

## I.

Accidents ambush the unsuspecting, often violently, just like love. It was Good Friday and the stars were just starting to dissolve into the dawn. As I drove, I stroked the scar on my chest, by habit. My eyes were heavy and my vision unfocused, not surprising given that I'd spent the night hunched over a mirror snorting away the bars of white powder that kept my face trapped in the glass. I believed I was keening my reflexes. I was wrong.

To one side of the curving road was a sharp drop down the mountain's slope, and on the other was a dark wood. I tried to keep my eyes fixed ahead but I had the overwhelming feeling that something was waiting to ambush me from behind the trees, perhaps a troop of mercenaries. That's how drug paranoia works, of course. My heart hammered as I gripped the steering wheel more tightly, sweat collecting at the base of my neck.

Between my legs I had wedged a bottle of bourbon, which I tried to pull out for another mouthful. I lost my grip on the bottle and it tumbled into my lap, spilling everywhere, before falling to the floorboard. I bent down to grab it before the remaining alcohol leaked out, and when my eyes were lifted I was greeted by the vision, the ridiculous vision, that set everything into motion. I saw a volley of burning arrows swarming out of the woods, directly at my car. In-

instinct took over and I jerked the steering wheel away from the forest that held my invisible attackers. This was not a good idea, because it threw my car up against the fencepost wires that separated me from the drop. There was the howl of metal on metal, the passenger door scraping against taut cables, and a dozen thuds as I bounced off the wood posts, each bang like electricity through a defibrillator.

I overcompensated and spun out into the oncoming lane, just missing a pickup truck. I pulled back too hard on the wheel, which sent me once again towards the guardrail. The cables snapped and flew everywhere at once, like the thrashing tentacles of a harpooned octopus. One cracked the windshield and I remember thinking how glad I was that it hadn't hit me as the car fell through the arms of the convulsing brute.

There was a brief moment of weightlessness: a balancing point between air and earth, dirt and heaven. *How strange*, I thought, *how like the moment between sleeping and falling when everything is beautifully surreal and nothing is corporeal. How like floating towards completion.* But as often happens in that time between existing in the world and fading into dreams, this moment over the edge ended with the ruthless jerk back to awareness.

A car crash seems to take forever, and there is always a moment in which you believe that you can correct the error. *Yes*, you think, *it's true that I'm plummeting down the side of a mountain in a car that weighs about three thousand pounds. It's true that it's a hundred feet to the bottom of the gully. But I'm sure that if only I twist the steering wheel very hard to one side, everything will be okay.*

Once you've spun that steering wheel around and found it doesn't make any difference, you have this one clear, pure thought: *Oh, shit.* For a glorious moment, you achieve the empty bliss that Eastern philosophers spend their lives pursuing. But following this transcendence, your mind becomes a supercomputer capable of calculating the gyrations of your car, multiplying that by the speed of the fall over the angle of descent, factoring in Newton's laws of motion and,

in a split second, coming to the panicked conclusion that *this is gonna hurt like hell*.

Your car gathers speed down the embankment, bouncing. Your hypothesis is quickly proven correct: it is, indeed, quite painful. Your brain catalogues the different sensations. There is the flipping end over end, the swirling disorientation, and the shrieks of the car as it practices its unholy yoga. There's the crush of metal, pressing against your ribs. There's the smell of the devil's mischievousness, a pitchfork in your ass and sulfur in your mouth. The Bastard's there, all right, don't doubt it.

I remember the hot silver flash as the floorboard severed all my toes from my left foot. I remember the steering column sailing over my shoulder. I remember the eruption of glass that seemed to be everywhere around me. When the car finally came to a stop, I hung upside down, seatbelted. I could hear the hiss of various gases escaping the engine and the tires still spinning outside, above, and there was the creak of metal settling as the car stopped rocking, a pathetic turtle on its back.

Just as I was beginning my drift into unconsciousness, there was the explosion. Not a movie explosion but a small real-life explosion, like the ignition of an unhappy gas oven that holds a grudge against its owner. A flash of blue flame skittered across the roof of the car, which was at a slanted angle underneath my dangling body. Out of my nose crawled a drop of blood, which jumped expectantly into the happy young flames springing to life beneath me. I could feel my hair catch fire; then I could smell it. My flesh began to singe as if I were a scrap of meat newly thrown onto the barbecue, and then I could hear the bubbling of my skin as the flames kissed it. I could not reach my head to extinguish my flaming hair. My arms would not respond to my commands.

