

Creation and Loss

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*"Creation—happens to us, burns into us, changes us,
we tremble and swoon, we submit."*

—Martin Buber

1

Jack works the bar at Aladdin's on Saturdays while his sister Louellen tends the restaurant upstairs. Both are the only friends I have kept since high school, over forty years ago. For every drink he mixes for me, Jack pours himself a shot. This way, he better understands the slurring of his customers as something more than mere aging.

Louellen comes down from the kitchen to fetch a liqueur for her cooking. She stands very near me, her hands cupped and prayerful in front of her. Her hair is much lighter now than what I recall from school, her face lined. She is far more radiant than in her youth, more assured. She has earned the right to curl her lip into a smile. She has earned the right to place her hands atop the counter with softness.

I admire her as I sit on my bar stool, her back a smooth linen as she reaches for the bottom shelf. Her bracelet jangles on the neck of a decanter. She never takes a nip, even on the coldest day of winter, even in her darkest gloom. Perhaps this is what makes her so desirable, her unwillingness to sink to our depths. Her skin is far looser than it used to be, and there are brown spots on her hands. Jack speaks of her decay as he tips another shot out of the bottle. He speaks of how her body has dissolved into the squalor of old age. I disagree. Her eyes have not lost their ember, they glisten in front of me like tumblers in the rinse.

I think of it as gold, the way we age. Life deposits enormous

troves of experience within the body and it grows heavy with the weight of such precious cargo. The passage to these riches is clearly delineated, through the eyes.

As I sip my rock and rye, Louellen asks if I would like to attend her church tomorrow. She is quiet, yet she attends services where the parishioners speak in tongues. Charismatic, she calls it, the way they utter unfamiliar syllables and flop on the floor. I decline her invitation and yet her smile isn't swallowed between terse lips. Tolerance is another present granted for one's time on this planet.

I remain at Aladdin's until it closes. Jack can barely stand and Louellen is called down to close the bar and put him to sleep on the cot inside the storage room. Louellen and I are left alone with the piped-in music and the artwork on the walls. I watch as she counts the money in the register, as she rinses the tumblers and ashtrays, as she runs the vacuum cleaner. She occasionally kneels to lift a nickel off the carpet from beneath the shadow of a bar stool.

By the time she is prepared to leave, the temperature outside has dropped considerably and rain splashes over us. We escort a patron to a waiting taxicab then stand under the awning. Louellen ties a plastic scarf onto her head and a long blue coat around her body. By the street lamp I can see indentations in her lips from where she has bitten them. She often has these moments, choosing not to express her anxieties overtly but instead distributing small deformities about her body.

She clutches her purse and pats my shoulder, her hand in a blue driving glove. Rain spouts from the bill of my fedora and splatters about her feet. In these departures I am most awkward, every movement or mannerism bringing more embarrassment. Still, the serenity of her eyes is not diminished, nor the presence of her hand upon my shoulder.

A car splashes along the curb with a lone man inside, beckoning. She asks me to stop by again some time and then vanishes into the car, enveloped by a sheet of rain.

I have told neither her nor her brother that I cannot go home. A Catholic church is open a block away, so I run to it. I try to sleep in a pew but I am cold. I rub my eyes but cannot shake the image of Louellen in the rain. A janitor sweeps the floors, his hearing aids shut off and his back turned to me. I am not religious but I

often find these buildings useful when I encounter a vague spiritual or moral lapse. Poverty is perhaps such a lapse.

The janitor sweeps away in other parts of the church, the whisper of dust beneath his broom like the sound of a barnyard in a windstorm, the imminent upheaval of one's surroundings into particles.

He whistles "String of Pearls." A chill stretches down the aisle to my heart. He turns off the lamp in each section he has cleaned, sealing the doors and gradually the entire church in darkness.

As a child I once saw an image of the church as being perpetually stabbed by a beam of heaven's light. To see inside church walls and know this darkness is startling at first, then makes great sense. Before creation, there was only this darkness. It allows one co-existence with God outside of time.

2

Jack stands in the doorway of Aladdin's to allow me in. Each morning he awakens and hobbles out of his cot. He seldom changes clothes, seldom showers, seldom undresses to sleep. His life is a continuum. Not a collection of days dissected from each other by sleep but one solitary day in the illusion of Aladdin's walls, in the vision of his Seagram's 7, in the smell of his sweaty undershirts. His event was Korea, catastrophic enough to last him all his hours. He prefers the darkness of the bar to all else he has discovered; it reminds him of the peaceful trenches of the war where sound was muted and a man allowed a moment's respite from the rushing bullets.

