



## Small Song

"Whoever is joyous while burning at the stake is not triumphant over pain, but over the fact that there is no pain where he expected it. A parable."

—Friedrich Nietzsche

My college roommate once asked, "Do you believe in voices?"

It was four-fifteen in the morning and we were both fractured on Jim Beam and joints while cramming for finals. Like so many other bell-bottomed, pot-smoking, head-banded, self-styled middle-class mystics of the 1970s, we'd read too much Gibran and Sri Chinmoy Ghose and the Avatar Meher-Baba and enjoyed nothing more than espousing our quasi-quantum rigmarole to prove how clever and enlightened we were.

"What was that again?"

"Do you believe in voices? You do? Then where are they located? Are they physical things?"

"Wonderful. Three drinks and a couple of tokes and you go Zen on me."

He leaned back into a cloud of Hawaiian Seedless smoke and grinned. "C'mon, man, you're the brainiac majoring in physics, you gotta have some idea where I'm coming from. I mean, you ever think about this shit for too long? You ask yourself questions, right? Like ... okay, here you go: Does Beethoven's Fifth Symphony cease to exist once the orchestra stops playing, or is it just some fuckin' ink trails on sheets of parchment paper in a library somewhere? It's like, if you destroy the paper it's written on so no orchestra can ever play it again, does it still continue to exist?" He shuddered and reached for the bottle. "Questions, man. They'll mess with your head."

He OD'd a few years after graduation and wound up as part of the vegetable stew in some laughing academy but I still think of him the way he used to be.

*Check it out, man; I had, like, this really weird dream about you last night—and I wasn't even stoned. You were layin' in bed and cryin' your eyes out and there's this little girl with flowers in her hair, right, and she's standing at the foot of your bed, begging you to stop crying because—this is the freaky part, man—because you're keeping her awake in her coffin! Yeab, that's what she said, that you were cryin' so*

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*much she couldn't go to sleep. And when you finally quit cryin', one of the flowers in her hair—this mother of a rose—it bloomed just like that! and the little girl, she disappeared. Is that freaky, or what?*

I think a lot about the way things used to be, during dead, lonely hours.

... said that you were cryin' so much she couldn't go to sleep...

Do you believe in voices?

Listen to my life.

#

I did not recognize my daughter when she came back from the dead.

It was the end of spring and because it was going to rain soon I had decided to take a shortcut through the ersatz-park behind the Altman Museum in downtown Cedar Hill.

I was fighting a losing battle with the sinus/ear infection that always came round this time of year. I'd forgotten to bring my medication to work that morning and by ten-thirty felt as if someone had drilled a hole in my skull and filled it with rubber cement. I lived only twelve minutes' walk from my crummy \$5.25 an hour job, which gave me just enough time to stagger home during my lunch break, hit the drugs, scarf down a sandwich, and glide back to the grind.

Though I often took this shortcut through the park I made it a point never to linger. Too many memories were waiting to jump down my throat if I dared to slow down or, worse, hang around. Aside from the sixty or so seconds it took for me to sprint through the park, I hadn't spent any significant amount of time there in well over five years, not since the death of my three-year-old daughter from—unbelievable as it sounds—mononucleosis.

I was nearing the south exit when I made the first of three mistakes—I noticed the imposing new sculpture that stood near the corner of the plat.

The second mistake immediately followed.

I stopped to look at it.

It stood about seven feet high, ten feet wide, and six feet deep. The figures were made of synthetic stone and fiberglass covered with wire mesh, colored in tones of terra-cotta and ash. There were fifty female figures in the piece. All of them were naked. A few were laughing but there was no humor there, only madness tinged with disgust. Some covered their faces with their hands, some knelt, some stood, a few were lying prone as if draped over a sacrificial altar, and others clutched their stomachs or were folded in a heap. Most of them were screaming. Pain, anger, grief, confusion—all of these were etched on their faces, raw and brutal and unspeakably ugly.

But none was more gut-wrenching than the face of the woman in the center. Hers was a look of sadness so total that at first it seemed like disinterest; then I saw the small crescent of tears brimming in one of her eyes and realized the permanence of her heartbreak, that here was a woman, a genuinely good and caring woman, full of passion and understanding and tenderness who, in her youthful loneliness, dreamed of finding her soul mate and then, years later, just when she'd started to believe she would never know the love poets and singers described, found her One Great True Love and gave her soul completely to him, bore him a child, a baby girl, and in the instant when her husband stood with their daughter cradled in his arms this woman truly believed with all her delicate heart that everything was going to be just fine.

Thoughts like these were why I never stopped in the park. This had been Karen's favorite spot in the city, and we'd often brought Melissa here; she loved to sit and watch the

ducks and swans. Our favorite spot outside the city had been the beach at Buckeye Lake. Karen and Melissa liked to go there and look for seashells. Of all the shells she and her mother had collected over the years, Melissa's favorites were a pair of large, perfect, shiny conch shells. If ever we took a trip, those shells had to accompany us. Melissa bestowed more affection on those shells than most children did their pets. They had been on the table next to her hospital bed the night she died.

I shook my head, checked my watch for the time, and looked up at the sky. The clouds were growing dark.

"It is something to see, isn't it?" came a voice.

She was sitting on a bench behind the small pond where the ducks and swans lounged in the water. Something about her seemed familiar to me but that was only because she reminded me of my ex-wife, no big surprise—every woman reminded me of Karen in one way or another.

"Yes," I said, not wanting to look at it again but doing so anyway. "It's very . . . powerful."

I don't know why I made this third mistake, striking up a conversation with this young woman. I'd only wanted to get home and take my drugs. My head was a blister ready to burst and the thought of eardrops and decongestants was a sweet siren's melody.