I imagine, dear reader, that you've had some experience with heat. Perhaps you've tipped a boiling kettle at the wrong angle and the steam crept up your sleeve; or, in a youthful dare, you held a

match between your fingers for as long as you could. Hasn't everyone, at least once, filled the bathtub with overly hot water and forgot to dip in a toe before committing the whole foot? If you've only had these kinds of minor incidents, I want you to imagine something new. Imagine turning on one of the elements of your stove—let's say it's the electric kind with black coils on top. Don't put a pot of water on the element, because the water only absorbs the heat and uses it to boil. Maybe some tiny tendrils of smoke curl up from a previous spill on the burner. A slight violet tinge will appear, nestled there in the black rings, and then the element assumes some reddish-purple tones, like unripe blackberries. It moves towards orange and finally—finally!—an intense glowing red. Kind of beautiful, isn't it? Now, lower your head so that your eyes are even with the top of the stove and you can peer through the shimmering waves rising up. Think of those old movies where the hero finds himself looking across the desert at an unexpected oasis. I want you to trace the fingertips of your left hand gently across your right palm, noting the way your skin registers even the lightest touch. If someone else were doing it, you might even be turned on. Now, slam that sensitive, responsive hand directly onto that glowing element.

And hold it there. Hold it there as the element scorches Dante's nine rings right into your palm, allowing you to grasp Hell in your hand forever. Let the heat engrave the skin, the muscles, the tendons; let it smolder down to the bone. Wait for the burn to embed itself so far into you that you don't know if you'll ever be able to let go of that coil. It won't be long until the stench of your own burning flesh wafts up, grabbing your nose hairs and refusing to let go, and you smell your body burn.

I want you to keep that hand pressed down, for a slow count of sixty. No cheating. *One Mis-sis-sip-pi, two Mis-sis-sip-pi, three Mis-sis-sip-pi . . . At sixty Mis-sis-sip-pi*, your hand will have melted so that it now surrounds the element, becoming fused with it. Now rip your flesh free.

I have another task for you: lean down, turn your head to one

side, and slap your cheek on the same element. I'll let you choose which side of your face. Again sixty Mississippi; no cheating. The convenient thing is that your ear is right there to capture the snap, crackle, and pop of your flesh.

Now you might have some idea of what it was like for me to be pinned inside that car, unable to escape the flames, conscious enough to catalogue the experience until I went into shock. There were a few short and merciful moments in which I could hear and smell and think, still documenting everything but feeling nothing. *Why does this no longer hurt?* I remember closing my eyes and wishing for complete, beautiful blackness. I remember thinking that I should have lived my life as a vegetarian.

Then the car shifted once more, tipping over into the creek upon whose edge it had been teetering. Like the turtle had regained its feet and scurried into the nearest water source.

This occurrence—the car falling into the creek—saved my life by extinguishing the flames and cooling my newly broiled flesh.

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*Accidents ambush the unsuspecting, often violently, just like love.*

I have no idea whether beginning with my accident was the best decision, as I've never written a book before. Truth be told, I started with the crash because I wanted to catch your interest and drag you into the story. You're still reading, so it seems to have worked.

The most difficult thing about writing, I'm discovering, is not the act of constructing the sentences themselves. It's deciding what to put in, and where, and what to leave out. I'm constantly second-guessing myself. I chose the accident, but I could just as easily have started with any point during my thirty-five years of life before that. Why not start with: "I was born in the year 19—, in the city of——"?

Then again, why should I even confine the beginning to the time

frame of my life? Perhaps I should start in Nürnberg in the early thirteenth century, where a woman with the most unfortunate name of Adelheit Rotter retreated from a life that she thought was sinful to become a Beguine—women who, though not officially associated with the Church, were inspired to live an impoverished life in imitation of Christ. Over time Rotter attracted a legion of followers and, in 1240, they moved to a dairy farm at Engelschalksdorf near Swinach, where a benefactor named Ulrich II von Königstein allowed them to live provided they did chores. They erected a building in 1243 and, the following year, established it as a monastery with the election of their first prioress.

