





Also by Juli Kearns

*Unending Wonders of a Subatomic World or  
In Search of the Great Penguin*



**THUNDERBIRD  
AND THE BALL OF TWINE  
(A FOLK TALE)**

*Dedicated to my husband, Martin, and our son, Aaron.*

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# **THUNDERBIRD**

## **AND THE BALL OF TWINE**

### **(A FOLK TALE)**

A novel by Juli Maria Kearns

*Idyllopus Press*



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O



What Odile Saw



**I'd say,  
"First, there was the space ship,"  
except that's not true.  
Not that there wasn't an  
exceptional occurrence that evening,  
because there was.**

"First, there was the space ship" is a conceit, a come hither wink of a dark alley lie down the order of a spit polished shoe of a movie that

grabs you by the nape of the neck the moment the intro credits stop rolling and, before you've an opportunity to scream at the film noir drama queen assaulting you, propels you out of your spectator seat and professionally slam dunks your head into the toilet bowl of a plot right in the red velvet curtain draped theater of said alley. The first handful of hot buttery popcorn not even in your mouth yet and you're bobbing up from a kinky money shot. But what is about to be related is far more mundane than all that, so we'll scratch away the "first" and instead simply remark, "There was a UFO," because it's not even known if the object was a space ship that Odile McDonald happened to see.

# 1



What Odile Thought as She Did See



**If there is any such bird of a feather  
as an ordinary evening,  
then the Phoenix in question  
was much like any other  
dusty fan dancer  
who elected to end her career  
in a lavish display of  
self-immolation.**

To the West, somewhere beyond distant Arizona, past Paradise Valley, hidden behind an azimuth value, the sun was as full of itself and the sky as true blue as ever, which meant that the edge of the world, where the fan dancer's smoldering feathers gathered on the horizon, was closer to Odile than a flat, far away disk that simply, slowly slid down a flat, painted backdrop until it disappeared altogether behind a just as flat, two dimensional earth.

Of course, the sky wasn't true blue at all. The blue was a kind of mirage, even if come by honestly. So, too, was sunset's fanfare all artistic shenanigans inviting photo ops as a record of another day done. Somewhere between science and fiction, due light's trip increasing to out of bounds, the ordinary atoms of the atmosphere had exhausted themselves of efficiently Rayleigh Scattering the sun's blues at Odile's lame human eyes which, no matter the efforts of those atoms and the mathematics involved, would never see how the seeming blue sky is really truly most efficiently scattered wavelengths of violet, her human cones being deficient of recognizing the truth, and Odile confidently submitted to the appearance presented her as fact. The deficiency of those cones was not unique to Odile; in fact it was shared with every other human she'd ever met, though never discussed. Just as Odile had failed to ever discuss most of her insights and observations with her fellow travelers in life. The general consensus was that despite the enigma of their existence becoming a known fact through the compounding enigma of self awareness' evolution, which had flung them out of paradise with its first denuding question mark (the fault of a terrible contagion, perhaps), the best way of dealing with this great big problem called Being was to keep the sharing of personal experience to a minimum after the establishment of a few vague storylines and the regulating thermostat of culture.

Not that Odile had a clue about the how of her eyes or what wonders they might be viewing beyond what was granted her normal human apprehension.

She had vague memories of third grade science schoolbook graphics of an upright universe turned upside down en route to her brain, then that brain's moral compass magically restoring proper orientation.

Despite believing otherwise, Odile was secretly certain that when she died this knowledge would accompany her into the great hereafter.

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Not that Odile was reflecting on any of this. Odile's body actually, customarily went to great lengths to ensure she needn't think much about what she was saw or what she did. Because humans are not so good at multi-tasking as all that.

The sun dropping below the horizon of the ever turning rock with a heart of iron called Earth, tumbling down below the three days' distant Rocky Mountains, the area between Over and There having eaten the blues up with Sally Rand abandoning East for West and the great burlesque stage beyond, Odile's own Sunset Strip might have made her sigh poetic with its quick fading red and orange revelations if Odile had been paying attention. Which she wasn't. Maybe it was because there wasn't much sunset left, maybe it was because Sally Rand had been paying penance in the jaws of the great Ouroboros of eternal return for millions of years and you kind of get used to it—but Odile was contemplating neither the mechanics nor poetry of what may as well have been a painted stage backdrop.

No, at the moment Odile was sitting at a long stop, her brain's cells talking amongst each other and nudging her into awareness that she'd been staring idly at a bright shining light hovering in the west beside the tallest of skyscrapers on a city hill about a mile distant. Wondering about nothing much, she continued to stare, other cells casually making up her mind for her the light was far too bright and large for a star and was probably the beam of a helicopter, most likely a news chopper, so ordinary an occurrence there wasn't much reason for it to have been nudged out of the background landscape of everyday event into conscious awareness, yet there it now casually was almost and she waited for the beam to move closer or waver and glitter blink as it turned. But it did none of these things. Instead, as soon as Odile realized the bright blue-white light was stationary, and became curious about it rather than holding a lackadaisical witness—yes, it was at the moment her brain's cells democratically elected a question mark over a period that she sensed the light return a kindred moment of recognition, a “yes” granted to what question she didn't know, at which point with no acceleration, leaving no trail at all, the light zoomed at about a sixty degree angle into the dark dome of sky and was gone in less than a quarter of an instant.

“So there,” it seemed to wink.

More likely it was a cluster of her brain's cells that said, "So there."

To which some other cells of her brain replied, "Well, uh, that's different."

Still, the event seemed in some ways so mundane and unremarkable that Odile felt no cause to exclaim aloud over it. "A falling star falls down not up," she said to herself. She discounted the possibility of a NASA space rocket hovering in the air beside a midtown skyscraper, on top of which, as far as she knew from news reports and sci-fi films, normal rocket propulsion made for energetic production of flame. And no missile of war she'd ever seen on television could travel so fast as to disappear into the black in the wink of an eye, leaving no reminiscence of a trail. "I believe I've just seen a UFO," Odile decided, and rationalized that indeed it was only that, an unidentified flying object, which was perfectly acceptable, whereas people would argue with her if she'd seen a flying saucer. The event, however, seemed so weirdly tailored for her (though wasn't so weird to her, as she was open minded that way) the UFO having shot out of sight only after rousing her curiosity, that she came near mentioning nothing about it to her companion. Then she decided she should mention the occurrence after all, because who knew but one day she might have reason to refer to it as a matter of consequence.

She took a breath and said, "I think I just got a cosmic greeting card."

Odile's response was not so out-of-the-ordinary for a person who has been amazed by an out-of-the-ordinary happening. If Odile had seen the oncoming car that was preparing to smash into them head on, though the impending crash would be an uncommon occurrence for her, it wouldn't have rebelled against her experience and knowledge of the world to date—even a trusted inevitability—and she would have spontaneously shouted something like, "Oh shit!" a split second before the righteously restored Thunderbird struck them. Instead, Odile had to make up her mind to share the privy info of the UFO, which surprised her, it didn't just pop out of her mouth.