"Are you feeling all right?"

Startled, I looked away from the sculpture. When had she come up next to me? Why was I down on one knee? Who'd lodged the icepack in my eardrum and where had my head gone when it fell off my shoulders?

She helped me to my feet and guided me over to the bench. Sitting next to me, she leaned in to take a closer look at my face. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you look like hell."

"Good. I'd hate to feel this lousy and have it be just my little secret."

She laughed, patting my hand. "Great line. Ed Asner as Lou Grant on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. I'll bet you used to watch it all the time. You seem the type."

"Look, I appreciate your giving me a . . . a h-hand like this but I think I'd better get home and—"

"Shhh," she whispered, placing a finger against my lips. "You will say nothing, I will answer not a word/And nothing will be able to shake our accord. "

"Uh-huh. And that is . . . ?"

"From a poem by Corbiere. 'Rhapsody of the Deaf Man.' You suddenly reminded me of it. A little bitter and angry, a little sad and distant, but also strong and mysterious and sensual in a . . . I don't know, a smoldering, tipsy kind of way. Does that make sense? No?" She shrugged. "It doesn't have to make sense to you, just to me."

I think my mouth may have actually dropped open. I didn't even know this woman's name! Whether or not she was flirting didn't matter a damn; that she seemed to want to get better acquainted did.

I did not, repeat not, want this. I'd spent a lot of time and effort and liver tissue in order to vanish from my old life and make myself as invisible to the world as a person could be without actually disintegrating into thin air; the last goddamn thing I needed was for someone to say, *Hey, wanna be my friend?*

The pain and pressure came howling forward again. I winced, closing my eyes and pulling inward. What was I doing, anyway, sitting with her like this? I wanted my drugs so much at that moment—and to be left A-L-O-N-E.

She cupped my head in her hands. "Does it hurt that much?"

"...godyeah... just..." I didn't have the strength to pull away from her. I took a deep

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breath, held it, and felt a balloon inflate in the center of my skull.

Her hands slipped upward, covering my ears and gently tilting my head back.

"Better?"

"A little." I opened my eyes. "What are you, a nurse or something?"

"Or something." She reached into the canvas bag next to her and pulled out a small portable compact disc player, along with a set of headphones that she plugged into the player, then tried to put over my ears.

"Whoa," I said. "What . . . what do you think you're doing?"

"You'll see."

"Look, I can't put those on, the pressure's bad enough as it is and if—"

In a series of movements so quick and smooth they might as well have been one motion, she leaned forward, kissed me on the cheek in an intensely affectionate way, and slipped the headphones over my ears.

I was ten years old when I got my first rock album, a 1971 release from Dunhill Records, *Steppenwolf Live*. I played it to death but no one track did I play more than the six-minute version of "Born To Be Wild" that closed side 4. (Forget the anemic studio version that most FM stations play during Friday rush hour; the '71 live recording kicks ass in a way the studio version can only admire from the cheap seats.) I played that song so much the grooves in the record began to wear down and little scratches, pops, and hisses—noises I came to think of as "echofuzz"—worked their way into the music. Still, I played it, and after a while the echofuzz became part of the song for me. *I'd* put it there, it came from me and so, to my mind, that made me part of the song, slamming my bad ass onto the seat of a chrome-roaring hog under heavy metal thunder.

And now I was listening to it again. This was not the clean, re-mastered version you'll find on the CD release, this was from the record, *my* record, the one I'd lost fifteen, twenty years ago: there was the hiss that almost drowned out John Kay's growling vocals at one point, followed by a series of pops in the middle of an instrumental passage, then, near the end of the song, the scratches that underscored a wailing guitar run, the kind of high-pitched, squealing, uncoiling-barbed-wire run that has to be surgically removed from your brain. I was so amazed to be hearing it again after all these years that it took a few moments to realize the pressure in my ears was gone and my sinuses were clear and open, enabling me to breathe freely for the first time in months.

The song came to its snarling hurricane conclusion and I removed the headphones.

"You don't look like hell anymore," she said.

"Where in God's name did you find this?"

"So it did help? You really feel better?"

"Yes! I haven't felt this good in ages."

Most men could have swum a hundred raging rivers on the memory of the smile she offered to me, which was suddenly so much like Karen's I couldn't look.

"Why did you kiss me?"

She actually blushed. "I wanted to. I've wanted to for a long time, ever since . . ."

"Ever since what?"

She handed a small photograph to me. "Since this night."

I looked at the photo. Something pulled up tight in my chest, frayed apart, and snaked like tendrils of black, searing smoke into my eyes. I pressed my hand against my mouth as if I could stop the tears through sheer force of will; if I did not allow air to pass into my lungs, I would not cry. I'd rather have had a fatal aneurysm at that moment than allow this particular memory to fully resurface.

"Who the *fuck* are you?" I said through clenched teeth.

Her face became a placid mask ... except for a small crescent of tears brimming in one of her eyes. "Don't you recognize me?" She reached over and brushed the back of my hand with her fingertips.