When Ulrich died without a male heir, he bequeathed his entire estate to the Beguines. In return he requested that the monastery provide burial places for his relations and that they pray, in perpetuity, for the Königstein family. In a show of good sense he directed that the place be named Engelthal, or “Valley of the Angels,” rather than Swinach—“Place of the Pigs.” But it was Ulrich’s final provision that would have the greatest impact on my life: he mandated that the monastery establish a scriptorium.

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Eyes open on a red and blue spin of lightning. A blitzkrieg of voices, noises. A metal rod pierces the side of the car, jaws it apart. Uniforms. Christ, I’m in Hell and they wear uniforms. One man shouts. Another says in a soothing voice: “We’ll get you out. Don’t worry.” He wears a badge. “You’re gonna be all right,” he promises through his mustache. “What’s your name?” Can’t remember. Another paramedic yells to someone I can’t see. He recoils at the sight of me. Are they supposed to do that? Blackness.

Eyes open. I’m strapped to a spine board. A voice, “Three, two, one, lift.” The sky rushes towards me and then away from me. “In,” says the voice. A metallic clack as the stretcher snaps into place. Cof-

fin, why no lid? *Too antiseptic for Hell, and could the roof of Heaven really be made of gray metal?* Blackness.

Eyes open. Weightless again. Charon wears a blue polyester-cotton blend. An ambulance siren bounces off a concrete Acheron. An IV has been inserted into my body—everywhere? I’m covered with a gel blanket. Wet, wet. Blackness.

Eyes open. The thud of wheels like a shopping cart on concrete. The damn voice says “Go!” The sky mocks me, passes me by, then a plaster-white ceiling. Double doors slither open. “OR Four!” Blackness.

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Eyes open. Gaping maw of a snake, lunging at me, laughing, speaking: **I AM COMING . . .** The serpent tries to engulf my head. No, not a snake, an oxygen mask. **. . . AND THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT.** I’m falling backwards gas mask blackness.

Eyes unveil. Burning hands, burning feet, fire everywhere, but I am in the middle of a blizzard. A German forest, and a river is near. A woman on a ridge with a crossbow. My chest feels as if it’s been hit. I hear the hiss as my heart gives out. I try to speak but croak instead, and a nurse tells me to rest, that everything will be okay, everything will be okay. Blackness.

A voice floats above me. “Sleep. Just sleep.”

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Following my accident, I plumped up like a freshly roasted wiener, my skin cracking to accommodate the expanding meat. The doctors,

with their hungry scalpels, hastened the process with a few quick slices. The procedure is called an escharotomy, and it gives the swelling tissue the freedom to expand. It's rather like the uprising of your secret inner being, finally given license to claw through the surface. The doctors thought they had sliced me open to commence my healing but, in fact, they only released the monster—a thing of engorged flesh, suffused with juice.

While a small burn results in a blister filled with plasma, burns such as mine result in the loss of enormous quantities of liquid. In my first twenty-four hospital hours, the doctors pumped six gallons of isotonic liquid into me to counteract the loss of body fluids. I bathed in the liquid as it flowed out of my scorched body as fast as it was pumped in, and I was something akin to the desert during a flash flood.

This too-quick exchange of fluid resulted in an imbalance in my blood chemistry, and my immune system staggered under the strain, a problem that would become ever more dangerous in the following weeks when the primary threat of death was from sepsis. Even for a burn victim who seems to be doing well long after his accident, infection can pull him out of the game at a moment's notice. The body's defenses are just barely functioning, exactly when they are needed most.

My razed outer layers were glazed with a bloody residue of charred tissue called eschar, the Hiroshima of the body. Just as you cannot call a pile of cracked concrete blocks a "building" after the bomb has detonated, neither could you have called my outer layer "skin" after the accident. I was an emergency state unto myself, silver ion and sulfadiazine creams spread over the remains of me. Over that, bandages were laid to rest upon the devastation.

I was aware of none of this, and only learned it later from the doctors. At the time, I lay comatose, with a machine clicking off the sluggish metronome of my heart. Fluids and electrolytes and antibiotics and morphine were administered through a series of tubes (IV tube, jejunostomy tube, endotracheal tube, nasogastric tube, uri-

nary tube, truly a tube for every occasion!). A heat shield kept my body warm enough to survive, a ventilator did my breathing, and I collected enough blood transfusions to shame Keith Richards.