And then her little Kia was a crumple of fiberglass and metal that by equal and opposite reaction physics was sitting a number of feet away from where it had been, and though Odile escaped without being very much broken at all, she almost but didn't quite forget about the

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UFO for the time being. Rationally, other matters took precedence, priorities shifted. Odile stunned by the fact of the unforeseen crash, her brain had to step in for her and elect her best potential focus and alert her to it, which meant kicking to the curb any number of concerns that might not have been so mundane on any other day. For a split second, Odile had the feeling that she might have seen something like this before. That just as in first grade she'd been taught in math to count and group oranges and apples apart, there was a long buried memory groove that her brain, seeking similar patterns, unearthed, and rolled this light down toward a first. For a split second, Odile had the feeling of a point of reckoning, that in favor of present physical concerns her brain could have instead slung the orb down the gutter of a different bowling lane and then shut down that lane for the night or completely. But Odile's brain didn't even sideline the UFO into a mental back seat for a nap. Rather, Odile's brain opted to couple and deliver both orb and the thunderous crash of the accident for a smashing, nose-hit strike that commandeered the attention of Odile's whole bowling alley brain which responded with a hushed and reverent WOW.

There are many things we'd like to forget, that we tell ourselves to forget, but our brains opt not to oblige. There are many things we would like to remember, which we tell ourselves we will remember, but our brains put on a long leash despite our druthers and casually release when out of sight, thus out of mind.

Odile's brain, of its own accord, had the memory of the UFO on a leash so short that even had she preferred to forget, she wouldn't be permitted. So it worked out well for Odile and her brain this time, that they were in agreement. Though the WOW scared the daylights out of her, Odile was in for the ride.

Because our druthers and our brains, more often than not, don't see eye to eye.

# 2



What Struck Odile



**Johnnie Jackson was the name  
of the unfortunate who'd been traveling  
in the opposite direction of Odile  
the day he'd lost control of the  
1966 gold Thunderbird  
convertible he'd inherited  
six months before  
from the man he liked to call,  
no matter the deep affection he'd held for him, his  
only and almost favorite uncle.**

And though there was undoubtedly a place outside Johnnie's perception of space and time where the Thunderbird still glittered gold as alluvial Deadwood Gulch sands that danced in the sun as Custer fell, the car had suffered the jeering scrapes and callous bangs of a hundred parking lot offenses since its often touted "righteous restoration" in the year Hale-Bopp and the Phoenix Lights failed in their exuberant bid to ignite mass hysteria in a public educated in the elliptical hijinks of comets and leery of any seeming celestial inexplicability being either not already subject to science (it was Billy's fault, he's always up to no good) or indexed in Nave's Topical Bible. Yet not a single injury had the car incurred while in Johnnie's possession, for Johnnie was a careful driver without even a single speeding ticket to sully his record and always parked in the deserted reaches of parking lots.

•

### Which Is Not To Be Blamed on Uncle Henry

•

From his death bed in Arizona, Johnnie's ancient uncle had bequeathed him the car and Johnnie had been more than honored, he had received the bequest as a sacred trust, a loan from the universe, because a beauty like that was never intended to belong to one individual alone.

"That car's a dilly. It's got power," Johnnie's uncle had told him. "Be respectful. Be conscientious."

However ancient, Johnnie's uncle had been robust and out with his dowsing rod, EMF meter, and EDA Bioscan scouring the desert for vortexes up to the day of his final and sudden illness.

"You're not going to die," Johnnie had said over the phone.

"Uncle Henry, don't die before we get there," Johnnie's sister, Irma, had said, taking the phone from Johnnie.

"Don't be jealous, Irma, but I'm leaving Johnnie my wig," Uncle Henry had replied.

Irma, whose feelings about the wig were a little less ambiguous than Johnnie's—meaning she would have only had affection for it as a

memento, and even then not that much no matter her fondness for Henry—had joked, “Then you can fucking well die now.”

Which were the last words that Uncle Henry had heard.

His will read that he was leaving Irma his love, respect, and his mushrooms, because he felt she needed to “get out a little more.” Which caused Uncle Henry’s lawyer to state, politely excising, that Uncle Henry may not have been as mentally stable toward the end as everyone had believed, considering his lack of discretion.

“That was just one of Uncle Henry’s jokes,” Irma had said.

“You didn’t know Uncle Henry as well as you might have thought you did,” the lawyer replied.

The mushrooms were never found. After a memorial service for Henry’s friends and youthful sixty-year-old girlfriend, designated transportation agents, Irma and Johnnie returned home from Arizona in the Thunderbird with Uncle Henry’s body in tow in an “America’s Moving Adventure” U-Haul cargo trailer. After burial, Irma had flown back out to Arizona and remained there only as long as was necessary to assist the girlfriend in taking care of the details of Uncle Henry’s modest estate. She concluded that the reason the mushrooms were never found was because Uncle Henry’s girlfriend, by then shacking up with the lawyer, had located them first and discretely excised them to another location. Which was fine with Irma as she was pathologically afraid of most any mushrooms that didn’t come in a soup can marked Campbell’s, and Uncle Henry’s lawyer and new girlfriend had been incredibly nice, took her on numerous tours from Sedona to Phoenix to Tucson, and handed over to her, in exchange, Uncle Henry’s self-constructed, The Most Grandiose Miniature Traveling Circus Ever.

•

Leading up to the  
Immediate Consequences That  
Weren’t on Uncle Henry’s  
Dead Conscience

•

Johnnie was a conscientious driver, had been drinking to excess lately but never got behind the wheel if not sober, had only experimented with hallucinogens during his high school years before

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discovering meditation in college and continued daily to seek mindless solace though it had given him up, didn't smoke except in sometimes social situations, had a one hundred percent perfect use rather than typical use effective rate with condoms, no children, been married and divorced once, paid his taxes, tried only to drink organic milk, didn't walk under ladders, eschewed elevators for steps, exercised, took his daily vitamin when he remembered it, and flossed his teeth nightly. Despite a semi-habitual but not obsessive dedication to fairly decent habits, and nearly every consumer product and service he purchased promising his devotions would guarantee a daily burnishing of sunny apollonian good luck as buffer against the wrath of divinities harboring an incomprehensible jealousy of piss-in-the-stream mortals, he was as banged up as the Thunderbird.

Whether or not Johnnie was superstitious and a believer in lucky charms is not the issue. He wasn't. He couldn't help a seeming obsequious complicity if every fruit of his labor for which he exchanged room and board was stamped on the rear with the footprint of "In God We Trust" rather than "You Would Be the Maker of Your Destiny if It Wasn't for Fate and the Rest of Those Assholes Out There." His reasoning had always been that doom was a natural consequence of birth.

Yet something had lately gone all wrong for Johnnie in a way that had caught his notice.

Something went all wrong for everyone, eventually. "Today is the first day of the rest of your life" only serves as a cartoon motivational proverb until it becomes an ill-informed eulogy.

But something had gone all wrong for Johnnie in the way that makes others think twice about joining arms in friendship and instead offering a gotta run wave from a healthy pace apart.