Something like an electric shock snarled up my arm and —

*—and there I was on that last night with Karen and she was crying and shaking beside me in bed, crying and shaking the same way she'd been doing almost every night since we'd buried Melissa five weeks ago, and this time there was no stop to it but instead of comforting her, instead of rolling over to touch her shoulder and kiss her bare back and hold her close, I simply lay there staring at the ceiling, feeling almost nothing at all, not for her, not for myself, not even, it seemed, for the loss of our little girl because all children would eventually find themselves crushed under the weight of a future that was merciless and uncaring if not actively malignant, and when at last I did look at her all I could feel was embarrassment at being a human being because we were all just excuses for something better that never quite transpired and truly believed that we could make every hurt lessen by telling someone that we loved them, that they were important to us, and then Karen was facing me, her eyes empty and furious at the same time, and she said, "I dreamed that when we buried Melissa, one of her arms came up out of the dirt holding a rose in its hand, and you gave me a shovel and I threw more dirt down on top of her arm but it just kept coming up out of the dirt again, and every time it came up the rose had bloomed a little more and you said, 'We can't let that happen, we can't let it bloom,' then you took a stick and stood there and the next time her arm came up out of the dirt you beat it, then you made me beat it, too, and then it slunk down into the dirt and never came up again and we both felt happy! and I hate you for that because I don't want her to be dead, I want her alive again so maybe we could pull ourselves out of our own grave, this life we've had since then, and don't look at me like that, you know it's true, you've done nothing, said nothing, you probably don't even fucking feel anything and I can't stand it anymore, I don't want to hate you so please, please just ... touch me, even if you don't mean it, please ..."*—

—I yanked back my hand, then shoved myself off the bench and started backing away from her, still clutching the photo.

"... I don't know how you got this," I croaked, feeling the snot clog my nostrils and the first tear slip from my eye, "but you have *no right*, damn you... you have no right to ... to ... *ohgod* I don't want to think about this..."

"You have to," she whispered, slowly rising to her feet and coming toward me.

"... no ..."

She stopped moving and held up her hands, palms-out. "I won't come any closer, I promise. I didn't mean to throw that at you so soon but I... I don't have a lot of time — and neither do you."

"Is that some kind of threat?"

She shook her head. "No, I would never threaten you. It's just that you've been trying so hard to forget and it's killing you. It will kill you. If you keep going on like you have been you won't last another year." She lowered her head, folded her hands, and began tapping the tops of her thumbs together. Karen used to do the same thing whenever she was feeling anxious.

The young woman sighed, then said, "How many times in the last six months alone have you thought about suicide? How many times have you looked at your prescriptions and thought about quadrupling the doses? Christ, you have to take three different antidepressants as it just to get yourself started in the morning!"

"Please don't look at me like that."

"Then get to the punchline."

"Fine. I can tell you this much right now; if you go on living — scratch that — if you go

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on *existing* as you have been, you're going to do it. You're going to miss a couple of doses and sink into one of your moods, and then you'll open the door to the cabinet underneath your sink, you'll push all the trash bags and kitchen cleansers out of the way, you'll take out that bottle of Chevas Regal you've got hidden back there—you remember that bottle, the one your case worker doesn't know about—and you'll wash down the rest of your pills with it."

I couldn't think of anything to say to her.

How in hell did she know about the Scotch? I hadn't even broken the seal around the cap yet. The doctors had made it clear enough: if I started drinking again, I would die. It was that simple. I had no intention of ever starting again, it was just that, for some reason, knowing there was liquor nearby made it easier *not* to drink.

She wiped her eyes with a small tissue, then stood there hugging herself. "I was allowed one day, *one day* from the future I never had, to see you again. I used half of that day three years ago—if you think hard enough, you'll remember seeing me. I spent hours looking for you that day. I—" She shook her head angrily, took a deep breath, and looked at her watch.

"I've been waiting here since eight this morning, hoping you'd come by. Four hours and fifteen minutes gone."

She was crazy, that had to be it, and I said as much.

"Then explain the picture."

Not daring to look at it again, I held the photograph up to her face and crumpled it into a ball. "You go to hell, lady." Then I turned and walked quickly away from her.

"I can't follow you!" she cried out. "I can only—please stop! *Please!*"

The other people in the park, their reveries disturbed by her outburst, were staring at me. I did not want to be noticed by any of them, did not want the image of my face to become part of the tapestry of their day, so I whirled around and crossed back to her. "If you continue yelling like that, someone is going to call the police."

Her cheeks shone with tears. There was not one part of her that wasn't shaking. "I'm sorry. I panicked. But I can't follow you and I've got less than eight hours left."

I decided to play along with her delusion. "Why can't you follow me?"

She held out one of her hands. In it was a small rose, which in and of itself wasn't so unusual, there were plenty of roses and other flowers around the park ripe for plucking, but this rose held by the young woman hadn't come from the rosebush in the park; attached to the bottom of its stem was one of those tiny plastic water-holders that florists sometimes give to customers when they know it may be a while before the flowers are put into a vase. Funeral homes use them, as well, so that family members at graveside can take a flower from atop the coffin of a loved one before someone throws a switch and the whole cold mess hisses hydraulically as it's lowered into the ground.

I always thought it was funny, in a morbid kind of way, that these plastic water-holders are always shaped like teardrops.

Without having to ask, I knew this rose had been taken from a grave.

The young woman looked at me, her eyes pleading. "It's going to bloom very soon, you see, probably before the day's over, and when it blooms I'll have to . . . please don't go. I can't follow you because you'll be going to places I never went. This park is the only place left from your past that you ever go to. Please don't leave. Please. There's so little time left and I want it to count for something. I've mi—"

"Then stay here. Look at the statue and wait for the rain to start, then sit here and get soaked and wait for your rose to bloom, I don't care, just leave me alone—which shouldn't be too difficult because I won't be coming back here again."

Something behind her eyes crumbled.  
And that's how I left her.

#

I got back to my apartment, took my decongestants, and ate a little something. I would not think about her or the photograph or anything she said. I would not. Would. Not.

Because of being delayed in the park I did not have enough time to make it back to work on foot—but there was just enough time to catch the #19 bus at the corner.

I arrived at the bus stop with a minute or so to spare, just in time to see the Operation Mainstream van drop off one of its handicapped passengers, a young man in an electronic wheelchair who was balancing a small briefcase in his lap.

