a fallen tree in a silent forest, invisible beneath an Oregon of quilts. One sharp little fart every few months—that was about all you'd hear from her between the hours of eleven and seven.

'Too much coffee?'

She laughed. 'Don't you remember? I actually had some warm milk while we watched *Mad Men*. Well, I'll be queen bitch at work today, that's for sure.'

'I had a bad night, too.'

'Poor baby.'

This from someplace inside her distraction. A night watchman or Maytag repairman somewhere inside her scraped brain was looking out for me. And that was love.

I'd slept badly and had a strange dream of golden light seen by something other than eyes. It was still with me there in the morning. Not a shadowy memory, but a vivid one that made the waking world seem drowsy.

'I need a shower.'

She turned and walked out of the room. I watched her go with a miser's attention. Each remembered detail of her face and body was and is precious to me: the curve of her hips, her

thin upper lip and full lower one. Even her almost-non-existent earlobes. Sometimes she claimed to be an alien spy, her human disguise flawed only in the earlobe department. She'd confess this to me, then wink.

When Tanya returned, she was freshly laundered and professed herself human. She nuzzled my stubble and guzzled my neglected coffee while I soliloquized on the Incredibly Motivated Kid.

'That's so sad.' She shook her head, sorry for the boy in an uncomplicated way that I could only envy.

Then she dressed in a grey skirt and white blouse and left for work for the last time. Looking back now, I marvel at people who dared wear white. Did they think that the world wouldn't touch them?

Tanya went out, and I stayed in.

In an age when pretty much everyone went out and shook the world's hand all day long, shook it until their hands went numb, their hair turned grey, and their hearts coughed and sputtered, I stayed home and wrote books. On *etymology*, if you can believe that. I know, I know! A great word, etymology. It was a real can of mace when I found myself being nosed at by strangers at parties or on buses: *I write books on etymology*. Watch them stagger, see them scatter—even if ninety percent of them thought that I studied bugs, not the secret origins of words.

My agent, still unsure about me after seven years of contractual

bondage, was always pushing for an *Eats Shoots and Leaves* sort of mass placebo, the idea being to try to trick the public into consuming something inherently dry and bland by dusting it with MSG. I never delivered that book. I never refused, mind you—just went ahead and wrote *other* books which, published through unambitious presses, sold just enough copies to shut-ins and fuzzy-sweatered fussbudgets to draw forth more grudging grants, more painful teaching gigs, and to continue the damp seepage of royalties into my checking account.

Our apartment was silly-small; French doors opening onto a one foot deep balcony took up the whole exterior wall of our living room—a failure's balcony that at times seemed to urge me toward a laughable leap. Inside, our home was white and very bright. Behind the living room a kitchenette, and huddled behind that a bedroomette and a bathroomette stocked with lots of tiny soaps and shampoo bottles we'd pilfered from various hotels.

I was working on my latest project that day—a book about the history of sidetracked words, of orphaned and deformed words. An etymological freak show. I was thinking of calling it *Nod*.

Nod. Biblically, it's the barren nightmare land where Cain was sent when expelled from Adam's domain, but at the same time it's a fairy tale kingdom toward which parents urge sleepy children with gentle pressure on the backs of their warm mammalian heads.

Ah, sleep.

In sleep we all die, every one of us, every day. Why wasn't that fact noted more often? When we doze off each night

there's never the slightest guarantee that we'll wake the next morning. Every little cat nap is a potential game-ender. So why fear death when we're happy and even eager to make that leap of faith each and every night of our lives? Nod.

Anyway, in forgetting words, my thesis went, we abandon them. But the realities those banished words gave voice to don't vanish: old, unmanned realities lurk eternally in dark woods, in nursery tales, police reports, and skittish memories. Like Grimm wolves.

All the old, whispered words still exist—fantastic words and phrases like 'babies in the eyes', 'cavalry clover', 'doomrings', 'mawworm' 'Blemmye'. Thousands and thousands of them. And when we hear those words, even in the antiseptic light of the twenty-first century, we feel a slight breeze, a chill presence we can't quite identify.

'Birchin Lane' was one phrase I remember wrangling with that day. 'To whip', as with a switch of birch. 'I'm afraid I must take you on a trip down Birchin Lane'. An upper class British accent, the calm dignity before a storm of violence—physical or emotional. We all see this in our loved ones' eyes at some point: the veil about to be torn down.