Traveling in the opposite direction of Odile, Johnnie hadn't seen the UFO that had distracted Odile from noting certain disaster. As far as he was aware he was not the Hand of God, Fate in a Strait Jacket, Destiny With A Ticket to Ride Your Sorry Ass into the predispensational, apocalyptic horizon, but even had Odile seen his thunder ball car she would have been unable to avert what was coming next, which several seconds in advance was as good as a police report already, there being paths of no return after all, some of which are writ

for the long haul and others which tumble past your peripheral vision on the sly. If we back up a moment, however, we'll see that Odile was not the first easy target and that Johnnie had to go out of his way to mess her up. As he approached the intersection, the light turning green, he had his foot on the gas when his companion yelled "Watch out!" alerting him to a black dog which had run into the street.

Johnnie veered left.

The dog cut right, a very hard right, successfully and deftly u-turning on its quick dog legs into the parking lot of a supermarket, and the wretched sounds of a crash scraping the asphalt raw behind her the animal booked it down a side street without a glance back.

•  
**And Beyond**  
•

"Sparky! Sparky! Stop that dog!" Johnnie's companion, scrambling from the car, had called to the few confused bystanders, but the dog was gone, gone, gone, never to be seen again.

Not that the dog had been seen by the confused bystanders in the first place as they happened to be three blind tenants of the red brick, high rise, kind-of-assisted living facility on the intersection's northwest corner. Which is not anything to be amused about and wink over any wrongly imagined references to mice scampering up to the farmer's wife, and was scarcely a coincidence as there quite often were one or two blind pedestrians at that intersection waiting to cross the street or crossing it, which was one of the reasons the light was an extra long one, a rare signal timed to defer to the needs of red-detailed white canes and an assortment of wheelchairs and the few elderly (perhaps even himself eventually, Johnnie knew) who frailly dared or could brave the sun with shuffling steps abbreviated by the eroding stream of life's humiliations. Outside those few meager seconds of deference, there was nothing kind about the six-lane crossing which for three decades counting had steeped in the ozone heavy air of a machine versus desiccated muscle death race. The coliseum crowd viewed the elimination rounds with the resentment of a clock weary of Harold Lloyd hanging onto its hands for dear life, holding back time, and as far as they were concerned it was all elimination rounds. The gladiators

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were all too vulnerable individuals which whomever had deemed fit to house in a high rise kind-of-assisted living facility in a hardscrabble neighborhood of vulnerables, bruised and twitchy drug addicts, old guard bottle-in-brown-bag alcoholics, unleashed crazies porting apocalypse minded signs, and homeless with shopping carts lining the heavily-trafficked street from horizon to horizon and far beyond those margins, all the way to downtown, day camp socializing on the steps of the library, sleeping in litter along the sidewalks, dozing on the postage stamp green areas cured brown with winter's deprivations, dreams discomfited by Hollywood-slick photoshopped glamour ads lining the cages of rent free bus stops. Billboards that featured health clubs for sun-licked Titans glowered over the street and no one noticed except for those passing through in their cars. The blind people couldn't see the billboards and the drug-addled, the alcoholics, the loonies and homeless didn't care. Equal Opportunity Birth made for good opiate for the masses ad copy, peculiarly mostly used as an injunction to rise above, but the possibility of becoming a minor god or goddess was dependent on riding Fortune's wheel rather than being ridden over, and very few of those who lived vaguely within a David and Goliath stone's throw distance even owned an auto.

Johnnie owned a classic scarred kiss of a ride but only because his uncle had bequeathed him it.

Maybe the dog was a ghost dog.

Though probably not, unless in the religious metaphorical sense of Cerberus preventing the dead from escaping gloomy Hades, except that Johnnie (at least) had no such ambition, content as he currently was that he only not slip more deeply into the abyss.

"Stop! Stop that dog!" Johnnie's girlfriend continued to yell then gave chase herself as it was her own dog and she was fortunate enough to be unhampered by injuries. Then, out of sight of the intersection, remembering the too fun mind-bender inner-dimensions of her overlarge, faux poodle pelt pocketbook chock full o' pills and dust, and that she was on probation, the platinum-haired woman decided to keep going. The fern green, brick apartment building in which she lived was, after all, only three blocks away, a short sprint, which was good because her heavy black boots with their two inch platforms and three inch heels were new, not broken in, not made for trekking, and

not very comfortable. Still, reaching her building, she managed to spring up the steps to the third floor door of a neighboring friend in whose bathroom she took shelter until midnight, by which time she had talked herself into believing she would have been worthless as a prejudiced almost ex-girlfriend witness and that the police had no interest in her or else the third floor landing and her usually ultra friendly number and impossibly state-of-the-art, brand new cell phone wouldn't have been so eerily, even disconcertingly silent.

This meant that Johnnie hadn't called either, which wasn't as much a concern as might be believed. Not when he and Hellene had been, in the car, arguing for the last time about their imminent break-up, she threatening to leap from the car then and there if he didn't stop, which she had planned on his doing (stopping, rather than not) at the intersection they were approaching where the light was conveniently red, because if there was anything Hellene liked it was putting on a show and the fantasy of slamming out of the car and stomping through bumper-to-bumper standing traffic to the sidewalk seemed just the right kind of ending to a never very satisfying relationship into which she'd fallen out of Johnnie's closest not-much-of-a-friend's bed.

•

## Hellene and Johnnie Were Sweethearts

•

"I'm getting too old for this?! For what? The truth? Does honesty have an expiration date?" Hellene had raged, eye skipping over what truth the Thunderbird's side view mirror might reveal to sidewind over neighboring cars for a potentially appreciative audience and future fans. "Maybe you're getting too old for this. Huh? Have you ever thought of that? Anyone who goes limp in an argument will go limp when it matters."

Which may not garner many sympathy points for Johnnie, the breaking of the sacred trust between friends bit, that he would have taken up with a friend's lover, but may carry less a disappointing essence of smarmy betrayal with the divulgence that, on the occasion of the falling out, Johnnie's closest friend had already secretly taken up with Johnnie's then girlfriend, Samantha, an aspiring circus entertainer who was never going to be happy if she wasn't performing breathtak-

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ing aerial contortions under a Las Vegas Big Top, dangling by her feet from French scarves dyed carmine with the dried and boiled bodies of thousands of insects that have sucked the humors of prickly pear cacti, and so it's rather sad to be privy to the knowledge that she would never move anywhere beyond training thumb-sucking preschoolers to turn somersaults with one hand (morning and afternoons) and educating curious women in the pleasures of pole dancing for exercise (evening gig).

Truth be told, Samantha just wasn't a happy person. Neither was Johnnie. Nor his once closest friend, bags already packed, who had long since decided he had nothing left to lose in that neighborhood and promptly slipped town for the hermetic wilds of Montana. Or Hellene. Not that their mortal miseries had anything to do with their sleeping arrangements of the moment. Rather, their inability to be satisfied with any toy longer than the moment of giddy acquisition had everything to do with stillborn futures greeting each day from the wrong side of the bed, and if you happened to be there with them (having passed that sainted moment of acquisition) then woe to you.