I watched as he moved his chair onto the hydraulic platform. The van's driver pressed a button on the control board and the platform hissed, then buzzed as it slowly lowered the young man toward the ground. It sounded exactly like the mechanism they had used to lower Melissa's coffin into its grave.

Even after the man had disembarked and the platform had folded back into place, I could still hear its buzzing. The van pulled away, the young man moved a small lever on the arm of his chair and began rolling in the opposite direction . . . and the buzzing persisted. It wasn't all that loud but it was constant, like the white static noise of a snowy television screen. Thinking it was just the infection kicking into a higher gear, I pulled my nose spray from my pocket and pumped a shot up each nostril.

No good.

The static was still in my ears. It quickly rose in pitch and volume to become a physical weight on my skull, and as the #19 arrived I felt something like a breeze that compelled me to turn to the left—

—the direction taken by the man in the wheelchair.

I stumbled around, pressing a finger into each ear, trying to create a vacuum and relieve the pressure but nothing seemed to help. I must have looked absurd or, worse, stoned, because the bus driver took one look at me, closed the doors, and drove away.

I shook my head a few times, violently, then pulled my fingers from my ears—

—the static was not gone, but the weight of it was.

There were so many sounds—scratch that—there were so many *impressions* of sound.

That's the only way I can describe it. And though none of the impressions were those of voices, they were nonetheless talking.

And some of these communicating impressions were so quiet they seemed barely to exist at all. I almost smiled, then, thinking of Dr. Suess's *Horton Hears A Who*—Melissa's favorite story. I'd read it to her every night, even on her last.

One of the impressions called for my attention, even though no actual words were spoken.

I looked toward the man in the wheelchair.

It *couldn't* have been him because he couldn't speak, he'd undergone a tracheostomy six years ago, necessitated by the advance of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis; aside from some limited movement in his neck and left hand, his body was useless. His only means of communicating with the world was through the small personal computer—what I had thought to be a briefcase—fitted to his chair. The computer employed a program that allowed him to select words from a series of menus on the screen by pressing a switch near his left thumb. This program could also be controlled by head or eye movement, enabling

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him to select up to fifteen words a minute, then "speak" by sending those words to a speech synthesizer that had been added to the computer only this morning.

I had never seen this man before.

I knew all of this because the cells in his dying body and the integrated circuitry of the computer were talking to the synthesizer in the same clinical, matter-of-fact tone that a physician might use when dictating notes for a patient's medical records.

I clearly heard them.

But I was hearing the impossible; a conversation between mathematical equations, electronic impulses, and myriad physiological mechanisms, all of whom had agreed to conduct their little mixer at the same specific neuron receptor site.

As the man maneuvered his chair around the corner and the conversation grew fainter, a single thought, irrational though it was, came to me: *Her.*

*She did this.*

Somehow that girl in the park was responsible.

*Sound*, I thought. *This is all connected to sound.*

The Vedic religious traditions believe in the "vibration metaphor": throw a pebble in a pond, and the vibrations ripple outward in concentric circles; strike a bell, and it vibrates in waves of sound; meditate on a thought, and it will echo through the realm of the collective unconscious.

If one were to theoretically apply the vibration metaphor to some recent discoveries about the susceptibility of brain-wave patterns to nonphysical stimuli, then it might be possible to employ a blended and sequenced series of binaural sound pulses to induce a frequency-following response in the brain, creating a ripple effect that could alter EEG wave patterns and generate expanded states of consciousness. Given those conditions, resting-state alpha activity would be suppressed and replaced by synchronous slow-wave activity in the median of the central cortex. If one were to then increase the amplitude and frequency of the sound impulses, the resting-state alpha and slow-wave activity could be induced to operate simultaneously, accompanied by temporal gamma brainwave activity, enabling an individual to perceive nonphysical energies outside the confines of the physical-law belief system; not only that, but the individual would perceive these nonphysical phenomena as constituting his or her whole field of awareness — not unlike a waking dream.

That had to be it.

Somehow the girl in the park found a way to generate an audioencephalographic interferometric effect to stimulate alternate brain-wave patterns in me, inducing a transcendent-state experience.

But how? And when?

(Wonky, loony-tunes thinking along these lines had been an hourly occurrence when I was drinking; *this* I'd come up with while stone-cold sober.)

The first few spattering drops of rain started coming down. I buttoned my coat and turned up the collar, my hands shaking —

My hand.

I remembered the electric shock I'd felt when she touched me earlier.

That's when she had done it.

I held my hand in front of my face and looked at it.

Then froze.

Something about standing like this, bundled up and shuddering with my hand in front of my face, triggered a memory of another time, one, maybe two years ago ...

*... I was drunk, sickeningly drunk, and wandering near the Cedar Street bridge. It was snowing heav-*

*ily. Five inches by morning, the weatherman had said. High winds, blowing and drifting, blizzard conditions. I was trying to remember why I had come this way when I suddenly found myself on the embankment beside the bridge, calf-deep in snow. I realized that the cars driving across the bridge had stopped running. I wondered if they'd gotten stuck like me. Then it grew very dark. There must have been heavy cloud cover. I couldn't see my hand in front of my face and the wind was blowing the snow right into me so I closed my eyes. The cold penetrated to the marrow of my bones. I should have been afraid but I wasn't. I felt as if I were being guided to keep on moving, so I pulled myself out of the snow and stumbled forward, even though I couldn't tell if I was moving back up toward the street or down toward the river. I couldn't see a thing. My feet in my cheap canvas shoes were like lumps of ice. They felt so heavy as I plodded along. My body turned numb with cold. I felt myself beginning to shut down for the last time. I became aware not only of the embodied side of life where everything was black darkness, bitter cold, and churning snow but—so close it seemed I could step right into it—also of the unembodied side of life. Colors that transcended color. Sensations that transcended sentience. Sounds that transcended sound. I was freezing to death.*

*Then I saw beings. They were very far away. One of them moved toward me very quickly. When she came close enough, I could see that she recognized me. She smiled. She held a cold rose in her hand. I thought she was Death. I asked her to take me. She shook her head and turned, gesturing for me to follow. I groped my way down the snowy embankment and followed her under the bridge. She was gone, but in her place was a large cardboard packing box with wrapping paper inside. Slowly and clumsily and in numbed condition, I managed to get myself into the box and pull the wrapping paper around me. Then I wept, for something about her had moved me in a way I hadn't known since the days when I'd had a family...*

Now, standing in the rain near the bus stop, I thought of what the young woman had said.

