

RESURRECTION STORIES

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Schaerbeek, 4 a.m.

Tonight is the night to do it.

Tonight, finally, there's no good reason not to.

If I thought that waking up tomorrow would feel any better than it did today, if I thought I could squeeze one more drop of sweetness from life, I would hesitate, but the forecast is beyond dispute.

It's dark in my sixth floor apartment. The man came around this morning to shut the power off. Funny that I've spent my adult life using the expression "keep the lights on," and before that, hearing my mother, who raised us on a librarian's salary, use it, and she always managed to keep them on. I haven't, and that's a serious matter. Letting the lights go out is a crime here. I'd follow my mother's lead, but they don't hire librarians anymore.

Darkness isn't the eeriest thing about losing power, though—silence in the midst of a noisy world is the trumpet call of desolation. I never realized how much comfort one can derive from the hum of electrical current. Like the sound of blood in the veins, its absence is a flatline.

Context, they say, is everything. I've stood in the desert, or the mountains, and experienced deeper stillnesses and darker darknesses. But in those places, such conditions are native, even comforting. In an apartment building in the Schaerbeek commune of Brussels, at 4 AM on Easter Sunday morning, they register as anathema and exile, prefiguring a blade to the neck. The thought that other people in my building know that my power has been shut off is deeply humiliating, and humiliation is one of the things I want to escape. I won't stand for being embarrassed by my own existence.

My son, in the court ordered custody of his crazy mother, won't miss me. He has seen only the worst of me in his few years on earth. He doesn't know that once I began the days singing and was gentle and even comical.

He saw me slap his mother once. She'd called me a loser once too often. I felt every bit of that slap, in muscle, mind, and marrow. I even rationalized briefly that we'd both earned it. But I couldn't live it down if I lived a thousand years. That's because it wasn't striking her that caused me shame. It was that *he'd seen it*, and for him, there *was* no context.

Isn't that how it goes? Think about murder. It only takes one, and then you've crossed into Gehenna. Every day now, someone outwardly normal does a terrible thing. The things I've done are disgraceful, but not yet terrible, and this is another good reason to quit. It has nothing to do with hope of heaven. There is only the desire to be rid of this dread, which is a disease.

It's a gun that I'll use. You can't imagine how hard it was to come by under present circumstances. But I managed. I considered alternatives, but none of them were guaranteed effective, or if done right, instantaneous. Although I have been told—not by those who succeeded, naturally—that there is a moment just as the trigger is squeezed when a survival reflex kicks in and directs the barrel just slightly away from the core of the brain, toward one of the ears, and that the brain, through neural plasticity, can survive these attempts, though in a much weakened state.

My challenge will be to refuse that reflex.

Nobody can know anything about suicide. Not whether it is an act of cowardice or valor, selfishness or selflessness, and never *why*. Every suicide must be preceded by an adding-up of agonies that cause existence to contract like the beam of a spotlight until there is nothing outside the pinpoint radius of its light. In this sense, there *is* a kind of solipsism, and maybe that is where the notion of selfishness comes from. But selfish as in, "I'm doing this for me and I don't care how it may affect others?" No. The option of vanity has been foreclosed by that shrinking spotlight beam.

There was a time when I subscribed to the suicide-is-selfish dogma. The State makes it easy to subscribe, and hard not to. There is very little we do with our bodies these days that doesn't fall under the searchlight in one way or another (shitting is the last private bodily function, and even that is subject to weight and volume restrictions). Our bodies are temples, we are told, not to mention, organ vending machines. *We are a human chain that cannot be broken*. That's the creed. But I don't believe any of it anymore. In truth, my will to suicide came with the realization that it was the last freedom. Freedom

to say, “This world fits like a bad shoe. I’m stepping out of it.” That’s what the Gnostics believed, I’m told. That the world was ill-fit for our souls. Cast down from Heaven, having lost our angelic virtue with each planetary sphere we passed through, we were exiles, and the only way out was back up.

A less operatic way to say it, and one that may square better with our scientism, was that humanity had developed at-a-distance from its origins, and on a lonely planet. Our starting point—the trailhead of our journey—could be thought of as unimaginably far away in space and time (the edge of the universe), or as the spark that preceded our conception—the quantum potential for our existence. Either way, it was the home of our true self, and that self still waited there, bereft, like Peter Pan without his shadow. Our punishment (for what crime is never clear) was to have been delivered into a simulacrum, and we were bound to this false existence until the day the scales dropped from our eyes and we saw that we were *not* home. Or maybe it wasn’t *punishment* at all, since that requires a punisher-in-chief, but simply a cosmic accident. An aberrant tic catalyzing one-celled life from the light of a single star. Both versions required a leap of faith, and both reached the same end: we were pod people. The Gnostic epiphany was to know this. Then, if we chose to stay in the world, like the Buddha, we would do so knowing what it wasn’t. And if not, there was a way home. By this mode of thinking, the Gnostics connected to both the Manicheans and the French existentialists.