Well, apart from Johnnie who was, yes, miserable, but from childhood he'd a marked tendency to become attached to his toys and wasn't one for consumer excess. And Hellene, she wasn't quite so miserable as the rest as she dispensed so much misery that by noon her angst bottle was free and clear.

Johnnie hadn't even known that Hellene had slept with his closest friend. But Hellene was aware Johnnie's friend, her briefly then paramour-of-the-moment, had taken up with Samantha, as had Johnnie been aware. Because Hellene told him. The world is composed of those who perceive it as their duty to tell, those who prefer not, and those whose business it really is. She had been vaguely content to avenge that then boyfriend's betrayal by bedding first Samantha then Johnnie, which Samantha didn't know about (the Johnnie bit) but Johnnie had known about Sam and Hellene. Because Hellene told him this too over that season's interpretation of chips and dip and beaucoup liquid refreshment at her favorite bar of the moment, which was in walking distance of her apartment which was good as they both got tanked. Thus Johnnie and Hellene, as Johnnie had a way of reluctantly leaving a meal and if Hellene too had been at Sam's

table, then it seemed the home fire was casting a familiar glow on the crumbs.

If Hellene hadn't handled either her relationship or break-up with Johnnie particularly well, neither had Johnnie who was not very adept at mediating consequence into personally favorable positions relative his or anyone else's actions.

•

## They Had a Quarrel One Day

•

“You want out? You want out?” Johnnie had yelled, and because he knew Hellene about as well as anyone and was aware she wanted more than anything to play dramatic and stomp out of the car, suspecting that her hopes were that a lemon yellow Porsche would pursue and offer a ride, he'd put his foot heavily on the gas as the light turned green and yelled he would let her out when he was “damn good and ready” which would be when he screeched to a neck-popping stop in front of her apartment building which was only three too long blocks away.

But Johnnie never again parked his golden Thunderbird in front of Hellene's apartment building because the golden Thunderbird was dead and the relationship he'd not been exactly almost eager to end, despite Hellene's sudden determination, was dead as dead could be when she ran off down the street and didn't return. Though Johnnie understood this probably had to do with an expired sexual rebound visa (not to mention the futile effort that was his life which Hellene had frequently discussed with him) he thought she could have at least called to check on his health. To allay any worries he hoped might be elephants of burden pinning her likely drunken arms to the bathroom tile and preventing her from phoning, he text messaged her at three a.m. from his hospital room, “Bitter and broken but alive and weller.” Then he slid out of the inhospitable uncomfortable bed and, the dry hospital air mocking his bare buttocks (in the way that only dry hospital air can do) he reluctantly assumed his butt end of a bad joke place in the tragic loss of dignity mocked so often by that brand of less experienced, cold hearted individuals who watch, write and act in bad television sitcoms. In one of those thin, uncomfortable inhospitable

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hospital gowns which serves no good purpose but to tax the inmate's dignity for sake of the keeper, to the window he limped on bare feet and crutches over the slightly gritty linoleum floor, in the way that bare feet tentatively, uncomfortably pad on inhospitable hospital floors. He pulled apart the short beige drapes that were already mostly ajar, hospitals being great disrespecters of privacy, and tried to look past the ghost of his reflection and that of his room on the lights of the surrounding city and all the black spaces in between.

Hellene was nowhere to be seen.

Johnnie had not infrequently been subjected to Hellene's hyper animated soap opera rehashes, she a devoted follower of them, and Johnnie was aware that if there was any stage in the world that attracted high drama, that set was a hospital room. If not for the expired rebound visa, Hellene would have been right at home, eager to exploit unprincipled disaster, but Johnnie was a slightly more sensitive sort than his now ex-girlfriend, and the thoughts bothering him were the type to which Hellene had been immune, clichéd musings such as who before him had worn the thin hospital gown with its white piping ties and who had been in this room before him and were they worrying about the bill or were their spirits (and others which had slipped a grave dispensation) stalking the halls, and if he slept would they bother him in his dreams with pallid faces and now done-for conclusions. They were expected thoughts, less fodder for television paranormal squishiness than an insistent spiritual fungus, and he would never have permitted himself to be checked in the hospital for a night's observation, when all that was wrong with him was a fractured foot, a broken thumb, and two cracked ribs embracing a not-so-busted heart, had it not been for the slim hope Hellene would find sexually irresistible the exhilarating prospect of antiseptic's perfume.

And the hospital admissions clerk. Who had looked a little like Hellene when Hellene was trying to impress her probation officer. She had eye-candy-in-the-shop-window tempted him.

"I'm not sure I want to do this," he'd told the clerk.

"Ah, c'mon, where's your spirit of adventure?" she'd replied, despite the fact he had no insurance, which surprised him, that he was considered a candidate for admission at all. He'd expected and hoped to be chucked out on the street.

"I've had enough adventure for one day."

"Which is why you need a rest. Think of us as a grand hotel and that you're here for a well-deserved vacation. What's to complain about?"

"I have no insurance?"

"That's why we're taking a nice healthy deposit," the admissions clerk replied, Johnnie struggling to sign the check with his largely useless right hand.

"I can't afford this," he said. "I'm already paying off another massive emergency room bill."

"Accident prone?"

"Shrapnel." Johnnie pointed to his mangled cheek, not inclined to explain further.

"Oh, I thought it was maybe a bad case of adult acne."

"Can you speak up?" Johnnie indicated his left ear. "Prematurely deaf."

"Hmmm. I hadn't really looked because I didn't want to stare." She regarded him for a moment. "I first thought it was maybe a bad case of adult acne but it isn't, is it."

"No. I do get the occasional pimple."

"Yucky," she smiled.

"But that goes away. The shrapnel won't."

"Double yuck. That's why there's plastic surgery."

*Double Yuck.* He marveled at the blithe way it popped out of her immune to disaster mouth. And she was still smiling, one hand entering data in the computer, her other waiting for his check.

"I don't have insurance. Remember?"

"Maybe it's time to get some."

"I couldn't afford it."

"That's what they all say until they can't not afford it. You can't be too careful with your health."

"You should have been around a few weeks ago to warn me."

"Of course it might not help out with problems that are considered elective procedures or preexisting conditions."

"Sure. And what if I get sick and they drop me?"

"Life's complex," she smiled.

## THUNDERBIRD AND THE BALL OF TWINE

“Would you like to meet me for coffee tomorrow night?” Johnnie asked the clerk, because she had sleek blond hair cut in a bob tucked behind her pretty pink ears, much like Hellene, had full lips much like Hellene’s, wore bright red lipstick close to the same shade of Hellene’s, and had her large eyes outlined in thick black eyeliner, just like Hellene outlined her large eyes. Plus, she was nice to him. Almost. And Hellene being history (which she most certainly was if her fetish for hospital-as-theater didn’t take precedence over her disgust with him) he wanted nothing more than to wipe her clean from his mind and get on with his life by taking the admissions clerk, whose name was Lena, to maybe even the same bar where he’d first taken Hellene after she’d betrayed his closest friend with Sam, and he’d not had any idea at the time that Hellene had been sleeping with his closest friend but of course his closest friend hadn’t cared about that when he found out Hellene was sleeping with Johnnie.