*... if you think hard enough, you'll remember seeing me...*

I had to see her again. I had to know who she was.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and started back toward the park.

Along the way I passed several people; some were on foot, others were in cars, but I was aware of them, of the strength of their existence, as strongly as I was aware of my own breathing.

And I heard things.

I saw an old woman and heard the first time she had made love to her husband.

I heard a child's fear of its dentist.

A bird's irritation at the rain.

The quenching of a garden's thirst.

I broke into a run. The spattering of rain became a heavy sprinkling. I heard the empty spaces between the raindrops.

She was still there when I arrived. I went up to her and grabbed her by the shoulders. "What did you do to me?"

"I had to make you come back."

"Why? What do you want?"

Her lower lip quivered. "I want you to remember. I want you to recognize me." She handed the photograph to me once again. It was smooth and perfect, as if I'd never crumpled it.

"You're dying inside," she said. "You condemned yourself a long time ago. The punishment's gone on long enough. I don't want you to hurt anymore. You're not the monster you think you are. People make mistakes. It's time you understood that it's okay to just pay the fine and go home."

"I don't want to think about it," I said, dropping onto the bench. "I don't..."

But I couldn't stop the memory from coming back, nor could I stop myself from look-

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ing down at the face of the man I used to be, thinking: *You stupid fucker.*

There was a time when you had the world by the balls, didn't you? Acing your finals and graduating in the top five percent of your class, then snagging a great teaching position at an oh-so-private Ivy League school, then a beautiful wife who loved you and gave you a perfect daughter who, in turn, thought you were the bestest thing in the whole great big wide world *I love Daddy thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis much!* You were so safe and smug within the myopic borders of your world, and you never once gave a thought to being undone by an absurdity, did you? Because that's what it was, an absolute, certified, A#1 in-goddamn-comprehensible absurdity. It was absurd to think that in this country, in this age, with so much wondrous medical technology there for the paying, that a little girl, a happy, radiant, inquisitive, healthy little girl with a giggle that brought tears to your eyes could die from a disease you're supposed to get from kissing or burning your candle at both ends. Well, I got a Muppet News Flash for you, pal; it is possible for a three-year-old girl who loves to watch ducks and collect sea shells to feel bad, and then a bit worse, and then a whole helluva lot worse, and finally lousy in a way that requires machines and tubes and pills and catheters and not nearly enough money in the fucking world to fix, and before you know it you're sitting in the front pew at good ol' St. Francis de Sales Church on Granville Street along with your wife and parents and in-laws and X-amount of your balding schoolboy chums listening to some second-rate, blue-haired organist eviscerate J.S. Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze" and dreading the moment when the two dozen children from your little girl's pre-school are going to stand up and sing "Let There Be Peace On Earth" because *that's* when you're going to lose it and lose it bad and wonder how but mostly why something like this could happen. Just forget it, pal, just scratch that 'why' business right off the list because there's no making sense of some shit, and your nice manners and fine credit record and good insurance notwithstanding, it is possible—and you have a crisp, clean copy of Autopsy #A72-196 to remind you in case you forget—for a three-year-old girl to contract Epstein-Barr virus and have her immune system so quickly degraded that she acquires, in spite of your fine house and dazzling grin and that award-winning thesis on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, a thing called *acute interstitial pneumonia*, then another thing called *purulent exudate* which gets lonely in a hurry and so invites *pelvic venous plexis* to come join the party and presto-change-o!—you're looking at a little girl who in less than four weeks curls up into a wheezing skeleton and turns yellow and finally dies in a torturous series of sputtering little agonies, and you can't even get to her bedside to hold her hand because of the tubes and wires and bandages and all the rest of the *Close Encounters of the Third-fucking-Kind* hardware dwarfing this room where all the numbers are zero and all the lines are flat, so when she dies it is without the final benefit of a warm, loving human touch tingling on her skin to let her know that you will always love her and will miss her every second of every hour of every day for the rest of your life.

It is also possible for that little girl's daddy to collapse in on himself and ignore his wife's grief until she can't take the loneliness anymore and flat-out leaves him wallowing in the wreckage he's made of their marriage. And when this man finally comes out of it he finds himself alone, alcoholic, and quite unemployed, thank you very much. He also discovers that his insurance has been bled dry, so he has to sell his car, then his stocks, and then his house in order to pay off medical and funeral expenses.

It is likewise possible that, having nowhere to go, he will hock his wedding ring, spend the money on liquor, and try to drink himself to death.

He will come very close to succeeding.

Then one morning he awakens in the psych ward of the county hospital where he's been drying out since a couple of cops found him unconscious in a large cardboard box beneath

a bridge, lying in a puddle of his own puke and just half a mile from the gates to the graveyard where his little girl is buried. A social worker helps him to find a job and a place to stay so that, if anyone cares to ask, he can say that he's a janitor—give him a mop and a bucket and a bottle of Windex, he's hell on wheels—and that he lives in a two-room apartment just twelve minutes' walk from the office building where he sweeps floors and scrubs toilets for nine hours a day, five days a week.