Untold millions of people have lived on Birchin Lane. Centuries of women and children and not a few men have run the gauntlet down its cobblestone streets. With *Nod*, I was trying to corral Birchin Lane back inside the language, trying to coax it forward in time. The running of gauntlets, the paddling of asses. Cans of whup-ass. Samuel L. Jackson's character speaking so calmly in *Pulp Fiction*: 'I'm gonna get medieval on your ass'. Ass, ass, ass. I considered Guantanamo Bay and Dick

Cheney's snigger-smile; I pondered the gym-toned celebrities who fell beneath the media's lash. And the throngs of voyeurs, the millions and millions of people just watching it all. Paris guillotines. Gaza. Damascus.

You'll laugh, but I secretly felt that *Nod* actually had some commercial potential, that people might actually want me to make these sorts of connections for them.

Anyway, working at home, alone, suited me and I seemed to suit it. I didn't have a lot of time for people; you could say I had my reservations about the species. Maybe I'd spent too much time in the forest of unspoken words to emerge with any confidence in my fellow man. Tanya, who had no time for lumbering words like 'misanthropic', elected to believe I was just shy. She was always bringing people by the apartment, beaming friend-candidates for me to assess in the light of her belief I'd find value in them and vote to keep them around. It didn't happen too often, but I'm glad she was wrong about me. And anyway, I loved *her*. Surely that counted for something.

That was the see-saw balance we maintained, face to face, while the world rose and fell in the background. So long as my eyes remained fixed on Tanya's, I never got too seasick. That was the trick.

And so I stayed home and worked all day, never straying far from the clickity clack, phone and Internet on lockdown so that I could focus and make some solid progress. Every hour or two I'd pause, glance out the window, and there would be the sun, a couple of notches further advanced in its cause, frozen and guilty in the sky.

* * *

Tanya got home around five o'clock, just as the sun began staring down its nose at the city. She straight-armed through the door and marched right up to me, stopped, and planted her hands on her hips.

'Have you heard?'

'Heard what?' I asked, pulling most of my face up from the laptop. She'd been warning me lately about half-faces and third-faces, so I was trying to be at least three quarters there for her.

'About last *night*?'

The ascending intonation, the short, stuttering head shake that pantomimes incredulity at another's bone ignorance. I'll call it a 'duh'. Tanya duh-ed me.

'What about last night?'

She began to pace a disgusted circle. I'd been sorting invoices and receipts on the coffee table and as she strode past, the flimsy pieces of register paper trembled in her wake. I saw a fresh coffee stain on her white blouse. Heated by her body warmth, I could actually smell those molecules of connection as she passed my chair, could hear the erotic swish of nylon as her thighs scissored by.

'No one slept, Paul! No one I talked to slept a wink last night. It wasn't just you and me. Didn't you go out? Didn't you even check the fucking news online?'

'I was—'

'It's all over everything!' For a moment I thought she would actually stamp her foot in vexation. As for the news, I still hadn't digested it—it was still too wriggling and wet to swallow.

'Nobody slept last night, Paul. In. The. Whole. Fucking. World. No one! Well, no. Sarah said she heard on the radio that

some people say they slept. Maybe one in a thousand. The radio said the grid crashed in California for four hours because of everyone keeping their lights and TVs on all night. Everybody's totally freaking out about it. Didn't you hear *anything*? I feel like I'm going insane, having to tell you all this!'

She fell onto the couch beside me and began texting with one hand while throwing her other arm over my shoulder, not especially affectionately, but more as a part of the general sprawl of her moment.

'So fucking weird. So *fucking* creepy.'

I tried to make sense of what she'd just said as her fingers hen-pecked my T-shirt and her phone shuddered. Then she pivoted her head and looked directly at me for the first time since she'd arrived home, her eyes, faintly red-rimmed, locking onto mine.

'Paul. Did you sleep last night?'

I should tell you about my dream now.

In it, I'm walking along the University of British Columbia's West Mall, near the clock tower outside Main Library. On the mall itself stand two ten-foot high cones constructed from long, tapered sheets of mirrored glass. As I pass the south cone, I catch the sun's reflected light, strobing from mirror to mirror. And then the cone explodes with a yawn—like the world is ending, not with a bang or a whimper, but an early bedtime. The sheets of glass don't shatter, they disassemble and drift off into a burning blue sky. Then slowly, I turn toward the library. Everything is floating: trees, people, benches, windows, walls. The pavement beneath my feet gives way, and I tumble into

space. The clock tower follows suit, its massive black hands wheeling off in different directions.

Then everything fades until all that's left is the sky and me. My body dissolves next and the sky becomes an all-encompassing sphere of golden light. And then, after a while longer, *I* disappear and there's just the light, an awareness of light. I'm seeing it, but not through eyes, or as if my eyes were all pupil, if that makes any sense. And then time disappears and words cease to be and the light lasts forever. I experience eternity, but still somehow wake up in the morning with a hard-on and a gnawing stomach.