He hadn’t cared at all. He’d just wanted out.

As for Samantha and Hellene, they’d happened two nights previous to that not-so-fateful day when Hellene and Johnnie fell in with each other. In a nightclub bathroom Hellene and Samantha had happened, so one could not properly really say they had “slept” together. Details aren’t forthcoming but Samantha had felt it a very circusy thing to do, considering her technical use of the stall.

If he took the clerk to that very same bar, perhaps Hellene would be there and observe how he had successfully moved along. But then that struck him as a very sad thing to do, even desperate, loathsome and infantile. Though few ever seemed to get too old for vengeful, infantile behavior, he decided against it.

The clerk didn’t deserve that kind of treatment and he felt guilty he’d even thought of it.

He didn’t deserve that kind of treatment either, he’d told himself.

“I’d ask you out for dinner but I’m going to be broke,” Johnnie had said.

The admissions clerk laughed.

“You could at least not laugh so hard,” Johnnie Jackson said.

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew how ridiculous is the idea of me going out with someone who has no health insurance.”

“If you fell in love with me then one day I could gain citizenship in the nation of the insured and it would no longer be a problem.”

The admissions clerk had cleared her throat.

“As long as you’re not laughing at me because I’m a midget,” Johnnie said.

“You’re not a midget,” the admissions clerk had said after a befuddled pause.

“It would be bad form for you to laugh at me if I was a pock-marked midget, just because I was a midget.”

After two befuddled pauses, the admissions clerk replied, “I would never make fun of a midget because he was a midget.”

She lied. Most people laugh at midgets just as most people mock the indignity of hospital garb. Johnnie could tell the admissions clerk was lying by the way she was gnawing her red bottom lip and rocking back and forth now like a kindergartner precariously perched for the indignity of a butt bruising fall from her school seat when it proved not to be a playground horse, except that the admissions clerk wasn’t humiliated, she was only annoyed and eager to be rid of Johnnie, who she wouldn’t even remember long enough for him to become a vaguely entertaining oddity ridiculed at break time, which is also when she would check her reflection in the bathroom mirror and find her perfect teeth dotted with pellets of red and decide a change in brand of lipstick was in order if she was going to stay ever starlet ready for the next internet social hub destined cell phone capture that would make her feel she was leading a vaguely recognized life.

And because the admissions clerk looked so much like Hellene, and because Johnnie was experiencing separation anxiety and knew he would likely never see Hellene again, he took the plunge of an immediate, imaginary, rebound non-romance that would leave him empty but perhaps wanting no more of women with red waxed lips and black outlined eyes and pretty blond hair bobs tucked behind pink ears, and checked himself into the hospital promising his dead uncle as guarantor. Plus, reiterating, he was having separation anxiety and for a few hours at least he would have the comfort of a Hellene clone several floors below him.

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In the Long Run  
Had The Night Gone According to Plan  
It Probably Wouldn't Have Made Any Difference

•

By three-ten in the morning, Hellene not having made an appearance, he was also over the rebound non-relationship. "That Lena was an expensive woman," he said to his reflection in the window and whatever ghosts were loitering around him. "Too much money to spend on a woman who would laugh at midgets."

The pockmarked reflection stared back at him, still new and disquietingly alien. Life's full of rewards just like this for jobs well done and this reflection was one of them.

By three-thirty in the morning Johnnie was sitting outside the front of the hospital awaiting a taxi that would take him to his apartment when an older woman with white hair streaked with black who looked too familiar exited the great glass doors and sat a healthy distance from him between the concrete barricade planters that guarded the entrance from the desperate assaults of, presumably, such terrorists as really sick people who couldn't afford a bed.

As already mentioned, something had gone all wrong for Johnnie in the way that makes others think twice about joining arms in friendship then instead offer a gotta run wave from a healthy pace apart. Johnnie hoped the distance the woman had left between them was indication of her knowledge he was a bad bet.

The woman looking into the distance, he attempted to ignore her presence.

Then, as he feared she might, she initiated conversation, which was not what he wanted. He hadn't even really wanted conversation with the woman in admissions, not after he'd started talking to her. He wanted conversation with no one. He was in no mood. He hurt. Nosy inquiries would probably be made that even under normal circumstances he shouldn't answer without a lawyer present and an officer of the law advising him of his rights, but the woman would likely feel, considering, these formalities were past tense, water under the bridge, and that his very pained soul was owed her.

“It was an accident, not a life time commitment,” Johnnie heard himself announce.

Which meant he had spoken first. But as far as he was concerned the woman had. She had cleared her throat. If the fastest camera in the world could take millions of pictures a second and a picture was worth a thousand words then her body language alone insinuated worlds too much information for him to process, which was why he didn’t know what to think of her very existence when his own was difficult enough to rationalize. Rather than getting tied up in the details it was easier to just free associate and deal with what caught on the emotional Velcro.

The woman managed a short laugh devoid of ominous undertones. “Oh, I don’t know about that. Some moments, more so than others, deliver themselves like Russian magic apples.”

Johnnie determined not to inquire what she meant as he was already aware.

“It’s cold,” the woman said, wrapping a fuzzy woolen red and yellow striped muffler around her neck and the lower half of her face.

Johnnie tugged his floppy knit cap down so it nearly obscured his eyes. “No, I wouldn’t be more comfortable.”

“More comfortable than what?”

“I wouldn’t be more comfortable inside. I’m fine where I am,” Johnnie said.

“I don’t remember asking.” Odile’s aunt, who had been driving the Kia, picked one by one fuzzy yellow and red woolen nothings off her scarf, tossing the shredded sheep hair into the south bound, sharpening wind. “Waiting for a ride?”

“Nope.”

“Taxi?”

Johnnie stared at the ground.

“Which way?” Odile’s aunt asked.

Was she picking him up? The woman had sat on his right side, his still good side, and Johnnie knew his former unpockmarked self had been somewhat attractive but not so irresistible that she should ignore the ill omen of their first encounter. He wasn’t, however, familiar with the peculiar habits and needs of every woman in the world, not at all, so perhaps she was among a class who did imagine that hospital curbside was an appropriate cruising lane.

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“Not yours.”

She said, not so much scolding—or disappointed or injured—as matter-of-fact, “You don’t sound very conciliatory, considering.”

“As you’re probably going to be suing the shit out of me and I don’t have any money, I think it’s a wise idea if we don’t become too friendly,” Johnnie interrupted.

“I take it you don’t buy into honey catching more flies than vinegar.”

“I’ve never gotten that saying. Who wants to waste good honey catching flies?” Johnnie asked, which he felt was saying too much; the question just popped out his chapped lips like his brain had convivial, conversational intention no matter his own reluctance, and he was immediately sorry for the poor impulse control.