Lastly, though, and here's the real kicker, it is quite possible that on his way home from his crummy job one day he will meet a young woman who looks too much like his ex-wife, and this woman will show him a picture that in no way, by no stretch of his alcohol-damaged imagination, could possibly exist.

"Do you remember it now, that moment in the picture?"

I nodded my head, violently, twice; a stray tear flung itself down onto the photograph like a suicide plummeting toward the pavement.

"Good," she whispered. "Because that moment is when your small song revealed itself to you."

"... my what...?"

"The voice of your soul. You do believe in voices don't you? The voice of your soul holds your history, all your memories and hopes and dreams, your baser impulses and higher aspirations; it's what truly defines you. And when it reveals itself to you, as yours did, it will tell you the purpose of your life, the reason why you exist.

"It's different with every person. A dancer's small song might reveal itself to them at the moment a strenuous, complicated piece of choreography they've been struggling with, maybe even to the point of an emotional and physical breakdown, suddenly, without their even thinking about it, becomes as effortlessly smooth and liquid as cascading water. The man you saw, the one in the wheelchair, his small song is still looking for its voice, that's what you heard; a child trying to learn a new language. In Utica there's an old brick schoolhouse that was built by one man, a sixty-eight-year-old retired bricklayer who gave it all of his attention and skill; his small song revealed itself to him the moment his labors were done and he stood back to look at his masterpiece."

I started to speak but she placed her finger against my lips and shook her head. "Shhh. 'You will say nothing ... nothing will be able to shake our accord.'" She tilted back her head, caught a few drops of rain on her tongue, then said, "Years ago there was a concert on PBS commemorating Aaron Copland's seventy-fifth birthday. Leonard Bernstein conducted and he was really on that night. The concert closed with *A Lincoln Portrait* and the second the piece was over, that phenomenal crescendo still ringing in the air, Bernstein dropped his head and wept like a baby. That was when his small song revealed itself to him, in that one moment at the end of the finale, just as he cut off the orchestra. It wasn't just in the way the music was played, though that was a part of it. He'd hit his pinnacle and everything had fallen into place in a wondrous way that only he and no one else could have brought about—he knew it, you could see it in his face. The reason he'd been put here, the purpose of his existence, was so he could bring all of his genius to that one performance and create music that was absolutely ethereal in its majesty. Later, someone asked him why he'd wept and he said, 'This will never be repeated. That piece will never again be played as gloriously as it was tonight. I thank God I was the one to conduct.'

"It's that way with all small songs. Only one time in a life will conditions be right for it to reveal itself and once that's happened, once everything has coalesced and the voice of your soul has told you what the purpose of your life is ... that's it. It never speaks again. Think of the song a swan can sing only at the moment of its death." She touched my cheek,

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then turned toward the pond. "I always liked watching the swans more than the ducks."

And I knew. I think it's possible I had known all along.

I looked at the picture in my hand. When she'd first shown it to me, I thought it had been taken by one of the dozen-or-so video cameras that monitored the ICU—but none of them had been positioned at an angle like this.

A man kneels on a hospital bed amidst the debris of tubes and hoses and electronic monitoring wires. He clutches what looks like an empty white laundry sack to his chest, only the sack has strawberry-blond hair. On the floor next to the bed is an expensive piece of medical equipment that is sparking and smoldering because he knocked it out of his way in order to climb onto the bed and get to the sack before it was too late.

You know from his face he didn't make it in time.

It's hard to tell if he's crying or snarling... until you see the shadow of something like love buried deep in the dark wreckage of his face. He has no thought for his wife, who even now lies sleeping on a couch in the nurse's lounge at the far end of the ICU, having been forced by him and two nurses to go rest for a bit because she'd been at her little girl's bedside for thirty-six hours straight with no sleep.

The photo captures a phenomenon you've heard about many times before from people who claim to have had an out-of-body experience.

This was the last earthly image seen by my three-year-old daughter as her soul left her body at the moment of her death.

"Where are the conch shells?" I said. "They were right here, on the table beside the bed. I remember that they were there but... they're not in the picture."

She reached into her canvas bag and pulled them out, setting them between us. They were smooth and shiny and perfect, the kind of shells a little girl on a summer beach dreams of finding. "I was careful not to break them, just like you used to tell me."

I marveled at her beauty; she had her mother's rose-petal smile and blue sapphire eyes, but also my slightly crooked nose and somewhat weak chin—to keep her humble, I assume. Still, she was even more stunning as an adult than Karen and I had imagined she'd be.

Her eyes regarded me as if I were the bestest thing in the whole great big wide world. "Hi, Daddy," she whispered. No two words ever shimmered so brightly.

She reached over and took my hands in hers. Her touch was a drink of cool, clean water after a lifetime under the scorching desert sun.

"H-hi," I managed to get out. "God, hon, I've missed you so... so much..." I fumbled for something else to say but there were no words. How could there be?

"I've missed you, too," she said. "Please say you'll stay here with me. We'll have almost seven hours together. You can... you can say good-bye this time."

My heart sank. "Why is there so little time? Why were you given only one day?"

"Because that's what you asked for, remember? When you talked to Father Ehwald after the funeral. You said you'd give anything to have me back for just one more day."

I almost smiled. "I didn't think anyone was listening." Something clogged in my throat. "If I'd known, I would've asked for a lifetime. Please... please forgive me."

She put her hand through my arm and kissed my cheek. "There's nothing to forgive, Daddy. Nothing at all. It's worth it to be here with you right now." She looked out at the pond. "Did you know they won't let you feed the ducks anymore? Isn't that a bitch? I wanted to give them some popcorn but that vendor doesn't come around here these days."