Naked women adorn the walls of Aladdin's, bending and flowing. Men eye or chase the naked women on the walls, men in a form of reverie, their heads wrapped in turbans and playing snake-charmer flutes. The wall is a landscape of intoxication in the desert, the figures covered with stale ash and dust. Above Jack, behind the cash register, is a particularly graphic painting of a woman lying nude beneath a large and menacing eye. He often stares at her as if she might yet come to life.

Louellen will not arrive until dinner time and I will be quite drunk by then, so I will not see her today. Instead I imagine

myself as one of the men painted on the walls, as we share the same intoxication, the same remote desire to chase a woman into our dreams. I will chase Louellen from morning into afternoon, a thousand Louellens bending in siroccos on the hourglass of sand.

Jack enters the storeroom and counts cases of Budweiser and Cutty Sark. He rarely moves a case out of the storeroom but invariably checks his inventory every morning. He brushes dust off the cardboard boxes, flicks his ash into an empty tumbler on the desk next to the adding machine, and hacks. He holds his stomach as he coughs and phlegm sprays from his lips. His eyes squint and water; his face reddens. I step behind the bar, pour two fingers of Seagram's into a shot glass and walk into the storeroom. His hand wavers as he takes the shot and dumps it down his throat. The coughing stops and he wipes his lips with a hairy wrist.

"Thanks, Danny boy."

"Are you well, Jack?"

"Fit as a fiddler crab, pal. Let me do you one up on the house once I get done in here."

I return to my bar stool and watch him strain to carry each case from one end of the storeroom to the other.

3

I wander out of Aladdin's and examine various parts of the city: smokestacks turned off, breweries whose empty floors smell of rat dung. The city decomposes in its way. Perhaps everyone is brighter now. Perhaps the children of the bullet-headed brewery man have advanced beyond their father's comprehension. He is probably in a car not unlike one I would own, should I have had the grace, glaring at the vacant buildings, wondering just when his efforts and his sense of history evaporated.

It is much like the horror of intimacy: the profound sense of knowing someone's life so well that you also come to understand their evolution into death.

I was trapped in my house with my wife for several months before she expired, nurturing her illness. I hovered in the kitchen

and seasoned pots of chicken soup. The house was unnaturally still the duration of her illness, like a tree branch full of leaves awaiting the wind. She coughed into her palm. A floorboard whined beneath my foot. Little other sound invaded our hours. The house was suffused with color.

I ate only pears, apples, raisins, walnuts, and wine. My limited appetite aided in my perception of the subtleties of color in our home. I had often seen my wife's face with a cosmetic mask across it, a beauty mask, greasepaint, an inverted minstrel. White clay would ooze from between her fingers as she faced the mirror. She had seen the procedure in a magazine. She in no way could perceive herself as beautiful and hence neither could anyone else. She lacked the primary necessity for beauty: self-assurance. She tried to steal self-respect from a glossy page and was doomed to failure. She never even noticed that it was colorless white that she smudged on her cheeks. In pursuit of beauty, she nullified all color.

My hunger and my drink make me so mean-spirited, so hateful of the dead. Or maybe I'm just jealous.

I grew so abstracted in my sick room chores. I beat her dead skin off the sheets while she bathed. I placed a chilly glass of water on her forehead to ease her fever. Words should have been spoken. Tenderness expressed. I could find neither. She slept most of the final days and I was grateful, for both of us. She sometimes dribbled soup from her lips and down her neck. I would pluck a tissue from the dispenser to dry her off. She kissed my hand. She placed a hand to my brow. She seemed to look for an assurance before drifting into sleep.

Once the phone rang from the other room. I lifted the receiver to my ear. Rarely did anyone call for me. I was astounded to hear Louellen on the line.

"Daniel?"

"Louellen. . . ."

"Is this a bad time?"

"Why, no. . . ."

"I can call back later."

"No! Please. It's fine really. How are you?"

Those were the first lies out of my mouth, lies from which I have tried to extricate myself ever since. An infidelity hanging in the air like a spider on its web.

For some reason I recalled a large pipe organ in a concert hall, where I once stepped in from a snowstorm during college. I listened for hours yet retained nothing but intonations. That feeling lingered as Louellen spoke. The marvelous pedals and pipes of her voice resounded in the empty house. I smiled and my eyes watered. I wished then that I were touching her and her lips were placing that sound directly into my ears. Each variation in pitch would reflect a button undone by her fingers. Each fluctuation in tone would reflect a kiss against her neck.