But, as the words had left his mouth he’d pictured the bowl of honey finally, the first time ever, white bowl filled with gold, resting on a white tablecloth spread out on a white floor in a long and narrow white room otherwise barren but for blue shadows of diminishing afternoon light. Then he saw the fly frozen in the honey and realized the absence of contention in the sanctuary’s silence and the peace afforded an unseen meal being taken nearby.

He’d hoped the woman would protest no, no, she wasn’t going to sue, that the accident wasn’t his fault, that suffering a minor injury or two renewed her will to live so thank you for the invigorating lesson, what didn’t kill Nietzsche made him stronger as long as he wasn’t witnessing the whipping of a horse whereupon (the story goes) his mental health completely broke and to the sanitarium he went so count me ever in your debt for only cracking up my auto and not my brain.

Instead, she said, “I’m not feeling at my best right now, but you aren’t either, obviously. Perhaps neither one of us is in the right frame of mind to discuss the accident.”

Johnnie wondered what there was to discuss.

He said, “I’m not the one who followed me out here...”

“I didn’t follow you...”

“...to make accusations.”

“You’re the one who raised the issue of the accident,” she pointed out.

“You planned on my doing so.”

“I’ve not a clue what you mean.”

“You didn’t follow me out here? Don’t you think it’s odd that we are both happening to sit here, the only two people who happen to be sitting here in the middle of the night?—this hospital is huge—and you came out right after me? What am I supposed to think?” Johnnie asked.

“Don’t be paranoid.”

Johnnie stiffened, which was difficult to do as he was already nearly immobile with his injuries and the cold.

“It’s coincidence,” Johnnie said, “you’re right.”

“I did not follow you,” the woman insisted. “I thought I’d go home for a few hours to get a shower and change my clothes. I would like to fit in a short nap as well, but I may just have time to have a cup of coffee and toast before I take the rail down to the airport to pick up my husband’s car. I was as surprised to see you out here as you were to see me.”

“How is your friend?” Johnnie asked.

“You mean my niece? She’s asleep.”

“I’d say I’m sorry but you’d take it as an admission of responsibility.”

“You just don’t let up, do you?” the woman said. “I’ll tell her you sent your regards.”

“Hey, look at this way! What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” Johnnie made a despairing, ill-dignified play for gratitude.

Odile’s aunt perhaps turned out to be one of the few who knew better. She laughed and Johnnie thought he heard in her laughter a hint of weary disdain.

Johnnie amended, “Okay. What doesn’t kill me today enjoys the chase.”

“I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Johnnie said, oblique.

His teeth chattered. The winter air was cutting cold and his bulky cotton canvas jacket with its fleece lining and a dozen pockets turned out to look only warm enough but less substantial than his discount cotton socks. He wished for a cup of coffee blistering his hands and sweating his nose but he likely didn’t have time to find a refreshment

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vending area and make it back before his taxi arrived, especially not on crutches, certainly not with cracked ribs.

“I know cotton doesn’t make for a good winter coat. What makes you think this cotton coat is the only winter coat I have?” Johnnie said, though it was. “Do you think I have any reason to be ashamed of that, if it is my only coat? I don’t.”

Claudia stared a moment before answering, “I didn’t say anything about it as it’s none of my business. But it’s true.”

“What?”

“No one who expects you to keep warm in the winter is going to be selling you cotton.”

“You didn’t say anything about what? You said cotton doesn’t make for a good winter coat.”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t say that.”

She hadn’t.

“Sorry, my ear,” Johnnie excused himself, “I have trouble hearing from time to time.”

“I was just thinking it though.” Claudia said. “If you’d bothered to look, you’d notice I’m wearing a cotton coat, too,” she added.

Johnnie didn’t look. “You have to wonder why so many cotton winter coats are sold. Just a high demand for cheap coats, I suppose. A lot of cold people out there who can’t afford good wool or a down coat.”

“Would seem so.”

“Or maybe a lot of stupid people.”

Claudia said, still staring, “You look cold. I know I am. Would you like to go inside and have a cup of coffee? My treat.”

“My taxi’s going to be here any minute,” Johnnie declined, and would have refused even if he’d had no excuse.

“Which way are you going? If we’re headed the same direction...”

“I don’t think so,” Johnnie said.

“Yes, you’re right, it’s probably not the best idea.”

Claudia clucked her tongue.

“It was an accident,” Johnnie reiterated. “Life’s full of them.”

Claudia said nothing in response. Despite Johnnie’s desire that they not speak, that they have nothing to do with each other, that they learn no more about each other than would be necessary, Claudia’s

decision to not respond made for an awkward silence. He took out his phone in an attempt to make himself look busy and saw the charge was close to running out. He played for a little while at appearing involved, then put in his ear buds and let the phone's shuffle determine his listening preferences. It rewarded him with Bob Dylan's "Isis." But when Claudia didn't politely reciprocate by taking out her own phone and making an effort to look as removed, he removed his ear buds and put his phone away, concerned that he may only appear to lack in confidence.

"Hemp is better for the environment. It's cool in the summer and warm in the winter but it's god damn expensive, too, and probably not warm enough for a winter coat," Johnnie said and immediately wanted to pound himself into the concrete as the last thing he wanted to do was sound open to conversation.

"Listen. I really really don't want to talk with you," Johnnie remitted his loquaciousness.

"I understand. Hemp's too underworld to talk about in the open."

"I don't want to get involved."

"That too. Hemp's a dangerously involving subject."

"Would you please respect my wishes and leave me the hell alone?"

"I share the same sentiment in that I would've preferred you hadn't creamed my niece's car, but when I walked out and found you sitting here I didn't flash you my battle scars, did I?"

No, but a guilty conscience had difficulty avoiding a shining raccoon eye despite the woman's sunglasses covering.

Johnnie turned his scarred face to her in full. "I've no idea how to relate to this sidewalk right now, much less to you or your friend. OK?"

Johnnie quickly turning his face away again, Odile's aunt removed her sunglasses, pushed them up over her white and black hair, and examined his profile.

Her phone rang.

"What are you doing awake?" she asked, answering it. In response to the voice on the other end, she nodded assent, saying "Yes" several times, then, "Guess who's sitting here next to me outside the hospital?"

The next thing Johnnie knew, Claudia had deposited her phone in his hand.

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“Who’s with you? Cliff?” a groggy voice asked. Then sensing that Claudia no longer held the phone, the voice said, “Cliff? What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming by until tomorrow.”

“No, it’s me,” Johnnie said, uncomfortable, pained both physically and psychically.

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then the woman asked, quizzical, “Do we know each other?”

Did they know each other?

Why he hurt so, Johnnie didn’t know. It wasn’t the pain of his physical injuries that made it difficult for him to answer. Instead, his sorrow and perplexity was that of an individual floating on the ocean in a too small, unprotected boat on a night when the dark of a clouded, new moon sky meets the water all around with an unremitting pitilessness of mysterious and impenetrable black. Though one’s eyes were open, one was blind, able only to hear and feel the terrible and deep ocean, but seeing nothing. He could understand how sailor or civilian might feel the only means of making peace with one’s horror of that terrifying deep would be to release one’s self into it, to cease to fight, to fill one’s lungs and stomach with its dominion and be wholly absorbed into that world.