I've had variations on that same dream every night since that first one when Tanya tossed and turned beside me, and it's the most joyous thing I've ever experienced [here I pause, pencil in hand, for a full five minutes before continuing]...despite it all.

By way of compensation, perhaps, bad news gives us a license to overeat. *Screw the Friday night sushi*, Tanya and I decided. Instead, we went all the way back to our sunburned suburban childhoods—to McDonald's, in other words—and got ourselves two nosebags filled with hot grease and salt. The place was packed: the floor gritty, the air humid with human heat. No one in the long queue was particularly hungry; we just wanted to eat something, all our faces fixed on the same goal of semi-oblivion through satiation. Emergency room bravado and sombre denial predominated; people studied the menu board with furrowed brows and gnawed lips.

'What do you want, babe?' Ahead of us, a fat man in an

irony-free tracksuit spoke to his companion, a woman sporting an identical outfit, her hair pulled back into a severe ponytail.

'A number two. Diet Coke.'

Just go ahead and order the sugary stuff, I wanted to tell her. I caught Tanya watching me. She winked, and we burst into guilty giggles.

'What's so funny?' the woman turned and sniffed, suspecting, correctly, that *she* was.

'Nothing,' Tanya replied, poker-faced. 'Obviously there's nothing funny.'

The crowd stared daggers.

After McDonald's, we picked up some Ben and Jerry's at the packed Safeway then went home and watched the news, gobbling down burgers and fries from our laps while, on a parallel track, we gorged on information.

The pundits and experts were trout on the dock, flopping back and forth in iridescent suits, carping up theories as to why this was happening, the very *dearth* of facts goading them on. But what does a flopping trout know about *why*? A maniacal cavalcade of ideas was spilling out of their mouths: a solar storm had kept us awake all night; magical mystery waves broadcast by cunning terrorists were to blame! Microwave overload!

Tanya watched with blazing eyes and hunched shoulders, nodding occasionally. I put my arm around her shoulders and rubbed her neck. Every time I tried to speak she shushed me.

The television's caffeinated universe kept unfolding. The flesh-draped skulls of the anchormen and women yammered,

and their joke shop teeth chattered. And their eyes! You'd have to handle those twitching eyes carefully if you ever found them in the palms of your hot little hands: you'd have to fight the urge to squeeze their jelly till it squished between your fingers. The men and women on TV were *brazen heads*. Of Irish derivation, a brazen head was omniscient and told those who consulted it whatever they needed to know, past, present, or future: 'let there be a brazen head set in the middle of the place...out of which cast flames of fire'. Isn't that television, exactly? In the centre of things, burning away?

'They're panicking,' Tanya whispered.

'Yes, they are.'

'They don't know any more than we do.'

'No.'

Her cheeks were blotchy and red. 'Then why don't they just shut up?'

On and on through the evening, the Brazen Heads parroted possible explanations that you just knew had been made up moments earlier by other similarly panicked mammals pacing around off-screen. There was consensus on only one point: eight billion cases of insomnia were no coincidence. The odds were on the order of googles and googles to one. It might even have been, as the televangelists and their milky ilk were claiming, the righteous wrath of Great God Almighty, although this theory annoyed me more than the others. If there is a God, then why isn't the presence of His hand acknowledged in everything? Why do we only drag God in when something cool happens (and make no mistake, the unspoken consensus that evening was that the whole mess was sci-fi blockbuster cool)? Why

don't people talk about God when McDonald's sells another cheeseburger? *Methinks 'tis God's doing, this sweaty pattie! Yon pimpled youth in the paper cap is naught but his instrument!* Some do! Some people watch granny die, writhing in the arms of cancer, and think that's just fine, part of some big plan. They sound like abuse survivors to me. That said, I suppose my God-unease is similar to my squeamishness about birds: the handlessness of God. I suppose that any of those theories might have been right, but even that first evening I sensed that no explanation was headed our way. What was happening was just a fact. And we weren't a species interested in facts, as such. We were more into evading or spinning them.

At any rate, it all came down to Tonight—all the Heads seemed confident about that much. What would happen *tonight* when we all laid our heads down and either said our prayers or didn't?

Translucent bags emptied and tossed, Tanya and I salvaged our salt-scraped tongues with ice cream straight from the bucket. As I ate, I imagined melting goop filtering down among mulched burgers and fries, filling the gaps and soothing my moaning gut.

With our stomachs bloated and the television and the Internet going at it so hot and heavy, the living room soon felt crowded.