I liked the story. It provided some dark comfort. But as I said, I have no expectation of a return to innocence. That would be a form of optimism, and if I felt optimism, I would not want to kill myself.

Continual, baseline panic had disabled both libido and imagination. The only narratives I was able to hold in my mind were those in which I either pulled the trigger on myself or had it pulled on me. All other thought caused agitation. Even the beeping of the phone, which until today had been people wanting money, but before that, might also have been my wife or son, had aroused panic, because it meant that *something was being asked of me*, and I felt capable of nothing. If you are on the power grid and in good standing with its administrator bots, you can’t turn off the phone anymore because it draws its juice from the same channel that feeds the data stream and is thus continually replenished. They don’t want people out of reach, as they can’t then be held to account for their debts. But now, even my phone is silenced. Within a

matter of days, there will be no record of me as a consumer. And then, it will be time for me to be consumed.

That final loss of my last little safe space was something even my degraded faculties recognized as worse than putting a bullet through the back of my throat, and that is why I got the gun. The day that I met with Köen and made the buy was the last time I'd been out of the apartment. It was raining North Sea rain, driven and cold, but I considered that fortunate cover for my criminal act. On my way back, the gun tucked against my tailbone, I had passed through an area of *brasseries* near the administrative hub, the old EU sector, where I had once been employed. A red-headed woman had crossed my path briefly on her way into the gray edifice housing the public debt commission, the same authority that was now shutting down my life. There was a fleeting exchange of looks, as much to avoid collision as anything, but long enough for me to see that I could want her, if things were different—if I was alive—and also that her hair was the red of blood. Not dried blood, fresh. And maybe *that* was what I wanted: to hear fresh blood rushing again. I can't say if she felt the same. I suppose I hoped that she had, if only for an instant.

The pistol is a small automatic, a pretty good one for the price, and said to deliver a kick that will shut it all down instantly, as long as I hold my aim. Obviously, I don't intend to use more than one round.

Now it's time. I'll retrieve the gun from its shoebox and prepare the materials for my little ceremony. There's not much. A candle. My last shot of rum. A copy of *The Sun Also Rises* that went through the wash and dry cycle. I had planned to read a passage, but now I think I'll skip it.

In the Schaerbeek market square outside my east windows, it's quiet. Just the sort of quiet I need to get through this. On some nights, we hear the running, clacking boots and then a muffled cry as someone is taken off. Those are the ones who still have something of value to lose. Anyone else out in the square at night is presumed guilty. Why they go out there, I can't say. There would seem only two reasons: to get to some *place*, or to get to *someone*. The third possibility, that they are willfully stepping into a summary execution, is beyond my considering even as I light the candle and pour the rum.

Glass drained, the rum still stinging, I bring the gun to my mouth. I haven't rehearsed this, and so I am surprised by the mass of the barrel, and how difficult it is to get it past my teeth. A brief taste of iron as it passes over

the front of my tongue on its way to the rear of the hard palate, the place where it goes soft, just before the uvula, which I mistook for tonsils when I was little. That's where the muzzle has to nest. It excites the gag reflex, having something back there, and I wish I had more rum. One has to relax those muscles, or the tendency will be to clench, to bite, and then the aim will be lost. Finally, my throat stops twitching, and I imagine the bullet's trajectory through my brain and out the crown of my head. The gun is in place now, and I secure it with my retracted lips and slip my finger behind the trigger.

Now, this is unexpected. I am used to considering myself with every action, even something as simple as lifting a toothbrush. But suddenly, I can't see myself in my mind. I am instead the blood-haired woman, strobed by candlelight, and I am aroused. I am aroused as both man and woman, however that is possible. Am I Adam Kadmon, the first Adam of the Kabbalists? I have a gun in my mouth and the gun is a cock and the cock is both mine and not because it's framed by a curtain of blood that falls like hair around my face. And suddenly all I can think of is going to her, there in the gray edifice, and taking her to the stairwell, and making love to her in atonement for all of it, and screaming with her, and bruising my knees on the stairs as she arches her back over the hard step. This is what's left for me. I will go there and I will wait for morning when she comes, and I will tell her that we have to save the world with love. That this is the only hope.

For the first time in a very long time, I can feel my body, and with it, the surge of blood.

I will take the gun, because my purpose won't allow obstruction. If they apprehend me, I will just finish what I started with my bell, book and candle. Or maybe some other imperative will come into play and I'll kill them first. So it was in the old days when brigands or highwaymen got in the path of a knight on quest. *Stand aside, scoundrel, or suffer my blade!* The pistol snugly against my coccyx, I descend the stairs and step out into the square.

The Easter Vigil will end soon, the last of the long night's candles yielding to the rising sun, and as I cross the empty square, footfalls faintly heard on its eastern perimeter, I know that I am not in the tomb.

I'm coming to you, Red Woman.