“It’s funny you should say that,” Johnnie replied, “because I’m sure you’ve known people for years who’ve made less an impact on you than I have in the few minutes of our acquaintance. Isn’t that funny? Isn’t life funny that way? No, I didn’t think so, either,” he hurried on, not giving her a chance to answer before Claudia took the phone back from him.

She spoke a few words into the phone and returned it to her pocket.

Again, Claudia faced him. Johnnie expected censure. Instead, she said, “That was rude and stupid on my part. My apologies.”

Johnnie nodded.

“Is it possible we’ve met before,” Claudia ventured, “you look vaguely familiar.”

It wasn’t impossible. The city crammed with millions of souls whose eyes grazed the faces of hundreds daily, in cars, on the subway, at coffee shops, clubs, grocery stores, pharmacies, simply walking from the parking lot to a store, one unconsciously scanned those near and

far for familiar features, even a gait, attire, that signaled tribal member or dedicated foe, and tossed the remainder in the background noise hold basket, not yet the waste basket, or else how would one recognize that the six giggling university girls in the dairy aisle were the six seen the previous Wednesday and the Friday before that at about the same time?

Perhaps Claudia had seen Johnnie standing in a grocery line and he had been in her hold basket waiting for subsequent observances that would determine him as perhaps a member of the neighborhood community, or just the community of shoppers who frequented the same store. Most likely, he would never have crossed her path again, but even if he had, the likelihood would be through a shared commonality so marginal that they would never had cause to even acknowledge one another's presence with a nod.

Was it like this in the primal landscapes of human civilization, were people already so locked into their tribes, families and duties that they never spoke to those they chanced upon on the grasslands but kept to their allotted paths, minding each their own business, wrapped up in private concerns? The anthropologist, Robin Dunbar, had been able to accurately predict the average group size of a number of different species of monkeys based on their neocortex size. The larger the neocortex, the larger the group. The general limit of the intimate circle for humans was a zodiac 12, just enough for a last supper. The mean group size was 150, and this only under pressure of communal endeavors such as agriculture and war. When a saturation point was reached where a group could absorb no more faces, mouths, voices and bodies, the social cell would split, forming another group. Humans were only constructed to tolerate a relatively small grooming clique. They had only so much energy to expend on vital relationships. Johnnie, who had sadly chosen some wrong friends in the past on whom to expend his energy, was feeling how empty he was and strained by his own company of one which had gotten way too complex and bizarre lately even for him. Had he been on the grassland of the primal landscape of human civilization and seen Claudia approaching, he would have hidden himself in the convenient vegetation, but there was no place to hide on the concrete plain.

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“Maybe it was just someone like me,” Johnnie said. “As long as it wasn’t someone just like me.”

“A joke! Very good!” Claudia laughed. “Yes, I’m vain enough that I like to think I’m the original deal, too. I wouldn’t cherish the idea of anyone out there being just like me.”

“I wasn’t joking. What I meant was I not only wouldn’t wish myself on anyone else, I don’t think anyone else would want to be me.”

“Don’t we all feel like that at one time or another? But, in the end, could you really imagine abandoning yourself completely, all your memories, the intrinsic you, for the promise of being a seemingly happier or better other?”

“If I lost all my memories, if I completely left behind all there is of myself, how would I know any better to regret what I’d done?”

“I see what you mean,” Claudia said. Then perhaps after chewing on that a bit, she said, “Maybe I’ll remember how we know each other later. Or maybe you will.”

Claudia was probably a nice person. Under other circumstances, they would have probably gotten along well enough. The other woman, the not Claudia, was probably a nice person as well when she wasn’t wild eyed, banged up from someone such as Johnnie introducing himself via brutalizing her car, not that she’d been raging bitter furious, abrasive or contentious, which she’d every right to be, no, under the auspices of her thousand yard stare she’d instead floated right out of the situation, down the street, and into his arms as his sense of responsibility and curiosity had compelled him to hobble after and head her off at the pass, herding her back to the literal scene of the accident. The other woman, the not Claudia, had even possessed a kind of magnetic something or other that, under other circumstances, might have inclined Johnnie to naturally, even helplessly gravitate toward her, for instance in a check-out line at a grocery store where their items could have briefly shared the bed and bundling board of the conveyor belt while he imagined their progress in and out of a relationship, the break-up of which would be so sad, for that reason alone his choice might be to not strike up a conversation. Or, if he’d had a particularly good day, he might have tried out an innocuous few words like how did they manage to keep selling the gossip tabloids or the ones with bizarre news like “Duck Hunter’s Stray Bullet Brings

Down Messenger of God”, “Woman Gives Birth to Baby Alien Clowns”, and “How You Can Go Home with E.T!” Better yet, he imagined that had he instead seen her in the coffee shop he sometimes frequented, a table next to her could as easily be imagined to be vacant, at which he would take a seat and after an appropriate pause he could casually ask if she came there often as he had never seen her before. Any inconsequential, unprovocative conversation starter was preferable to scaring the wits out of her and himself with a love-at-first-sight confession scenario, especially when that wasn’t even the case, his immediate feelings having been instead a tumult of bafflement, confusion, intimidation, curiosity, and infatuated pathetic vulnerability, Johnnie facing the cosmic dam that held back the Milky Way as it ruptured, a flood of stars engulfing him in a galaxy of fathomless intentionality.

No, Johnnie actually had no idea what he would have said to her had he first encountered her at the coffee shop. He would have reflexively denied the feelings as hormonal histrionics, left the shop without saying a word, and counted it as an act of grace and mercy.

“We don’t know each other,” Johnnie said to that other woman’s aunt.

They knew each other because of the accident. That’s all there was to it.

As fucked up as Johnnie knew he was, he felt he was rapidly deteriorating, perhaps because of the accident. Real terror ripped through him and sped on, he instinctively turning his head in its direction as if he should be able to chase its shadow down the street to its dark alley destination. But there was no reason, for he knew if he waited the panic would return, cycle round the block and through him again as it had been doing with increasing frequency since he wasn’t sure when, only aware the block had been shrinking, the runner’s course tightening.

“I keep seeing you with orange or red hair. Or the person you look like had orange or red hair, and a very pale face.” Claudia’s facial recognition software was working overtime but confused by the peripherals.

“Sounds like a clown,” Johnnie said, in spite of himself.

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“What do you do for a living?” Claudia eyed Johnnie with what he uncomfortably felt was far too much curiosity.

“Why are you still bothering me?” Johnnie asked. “I told you, it sounds like you’re looking for a clown and I...” He had to think about it. “I sell books.”

“Can I have your cell phone number?” Claudia had taken out her cell phone again.

“Why? Do you need a clown for a birthday party?”

Claudia laughed. “You want nothing to do with me, do you?”

“No.”

It was, yes, too late for that, now, wasn’t it?

“Your cell phone number?” Claudia asked.