The doctors removed my wasteland exterior by débriding me, scraping away the charred flesh. They brought in tanks of liquid nitrogen containing skin recently harvested from corpses. The sheets were thawed in pans of water, then neatly arranged on my back and stapled into place. Just like that, as if they were laying strips of sod over the problem areas behind their summer cabins, they wrapped me in the skin of the dead. My body was cleaned constantly but I rejected these sheets of necro-flesh anyway; I've never played well with others. So over and over again, I was sheeted with cadaver skin.

There I lay, wearing dead people as armor against death.

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The first six years of my life.

My father was gone before I was born. He was evidently a most captivating good-time Charlie, quick with his dick and quicker to split. My mother, abandoned by this nameless lothario, died in childbirth as I surfed into this world on a torrent of her blood. The nurse who was grasping my greasy newborn body slipped in a puddle of it as she attempted to leave the delivery room, or so I was told. My grandmother first viewed me as I was whisked past her in the arms of a red-on-white Rorschach test of a nurse.

The delivery went wrong for me, as well. I was never told exactly what happened but somehow my body was cut from stomach to chest, leaving behind a long scar—maybe it was an errant scalpel as they tried to save my mother. I simply don't know. As I grew, the scar remained the same size until eventually it was only a few inches long, centered on the left side of my chest where a romantic might draw the heart.

I lived with my grandmother until I was six. Her bitterness towards me, as the cause of her daughter's death, was obvious. I think

she was not a bad person but rather someone who never expected to be predeceased by her own daughter, nor to be charged, so late in life, with the care of another infant.

My grandmother didn't beat me; she fed me well; she arranged all the necessary vaccinations. She just didn't like me. She died on one of the rare days that we were having fun, while she was pushing me on a playground swing. I went up into the air and stretched my legs towards the sun. I came back towards the earth expecting her hands to catch me. Instead, I sailed past her doubled-over body. As I swung by her again on the forward trajectory, she'd collapsed onto her elbows. Then she sprawled facedown in the playground mud. I ran to a nearby house to alert the adults, and then sat on the monkey bars as the ambulance came too late. As the paramedics lifted her, my grandmother's corpulent arms swung like bat wings with the life squeezed out of them.

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From the moment I arrived at the hospital, I stopped being a person and became an actuarial chart. After weighing me, the doctors pulled out the calculators to punch up the extent of my burn and calculate the odds of my survival. Not good.

How did they do all this? As in any proper fairy tale, there's a majick formula, in this case called the Rule of Nines. The percentage of burn is determined and marked on a chart not unlike a voodoo map of the human body, divided into sections based upon multiples of nine. The arms are "worth" 9 percent of the total body surface; the head is worth 9 percent; each whole leg is worth 18 percent; and the torso, front and back, is worth 36 percent. Hence: the Rule of Nines.

Of course, there are other considerations in rating a burn. Age, for example. The very old and the very young are less likely to survive, but if the young do survive, they have a much greater capacity to regenerate. So, they've got that going for them. Which is nice. One must also consider the type of burn: scalds from boiling liquids;

electrical burns from live wires; or chemical burns, be they acid or alkali. I ordered up only thermal burns from the menu, those strictly from flames.

What, you may wonder, actually happens to living flesh in a fire? Cells consist mostly of liquid, which can boil and cause the cell walls to explode. This is not good. In a second scenario, the cell's protein cooks up just like an egg in a frying pan, changing from a thin liquid into something gooey and white. If this happens, all metabolic activity of the cell ceases. So even though the heat was not sufficient to kill the cell outright, the loss of ability to deliver oxygen ensures the tissue will die soon enough. The difference is slow capitulation rather than immediate immolation.

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With Grandma gone, I went to live with Debi and Dwayne Michael Grace—an aunt and uncle, the quintessence of trash, who were annoyed with me from the moment I arrived. They did, however, like the government checks sent for my upkeep. It made scoring dope considerably easier.