"He hasn't been around for a long time."

She huffed. "Well, I think that sucks. How're you supposed to have any fun if you can't feed the ducks? I'll bet if enough people complained, they'd change it back to how it used

to be."

"You're pouting."

"I am? Sorry."

"No. I used to love it when you were a kid, the way you'd pout like the whole world had gotten together and conspired to ruin your day."

"*Well*, that's what it felt like. I was three and trying to learn about the world. How're you supposed to learn anything when all the crabby old adults are breathing their rules down your neck all the time? And you were the worst, don't deny it. Especially that business about your computer."

"You wanted to pour *Kool-Aid* on the keyboard! I used to think I'd have to hire armed guards to keep you away from it. "

"You could have locked your office door."

"And miss catching you in the act? No way."

"That's wicked."

"You were a wicked child sometimes. *Kool-Aid*, for heaven's sake!"

"It made a neat river when it spread between the keys. I mean, c'mon—as a scientist you should've chalked it up to the study of human intelligence."

"*Intelligence*? Look, hon, a lot of things have changed but one of the constants in life is that pouring a sugary liquid between the keys of a computer keyboard is in no danger of falling under the heading of 'Intelligence: See Inspiring Acts Of.'"

"I was three. Sue me." She looked at me and we both burst out laughing. It felt odd. I hadn't laughed in a long, long time.

She hugged me again. "God, Daddy, I really have missed you. And so does Mom. She thinks about us all the time—but mostly she thinks about you."

"Do you ... do you know where she is? My God, I tried to find her right after I got out of the hospital but she'd moved away. I thought about hiring a detective to find her but I can't afford—"

"Shhh, Dad, please. Just listen, okay? This has to do with Mom, too.

"Every living thing has its small song, but there have been countless things and people who, for whatever reason—a moment too much of fear or hesitation, weariness or grief, anger or tension or confusion—didn't hear the voice of their soul when it spoke to them. But what it said didn't cease to exist simply because it wasn't heard; a tree that falls in the forest still makes a sound even if there's no one there, radio and television transmissions that'll never be picked up by a receiver still bounce through space; and, just so you know, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony doesn't cease to exist just because the orchestra stops playing." Her voice trailed off and she stared at the conch shells.

"Take them," she said.

"Why?"

"Because you need to hear some of the others."

"How can I do that when I didn't even hear my own? You said that once it reveals itself it never speaks again."

"Yes, I did. But I never said that it doesn't leave an echo.

"And anything that's been left behind can be found if you look hard enough. How do you think I was able to find that dumb Steppenwolf song of yours, Mr. Echofuzz?" She shook her head and laughed softly. "Oh boy, if you knew how long I had to look for that thing, how much mnemonic static I had to sift through ..."

She picked up the shells and placed them in my hands. "That's why so many people feel empty and futile and spend their lives looking for something they can't quite define. That's

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why the world is so miserable—all of those lonely, unheard small songs."

I looked at the shells in my hands. "Are these ...?"

She shrugged. "They have to go *somewhere*, don't they? What the hell do you think the sound is that you hear when you hold a seashell to your ear? 'It sounds like the ocean.'"

"You mean that ocean-sound is —?"

"Well, duh. But people never listen well enough, they never get past the first ... *layer* of sound. Go on, take a listen. You have to hear it for yourself. You have to know that all of that mystical bullshit you talked about so much in college, that you thought it would be nice to believe in, is true.

"Go on, Dad."

Not feeling at all foolish or self-conscious, I held the shells against my ears, listening.

And was aware of every exquisite moment as the sound waves impinged on my tympanic membrane, setting it in motion and carrying the vibration through the hammer of the malleus, the anvil of the incus, and the stirrups of the strapes into the cochlea; received by the basilar membrane and transferred to the endolymph liquid, the sound, so much like my echofuzz of long ago, disturbed the sensitive filaments of the organ of Corti and generated electrical impulses that soared up nerve pathways into my brain, encountering its complex electrochemical network—

—and the sound registered—

—as a massive but muted ocean roar—

—then the sound of waves scattering on a beach—

—then one wave breaking apart—

—becoming a small pool into which a pebble was dropped—

—and the ripples expanded outward in concentric circles, becoming a rhythm—

—then rhythms.

Rhythms.

Rhythms and pulsings.

Rhythms and pulsings and tones.

The rhythms and the pulsings and the tones of the universe.

The rhythms and the pulsings and the tones.

The rhythm of insects and heartbeats, of whisperings and thunder and bodies locked in sex; the pulsing runs of birdsong and tolling bells and whistling breaths; tones of infant birth-cries, canticle moans of graveside mourners; cicada arpeggios; descants from whales breaking the surface and trillings of single cells in division and in death; the thunderous tympani of gorillas in Africa beating their chests; the chirpings of crickets; the growl of cancer cells devouring delicate tissues; modulated vibrations of a million locusts in migration; the primeval groans from shifting tectonic plates; the *gloriae* of melting polar ice caps; madrigal dawn; *andante* night; and the brassy, sassy blues from the light of a long-dead star as it staggered like a drunkard toward the Earth: a polythematic assault.

I heard thoughts and sensed dreams and absorbed myriad impressions as they were passed from psyche to psyche with compulsive speed and more sensory layers than my brain, anyone's brain, *anything's* brain could possibly absorb. The atmosphere was packed with millions upon millions-squared of swirling, drifting, reeling bits of consciousness.