“What’s her name, that other woman, your friend, she already has my insurance information.”

“I’m not my niece.”

“I tried to tell her,” Johnnie said, “at the scene,” the dog running into the street before him again, he wrenching the wheel to the left, toward the Kia, he had seen to his left before him the Kia and zeroed in on it, the thought of turning right into a probable less destructive collision had never entered his mind, perhaps because there would have been more risk to Hellene, “the accident was unavoidable, it dashed out into the street right in front of my car. Either way I veered, left or right, I was going to end up hitting someone.”

That’s why there are leash laws, Johnnie opened his mouth to add, facing Claudia again, but as he looked at her he was overcome by dizziness and nausea choked the words in his throat.

Struggling to clarify his anxiety, Johnnie felt he was in the bell tower of an old mission in an Alfred Hitchcock movie and Sparky the dog was the nun emerging from the shadows coincidental with a *deus ex machina* invisible sucker punch sending Kim Novak over the edge for no sensible reason but for the fact oracle was intent on punching her lights out, she had hit that point in the disequilibrating loop of obsessive replays where oracle had no other choice and would make advantage of any distraction as camouflage to its index finger reaching in to tap-tip her over. A source of confusion to Johnnie was that he wasn’t only Jimmy Stewart, plagued with vertigo, but also Kim Novak, a perplexity he wasn’t going to try to figure out now. And he had no

idea why a black lab would be so pit bull voracious in its man's best friend determination to fuck up his life, and couldn't explain why, as he looked at her hands wrapped around her cell phone, his brain was now co-opting Claudia for the role of the nun and had her ring-ringing the mission bell while Jimmy Stewart stood gazing down into Daedalus' conch shell split wide open as the head of Novak cum Madeline Elster cum Judy Barton to reveal an ant emerging from leviathan's cold, unblinking eye at the center. "Whoa." But the nun, the reason and why of her at least posed no problem when one comprehended that from moment to moment nothing remained the same, that the nun post Kim Novak's leap was not exactly the same whose shadowed face had startled Judy Barton, and that instead of being herself the *deux ex machina*, the nun who tolled the bell was only part of the clean-up crew.

Which didn't mean that Jimmy Stewart was ever going to want to see her again either.

"How did it know it was my car? Was it sitting there waiting for me this entire time?"

"What?"

Johnnie mumbled on, oblivious now to anything but the nausea and fear filling him, "It felt like it was a part of me racing out of my dreams, like you're in a movie, watching a movie, I mean, and the gun appears, you hear the bang, the story should stay there on the screen, but when you leave the theater there's a smoking gun lying on the street." His voice trailed off.

"Yes?" Claudia said, apparently listening.

"I don't know what's happening to me," Johnnie said.

"You were in an accident."

"You're probably one of those weird women who's going to tell me it's fate."

"What? The accident?" Claudia asked.

"I don't know."

"I don't know what you're talking about either. I just wanted your cell phone number so when the anniversary of our little collision came around I could call and congratulate you for still being alive, having as little brain as you do, driving without a seatbelt on. Some laws exist for a reason, you know, and I'm a little surprised at you because you're too

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old not to know that. You're not some kid fresh out of school. There are people your age and younger who are having mid-life crises already."

A taxi arrived, but not the tangerine orange and black kind upon which Johnnie had called. It was generic white and was Claudia's. She stood. "You sure you don't want to share a ride?" she asked.

Johnnie thought a moment. "By definition, you can't call an accident fate, can you?"

Claudia placing her hand lightly but with calming pressure on his knee, he looked at the woman who was looking at him. Their eyes met.

"Hello," she smiled.

"Hello," Johnnie replied.

"OK, finally, we make contact. How're you feeling?"

"Like hell," Johnnie said.

"You'll feel worse tomorrow."

"How's your daughter?" Johnnie asked. "She sounded a little out of it."

"Odile's my niece and she's going to feel worse tomorrow as well. So am I. When you're moaning and groaning about how much it hurts, remember you're not the only one in that boat."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Claudia reassured. "It's not like it was your dog."

And with that, Odile's aunt had risen, climbed into the taxi, closed the taxi door, and the cab had driven off down the mostly empty city street, the rubber of its wheels grinding a big empty zero in the air in the way that car wheels tend to do deep in the early morning hours on cold mostly empty city streets.

Johnnie stared at the asphalt. If anyone had asked him what he was thinking about, he would have replied the tried and supposedly true "a nice warm bed" when what he was considering was if, by definition, one could or couldn't call an accident fate, and felt that the most primitive conjuring of the word likely was born of a different encounter with the horizon than remained in the glassy eyes of the mummified definition in the dictionary.

Ten minutes later, Johnnie's cab hadn't yet shown so he called for another. Thirty minutes later, feeling purposefully shunned, rather than return to the hospital he sought shelter in the enclosed bus stop at the end of the block where he covered himself with newsprint sheets of an abandoned newspaper and fell asleep under the flaming, apocalyptic, urban skyline of a movie advertisement that showed the modern cowboy hero, a large futuristic gun braced on his hip, single handedly facing down a fleet of alien invaders. He dreamt of running down night streets, white beams tracking him from the black sky. When he woke up it was daylight, cars zipping past on the street, the eyes of the occasional passenger, driver, pedestrian focusing on him, probably wondering who he was and why he was sleeping on a bench.

Johnnie's cell phone had just enough charge for him to call his sister, whose car drove up before the bus stop in less than ten minutes, which may or may not suggest there was a reason he'd been reluctant to call Irma for a lift though she lived within five minutes of the hospital.

"You are some messed up shit," Irma said as she assisted him into the car.

"Just lucky, I guess," Johnnie said the first unimaginative thing that popped to his mind and wanted to pound himself into his seat because it was so par for the course, this inability to keep his mouth shut when he had nothing of reason to contribute.

"Didn't have your seat belt on, did you! Why? Do you have a death wish or something?" Irma hopped in the driver's seat and slammed her door so hard that she felt compelled to open and shut it just to make sure she'd not broken it. Then, assured her car's integrity was still intact, she launched in on Johnnie again. "What the hell is wrong with your brain? Like I want to hear any explanation from the mouth of a fool like you. Don't answer me. Don't. We're going back to my place where you will rest, and we'll talk about things when you wake up. We're going to get you fixed up and on the right track again."

"I'd prefer to go home."

"OK, if you insist, but I just want to tell you two things, numero uno, you've been a mess since you started seeing Hellene and, numero duo, death isn't the best way to finalize a relationship. Got that?"

"Numero dos."

*THUNDERBIRD AND THE BALL OF TWINE*

“What? Are you correcting me?”

“I was a mess before I started seeing Hellene,” Johnnie said.

He knew Irma wouldn't argue with that.

# 3



Three Weeks Earlier  
Johnnie's Left Profile and Ears  
Were Unremarkable  
And All Was All Right with the World



**Not optimum.**

Only three weeks previous, Johnnie Jackson had been spread out on Hellene's faux black-and-white tiled bathroom floor, exhausted from retching, her whining dog scratching at the apartment's front door