In my time with the graceless Graces, I relocated from one trailer park to another until my guardians found an all-night party that grew into a three-year methamphetamine festival. They were well ahead of their time: crystal meth was not nearly as popular in those days as it is now. If there was no pipe available with which to smoke it, a hollowed-out lightbulb was used, and sometimes the run on bulbs was such that we lived entirely in the dark. The drugs never seemed to run out, though. The Graces, flashing smiles like smashed keyboards, would hand over their every penny to the dealer.

One of our neighbors traded the use of her daughter, a few years younger than me, for the equivalent in drugs. In case you're wondering, the street value of an eight-year-old is \$35, or at least it was when I was a kid. When the mother became savage-eyed and withdrawn, the young girl would come to cry fearfully in my tiny room,

anticipating an impending sale. Last I heard, her mother had cleaned up, lost addiction, and found God. Last I heard, the girl (now adult) was a pregnant heroin addict.

For the most part my childhood was not agreeable, but I was never sexually auctioned so my guardians might crank up. Still, a man should be able to say better things about his youth than that.

The only way I was able to survive that shitty world was to imagine better ones, so I read everything I could get my hands on. By my early teens, I was spending so many hours in the library that the librarians brought extra sandwiches for me. I have such fond memories of these women, who would recommend books and then talk to me for hours about what I had learned.

Long before I discovered the desire for drugs that would occupy my adulthood, my basic nature had already been established as compulsive. My first, and most lasting, addiction has always been to the obsessive study of any matter that took hold of my curiosity.

Although I was never much for school, this was not because I believed education an inferior pursuit. Far from it: my problem was always that school interfered with matters more fascinating. The courses were designed to teach practical information but, because I understood the core concepts so quickly, they could not hold my interest. I was always distracted by the esoterica that might appear in a textbook's footnote or a teacher's offhand remark. For example: if my geometry teacher mentioned something about Galileo giving lectures on the physical structure of Hell, it became impossible for me to refocus my interest when he returned to talking about the sides of a parallelogram. I would skip the next three classes to visit the library, reading everything I could on Galileo, and when I returned to the school I would fail the next math test because it did not include any questions about the Inquisition.

This passion for self-directed learning has remained, which should already be apparent in my depiction of burn treatment. The subject has such personal relevance it would be impossible for me not to learn as much as I could about it. My studies do not stop there:

research on Engelthal monastery, for reasons that will become apparent, has also commanded a great many hours of my time.

While it is true that outside the library I have lived a life of wickedness, inside it I've always been as devoted to knowledge as a saint to his Bible.

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Burns, I learned, are also rated according to how many layers of skin are damaged. Superficial (first-degree) burns involve only the epidermis, the top layer. Partial thickness (second-degree) burns involve the epidermis and the second layer, the corium. Deep partial thickness burns are very severe second-degree burns. And then there are full thickness (third-degree) burns, which involve all skin layers and result in permanent scarring.

Severe cases—such as mine—usually feature a combination of burn thicknesses, because no one is turning the spit to ensure even roasting. For example, my right hand is completely undamaged. It experienced superficial burns and the only treatment was a common hand lotion.

My partial thickness burns are primarily located on my lower legs beneath the knees and around my buttocks. The skin curled up like the pages of a burning manuscript, and took a few months to heal. Today the skin's not perfect, but hell, it ain't so bad. I can still feel my ass when I sit.

Full thickness burns are like the steak your old man forgot on the barbecue when he got drunk. These burns destroy; this tissue will not heal. The scar is white, or black, or red; it's a hard dry wound, hairless forever because the follicles have been cooked out. Strangely enough, third-degree burns are in one way better than second-degree ones: they don't hurt at all, because the nerve endings have been cooked dumb.

Burns to the hands, head, neck, chest, ears, face, feet, and perineal region command special attention. These areas rate the highest

scores in the Rule of Nines; an inch of burnt head trumps an inch of burnt back. Unfortunately, these are the areas where my full thickness burns are concentrated, so I came up snake eyes on that one.

There is some debate in the medical community over whether there is actually such a thing as a fourth-degree burn, but this is simply a bunch of healthy doctors sitting in a conference hall arguing semantics. These fourth-degree burns, if you accept the nomenclature, tunnel themselves right down into the bones and tendons. I had such burns as well; as if it weren't enough that a floorboard severed all the toes from my left foot, these so-called fourth-degree burns took three toes from my right foot, and a finger and a half from my left hand. And, alas, one more body part.