I allowed the telephone to dangle from my hand. A recorded voice told me to hang up or dial the operator for assistance. I know that I spoke profusely but cannot recall one word. I have tried to write it down since, and this is what escaped from my pen:

"Louellen, there are no words I can conjure to express my sorrow at our distance. I pour myself a glass of wine while my wife sleeps and with each swallow I feel closer to you, farther from my home. I am frightened by the motion taking place within my heart. I am cold and hunger reaches through my system, yet I struggle toward a clearer vision of you in my mind. My wife is ill. Dying, if the truth be known. And perhaps it is my fault. Whenever my attention slips into another area of life, another person, she is stricken far more deeply by her illness. My time is spent watching her dream. My own dreams are focused on rubbing lotions into her skin to ease the soreness, doses of medication to temper the pain, boiling soup. I cannot reach you from here. Years are wedged between us, beyond miles, beyond the breadth of existence."

4

I ride a bus and sit next to an old man in a Greek sailor's hat. He eats a candy bar and reads the business section of the morning paper. The windows are dirty with snow. The bus tosses puddles onto the sidewalk as it lunges forward.

I notice panic on the faces of people waiting at each stop. They cluster together as if to share warmth. They will not look at one another, nor the driver, nor the other passengers. They look only

at the sky or the soil. One finds an old detective novel wedged between the seats and pretends to read it.

I am similarly distracted, discovering new plots of land between buildings I've passed many mornings of my adult life, discovering the abandonment of buildings I had presumed to contain someone's life and property. Many of the boarded windows belong to what were formerly nightclubs and restaurants, food and drink long since passed off by the bodies of their patrons, the bodies themselves now replenishing the earth.

It is reassuring to know that there once was a procession of bodies and voices within these boarded buildings, of love and drunkenness much the same as now. I am not the only soul in time to have frittered away my breath in pursuit of weakness.

This line would lead me to my former work place, had I the ability to concentrate. I remember paper, the words so much black string on my finger. But any noise eclipses me these days and words on a page are often noisiest of all, more wings beating in the aviary.

I was never interested in the success or failure of the company. All my actions added up to a mere stop-gap in its infrastructure. If the company had failed, I would have been the man with the broom pushing its fragments into a dustpan.

5

Louellen and I agree to meet on Monday night. She has discovered an outdoor cafe that has dared open so close to the edge of winter. We sit on chairs beneath an umbrella. I drink chambord and cranberry juice, on her suggestion. She drinks the juice alone. The waiter learns our orders and assigns them to our faces, extends them further into our personalities and develops prejudices as to our hidden characteristics. Louellen orders chicken parmigiana and I order rigatoni, Americanized versions with soybean in the meatballs and bland sauces.

Louellen wears a black and white blazer over a thin white blouse. Dusk smooths the lines in her face, rendering her ageless. Light creeps under the umbrella only far enough to let me observe

the swelling and deflation of her chest as she breathes. She has no shame on Mondays; she forgets her Sunday timidity.

She brushes a few stray hairs out of her face, uses her fingernail to trace the veins that rise to the surface of her hand. The red from our drinks transplants itself into the sky, the waiter's uniform, the shadows on her cheek. She pays our bill when we are done and we walk with arms interlocked down the stone path to her car. I kiss her hand under the lamplight. The sky is without cover; we could drive all night beneath it.

We travel to a quiet spot by the river where picnic tables and grills sit. I open a bottle of white zinfandel with the corkscrew on a Swiss army knife that Jack had hidden in her glove compartment. The cork resounds in a small heartbreak under the circling of bats. The river splashes beside us. I drink wine from a dixie cup, a splash down my throat as if I am drowning.

I place my jacket on the grass and ask Louellen to sit upon it. She reclines as crickets bleat about us. As I continue to drink the wine, I no longer see her but feel her next to me like hands over braille. We have lost our identities and revert to some basic form, two atoms in the chain of occurrences that result in the creation of a universe.

I am grateful to her, grateful to be rid of my identity and limitations. I wish to share more with her, more than just my body and its imperfect presence, more than just my hasty words and their inexpressiveness, more than just the evening stained with liquor churning in the riverbed.