'Maybe we should go into the kitchen and leave the laptop and the plasma alone,' I said.

'I almost turned on the radio five minutes ago. I'm so stupid.'

She laughed, but only for a moment, then I spoke into the silence that followed.

‘It’s weird how we can do that.’

‘What?’

‘Laugh at ourselves.’

‘What do you mean?’

I turned off the television and the room was instantly too silent.

‘It’s like each of us are two people, one watching the other.’

She thought for a moment. ‘I think I get it. Our world,’ she threw an arm toward the black screen, which stood there looking for all the world like the Monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* tipped over on its side, ‘is getting fucked over, but we’re also watching it getting fucked over.’

I nodded. ‘So there’s us getting fucked over and there’s also us watching ourselves getting fucked over.’

‘Christ, no wonder I can’t sleep. But is the part of me that’s watching myself get fucked over *also* getting fucked over, Paul?’

It was a good question, I think now. Maybe a great one.

As awareness swelled, tumour-like, in the global consciousness, Tanya’s Tinkerbell of a cell phone chimed and shimmied, impelled by all the usual suspects: our parents back in Toronto, her friends and workmates. My mom cried the whole time we spoke while my dad affected a casual dismissiveness about the whole thing that he clearly didn’t feel. They weren’t different from their normal selves, but neither were they the same. It was as though the volume of their usual personalities had been turned up so high that they were hissing and crackling like a cheap radio at top volume. Indeed, everyone we spoke to that

night was nervous and jokey, but circumstance made humour seem like a sinister thing—a guttering cackle etching air in the absence of sense.

At the end of each conversation we said our goodbyes as lightly as we could, but the silences around those words were formal—airless and still.

And yet.

And yet, at the same time, the whole thing was also kind of exciting. Don’t be coy; you know what I mean. Tiny disasters—lost kittens, sobbing moppets—could rend our hearts, but the massive ones inevitably became popcorn-munching spectacles.

Viva, some part of our brain always cries, *calamity*. Which may be at least partly why calamity always seemed to find us.

And here’s the worst part. Listening to Tanya’s conversations as she told friends and relatives about my sleeping, I actually felt myself puffing up a little. How pathetic was that? It turned out that no-one else we knew had slept. I was tempted to feel as though I’d done something *special* by dozing off. It’s shameful how we feed on our own scraps of press: the survivor of the mass shooting, the lottery winner, the reality show contestant, the writer of wildly unpopular books on words.

It was almost midnight when we went and looked out the window to see what we feared to see: the blood in our world’s stool. All the city’s lights were blazing.

We stood there holding hands, feeling each other’s poignant skeletons through layers of skin and fat, a nexus of warmth building up between our fingers and palms. We really *were* creatures of pure energy, I remember thinking, just like the hippies and the physicists had always claimed—beings made

up of ‘energy’ and ‘wave lengths’ and ‘vibes’, so ephemeral that the swishing of a dryer sheet might neutralize our charges and erase us. Feeling so temporary and fragile was nice; the moment felt valuable.

Tanya squeezed my hand then let go. ‘I’d better try to go to sleep. I’m nervous.’

‘Let’s both go to bed.’

We headed off to the erstwhile big top of our bedroom, took off everything, and pressed our bodies together between the sheets, gerbils in a pet store cage trying to douse our minds and vanish beneath the gaze of incomprehensible giants.

‘You sleepy?’ I asked as the sheets warmed around us.

Her voice was tiny. ‘No. Are you?’

Compassion is—pretty often—omission. I pulled her close, placing my hand over one of her ears, and pressing the other into my chest. And then I yawned.

I think now that if all eight billion of us had just shut off the lights and gone to bed that night and left it alone we’d have all slept and the chalice would have passed us by. But let’s be real. Whoever leaves *anything* alone? Life’s a scab, and it’s our nature to pick at it until it bleeds.



DAY 2

JOHN A’ DREAMS

A begging imposter, naked vagabond

When I woke the next morning it was full daylight and Tanya’s side of the bed was a mortuary slab of absence. I found her in the living room. Where the previous morning she’d looked pregnant with unwanted knowledge, she now looked as though she’d given birth, misplaced the baby, and been up all night trying frantically to remember where she’d left it. Was it in the fridge? The laundry hamper? The microwave?

The laptop was open on her blushing bare knees; her eyes were Google goggles.

‘How long have you been up?’ I asked. Then, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No. It’s good that one of us could sleep.’

‘Nothing?’ Nothing. ‘Listen, you’re just freaked out. You’ll sleep when you’re tired enough. Everybody will. It’s just a...’

Tanya stared down at her laptop, thighs quaking. She pressed