You will recall that I spilled bourbon onto my pants moments before the accident, and the timing could not have been worse. In effect, my lap was soaked with an accelerant that caused the area to burn with increased intensity. My penis was like a candle sticking out of my body and burned accordingly, leaving me with a seared wick where the shaft once had been. Unsalvageable, it was removed shortly after my admission in a procedure known as a penectomy.

When I asked what had been done with the remains of my manhood, the nurse informed me that they had been disposed of as medical waste. As if it would somehow make me feel better, she went on to explain that the doctors left my scrotum and testicles attached. Too much to take everything, one supposes, kit and caboodle.

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The Graces died in a meth lab explosion, nine years after I first arrived in their trailer. It was not surprising: is there a worse idea than addicts cooking their drug in a confined space, with ingredients that include lantern fuel, paint thinner, and rubbing alcohol?

I was not particularly disheartened. On the day of their funeral, I went to talk with the librarians about the biography of Galileo Gali-

lei that I'd been reading—because, in fact, my geometry teacher *had* piqued my interest in the scientist.

While any schoolboy can tell you about Galileo's persecution at the hands of the Inquisition, the truth of his life was more complicated than that. It was never his intention to be a "bad" Catholic, and when ordered not to teach the idea of a heliocentric universe, Galileo complied for many years. His daughter Virginia entered a convent under the lovely name of Sister Maria Celeste, while his daughter Livia took the habit under the equally extraterrestrial moniker of Sister Arcangela. There is something poetically fitting in this because—even though his name is now used as conversational shorthand to signify science oppressed by religion—Galileo's life twinned religion *and* science. It is said that when Tommaso Caccini, a young Dominican priest, became the first to publicly denounce Galileo's support of the Copernican theory, he ended his sermon with a verse from the Acts of the Apostles: *Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?* What Caccini did not suspect, however, was that if Galileo was gazing up at the sky, he was just as likely to be praying as to be charting astronomical movement.

At the age of twenty-four, Galileo auditioned for a university teaching position by delivering two lectures on the physics of Dante's *Inferno*. Most modern thinkers would consider this wonderfully whimsical, but in Galileo's day the study of Dantean cosmography was a hot topic. (Not coincidentally, the lectures were at the Florentine Academy, in the poet's hometown.) The presentations were a great success and helped Galileo to secure his position as a professor of mathematics at the University of Pisa.

It was not until later that Galileo came to realize the position he'd argued in the lectures was incorrect and his contention that the cone-shaped structure of Hell was scale-invariant, meaning it could increase in size without a loss of integrity or strength, was not true. If Hell actually existed in the Earth's interior, the immensity of the cavity would cause the roof (the earth's mantle) to collapse unless

the walls of Hell were much thicker than he had originally argued. So Galileo set to work on the nature of scaling laws and, late in life, published his discoveries in *Two New Sciences*, whose principles helped establish modern physics—a science that now exists in part because Galileo realized he made a mistake in his application of natural laws to a supernatural location.

But if Hell were a real place, there is little doubt that Debi and Dwayne Michael Grace would be there now.

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I was unconscious for almost seven weeks, wrapped in my deadflesh body bag. My coma was first caused by shock but then the doctors decided to keep me in it, medically immobilized, while the healing commenced.

I didn't have to consciously deal with the collapse of my circulation system, nor did I have to consider my kidney damage. I was oblivious to the shutdown of my bowels. I knew nothing about the ulcers that made me vomit blood or of how the nurses had to scramble to make sure I didn't asphyxiate when this occurred. I didn't have to fret about the infections that might set in after each emergency surgery or skin graft. I was not notified that my hair follicles had been incinerated or that my sweat glands had been destroyed. I wasn't awake when they suctioned the soot from my lungs—a treatment which, by the way, is called pulmonary toilet.

My vocal cords had sustained extensive damage from smoke inhalation, and a tracheotomy was performed so my larynx could start to heal without the irritation of a tube pressing against it. Nothing more could be done. Another part of my body that received little attention in the earliest stages was my right leg, which was severely broken. The doctors had to wait for my condition to stabilize before they could begin the operations to rebuild my shattered femur and busted knee. Keeping me alive took precedence over retaining a pretty voice or limp-free walk.