6

The quest for love gradually becomes the quest for one's self. This from someone who spends hours preoccupied with his image as it glares at him from storefronts, bus windows, hubcaps, spoons, metal trays in cafeteria lines. I am separated from myself, and as I examine the women I have loved I discover I have sought my own attributes or the attributes I might have possessed had I been born female. An angular hairstyle, somber dress, adornment all mean a lot to me. As I quested for my female self I became more and more of an auctioneer, giving quick appraisal to potential

mates and raising their status to someone who could have filled a void in my heart. I became entranced by quick flashes of color, by light glittering off an earring as a woman entered a doorway.

One cannot continue to see oneself as the end and means of the world without feeling a bit disturbed. I have not seen my wife for years; I cannot recall her most ordinary expressions. Instead I obsess about my own, my eyes turned sideways peering in a window, exploring every crater and incision of my face, discovering wrinkles and blemishes, uncovering the awful truth that I am nothing like I had presumed myself to be. I wish I were of larger build, teeth trimmed as evenly as hedgerows, the slit eyes and sooty hair of a Manchurian. I feel ridiculous and old. I relish aging until I see it occur within myself. Someone sits next to me on a park bench and I am moved to curl up so as to avoid contact with their body, as if I might cling to them like a snail.

I am no longer concrete. I cannot visualize. There is no importance to the buildings looming over my head. The people, the constructions, all are figures in an abstract equation beyond my comprehension.

7

A festival occupies a park in the center of town. Trailers open to reveal carnies hawking baseballs to children passing by. The festival is designed for younger people, yet I stand with the throng in front of the bandstand as the boys onstage tune their instruments.

The streets surrounding the park have been blocked with sawhorses. Lamps glow above displays of buttons, T-shirts, costume jewelry. Popcorn fills the lid of a popper. The sounds of excavation intrude on the notes of the musicians. The theme recurring in the speeches of the politicians is that of growth and development. There will be no traditions other than erasing history and thereby memory as well. Soon we will be able to recall nothing of our childhoods other than old syllables spelling out invisible locales, while we wonder at how unfamiliar and menacing the new surroundings have become.

Jack and Louellen stand inside a trailer as they pour beer into plastic cups for the crowd. I stand beside their trailer until Jack notices me and invites me to help. He removes his apron and hops out of the trailer, his bladder filled with furtive cups of beer. The lines are long at the portable toilets and he sways in an uncomfortable rhythm that seems to be in time to the beat of the band. Louellen fills more cups while I collect the money. We continue this pattern for some time, and the activity numbs me. My ears ring with the music and crowd.

Louellen and I have little opportunity to speak throughout the evening, except to total sales. I note the smallest interruptions in our rhythm, as she kneels to tie her shoe or open up a box of plastic cups.

By night's end a few people return to the trailer with their crumpled cups. Our kegs are empty. One man with a large dog leashed to his wrist is outraged at our lack of beer and sickens his mutt upon us. The dog leaps toward the trailer but cannot scale the sides. The beast barks and gnashes its teeth, then is called off with a snap of its master's fingers. Louellen remains immobile during the episode, squatting down and loading the contents of the trailer into boxes to be taken back to Aladdin's. The dog is not an ordinary hazard in her life; she has always been protected by Jack, or by her parents, or by her ex-husband. She has never learned to protect herself, which dates her in some way.

Jack returns and places a watermelon at our feet. He has stolen it from a fruit stand at the other end of the park, an act of revenge against the proprietor who beat him at poker the week before. Jack leaves again, his happiness expansive as he mingles with the young people, people he dreams will flood into Aladdin's and return it to its rightful position of glory within the community.

I pick up the watermelon to pack it away, when I notice that Louellen is crying. She weeps soundlessly, her eyes closed and her lips pinched together. I put my free arm around her, holding the watermelon in the other. It is as if her every possession is on sale, gathered in these boxes, expended in these hollow kegs, cursed at by animals. At Aladdin's she only deals with the dignity of her childhood, the best of people, noted friends of her parents. Now there is only this unprotected trailer, a crowd that sweats and gyrates, the barricades and blinding bulbs of a ferris wheel. I clasp her tightly and see the lines in the corners of her eyes. She lifts her

face as if to speak; she holds my hand as if to remove it from her body. Her hand lingers there. Then we kiss.

I yearn to define her in my hands. I caress her as we kiss, but she resists. I content myself with the dangling of her fingers on the back of my hand, kisses grazing my lips like moths against a lamp. Jack returns with a butcher knife and we place the watermelon on the countertop. He drops the blade in evenly spaced strokes through the fruit, its juices spattering the sawdust on the ground. We all three take a slice and slurp the flavor out, spitting seeds into an empty cup.□