And these conch shells transformed it all into something like musical notes, and those notes into an overpowering *Allegro con fuoco*; at that moment I was attuned to the majestic cacophony to such a degree that I heard, as plaintive and delicately strained as any rhapsody, the murmur of every cell; the percussive sounds of termites banging their heads against the floors of their dark resonating nests; the drumming feet of mice; the synchronic rustling

made by flowing blood as it brushed against arterial walls; the clicking of synapses; the introverted cries of a million lonely people shrieking their anguish into the cold, empty, uncaring night; and I realized that somewhere, underlying all life, there was a continual music that had been playing since life began, and that its sounds, its rhythms and pulsings and tones, were the refrain of something more, the distant memory of the chorus from an earlier song, a sub-organic score for transposing the inanimate, random matter of chaos into the enigmatic, lavish, magnificent, improbable, ordered dance of living forms, rearranging matter and consciousness into miraculous symmetry, away from probability, against entropy, lifting everything toward a sublime awareness so acute, so incandescent and encompassing I thought everything within me would burst into flames for the blinding *want* underneath it all.

I was hearing the voice of the soul, maybe of all souls.

Then came a sound, faint but steady, softly determined, and the whisperings and laughter, the singing, the grand throbbing noise of the energy from the shells began to fade in my ears. I felt as if I were divided from my own body, suddenly standing outside my flesh observing all of it, my only companion the delicate echo of a single voice-note, pure and easy and somehow incomplete, that whistled through and past me like a breeze through an open window. I tried to grasp the echo, to make sure I had understood its meaning, but it was gone, absorbed back into the cacophony.

I turned toward Melissa. My daughter said nothing, only gestured toward the sculpture.

I rose to my feet as the rain grew more dense and moved toward it.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe.

The piece was not the same as before.

All fifty figures were still there, and all of them still suffered unimaginable pain —

—but now all of them, their hands grasping synthetic stone roses, had Karen's face.

God pity women who love unselfishly, true souls who offer their hearts and dreams to men who don't deserve them; whose grief must be borne privately so they might be strong for the weaker ones they love; who grow used to being lonely when in the company of a husband too self-absorbed to notice them or their pain; who must sustain themselves on memories of tenderness rather than the promise of it; and who continue to love faithfully even if that love is never returned in equal measure. May whatever joy there is in your life be safe from harm. God pity your selflessness. I once knew such a woman and, for a time, loved her as best I could.

But it wasn't enough to protect her from the night. Forgive me.

I climbed onto the base of the sculpture and pulled myself closer, close enough to kiss her wonderful lips if they had been real, close enough to hear her laugh that so often had given me the strength to go on, close enough to remember how she had, for a while, opened me up to feelings and tiny kindnesses that most men never experience, close enough for all of that, I knew her outrage, her loss, her terrible loneliness and sorrow, this splendid woman who'd needed so much from me but asked for so little and didn't get even that much —

—here, before me, was Karen's hurt made physical, and I could see now in all of the figures' expressions the terrible evolution of what she'd gone through; from the look on her face when I'd told her that Melissa had died to the way she'd forced herself not to cry the day she walked out of my life, I had now before my eyes all the feelings I never heard with my heart.

I fell backward onto the spongy ground. Melissa knelt beside me and took my hands. "I love you, Dad."

She held me in her arms, rocking me like a baby, there under the pounding rain and the

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perpetually grief-stricken gazes of her mother.

Melissa touched my cheek, then kissed my forehead. "Did you hear it?"

"... yes ..."

"So you know?"

"... godyeah ..."

She kissed me again, then held me closer. "I wish you hadn't loved me so much."

I grasped one of her hands in mine, brought it to my lips. "Me too, hon. I'm s-so sorry, but me too."

And almost added: *Because.*

Because if I hadn't loved her so much, I would have seen that my wife's pain was so much greater than my own, and I would have helped her through it, and we would have gone on together.

It was as simple as that: The purpose of my life had been to share it with her. For better or for worse, as the saying goes.

"You have to find her, Daddy," whispered Melissa. "It's going to be hard, and it might take a long time, but you have to find her. She still hurts so much. She never stopped needing you. Or loving you."

"Oh Christ, honey ... *how?*"

"Shhh," she placed her finger against my lips and pressed her rose into my palm. "You just have to ... listen ..."

For a while we listened together, holding each other on that bench in the rain, until the afternoon faded into twilight and the twilight into night.

I tried to say all of the things I had dreamed of saying to her for so many years but there wasn't enough time. How could there have been?

In her last moments Melissa took my hands in hers and kissed my cheek once again. "I was never ashamed of you, Dad. And I never will be. I hope you believe that."

"I've wasted so much time," I whispered to her. "We could have had an entire day but I—"

"I love you. And when love is present, no time is ever wasted. I've had my lifetime with you, and that's enough. It has to be." She leaned over and wrapped her arms around me. "Good-bye, Daddy. You'll be happy again someday."

I looked down at the rose she had given to me. It was in full bloom. "Good-bye, hon. I wish—"

"Shhh, you mustn't—"

And then she was gone.

I moved back into the cacophony layer by lonely layer. I listened to the old songs, the sad songs, the bitter, misused, and jubilant songs, all so ephemeral, all so small. I listen still. Every moment of every day, wherever I go, they are with me.

The echo of Karen's small song is here, somewhere. If I can find it, it will lead me back to her. So I listen for it. Truly listen. And I prepare for the day when life shall continue by her side.

In the night I hear the poetry of this world; the patience of the darkness, the sighing of the moon, the laughter of dreams.

A pressed rose rests in my breast pocket.

My daughter's kiss still lingers on my cheek.

In my hands are two perfect shells.

I will find my wife, no matter how long it takes.

And I warn the universe: *I will not lose her a second time.*

Do you believe in voices?  
Then listen.  
Listen.  
*Listen....*