During the coma, atrophy of the muscles couldn't be avoided. There was my lack of movement and the fact that with large portions of my skin eradicated, my body was eating itself. It consumed the protein within, spending a tremendous amount of energy just trying to maintain a constant temperature. The heat shield was not enough, so my body ceased delivering blood to the extremities. The body's concern is for the center, the outskirts be damned, and I stopped producing urine and became toxic. As my body contracted, my heart expanded: not from love, but from stress.

I was covered with maggots, a treatment used more frequently in the past but which has recently come back into medical vogue. The bugs ate away at the necrotic flesh, becoming fat on my decay, while leaving the living flesh intact. The doctors sewed my eyelids shut to protect my eyes and all that I required was for someone to cover them with coins. Then, I would have been complete.

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I have one happy memory from my time with the Graces: happy, yet marked with a most curious occurrence.

The air show was on a hot day in mid-August at a nearby airfield. The planes did not excite me—but the skydivers, with their parachutes open to the heavens and the colored streams of smoke that trailed behind them! The falling from sky to earth, a Hephaestian plummet slowed only by fluttering swells of silk, seemed like a miracle. The skydivers operated their magic levers, circling large white bull's-eyes stenciled on the ground, invariably hitting their marks, dead center. It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen.

At one point, an Asian woman moved behind me. I felt her before I saw her; it was as if my skin jumped just from her presence. When I turned around, there she was, standing with a tiny smile. I was young and I had no idea whether she was Chinese or Japanese or Vietnamese; she just had Asian skin color and eyes and she was barely as tall as I, although I was only ten years old. She wore a dark

robe of a simple material that made me think that she must belong to some sort of religious order. Her attire was completely out of the ordinary but no one in the crowd seemed to notice, and she was completely bald.

I wanted to give my attention back to the skydivers, but I couldn't. Not with her behind me. A few moments passed, with me trying not to look at her again, before I could no longer stop myself. All the other people had their faces turned up into the sky but she was looking directly at me.

"What do you want?" My voice was steady; I simply wanted an answer. She said nothing but continued to smile.

"Can't you speak?" I asked. She shook her head, then held out a note. I hesitated before taking it.

It read: *Haven't you ever wondered where your scar really came from?*

When I looked back up, she was gone. All I saw was the crowd of upturned faces.

I read the note again, not believing she could know of my imperfection. It was on my chest, hidden under my shirt, and I was certain I'd never seen this woman before. But even if I had somehow improbably forgotten a previous encounter with a tiny bald Asian woman in a robe, there was no chance I would have shown her my scar.

I started to weave through the crowd, looking for any trace of her—a robe slipping through the masses; the back of her head—but there was nothing.

I put the note into my pocket, taking it out a few more times during the day to assure myself that it was real. Dwayne Michael Grace must have been feeling unusually generous, because he bought me cotton candy from the concession stand. Then Debi hugged me, and it was almost like we were a family. After the show, we attended an exhibition of lit paper lanterns floating down a nearby river, a display that was quite beautiful and unlike anything I had ever seen before.

When we got home late that evening, the note had disappeared from my pocket even though I had been extra careful.

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I dreamt incessantly in my coma. Images reeled into each other, competing for the center ring of the circus.

I dreamt of a farmwoman heating bathwater. I dreamt of the blood from my mother's womb. I dreamt of the flabby arms of my dying grandmother, pushing me up into the blue blue sky. I dreamt about Buddhist temples near cool rushing rivers. I dreamt of the little girl who was sold by her mother for meth. I dreamt of the twisted furnace of my car. I dreamt of a Viking warship. I dreamt of an ironworker's anvil. I dreamt of a sculptor's hands working furious chisels on stone. I dreamt of flaming arrows bursting out of the sky, I dreamt of raining fire. I dreamt of glass exploding everywhere. I dreamt of a delirious angel frozen in water.

But most of all, I dreamt of the gargoyles waiting to be born.

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It was after the incident at the airfield that stroking the birth scar on my chest became a habitual action. I never noticed I was doing it, but others did. Dwayne hated it, slapping my hand away from my chest while telling me to "quit playing with yourself." Then he'd smoke more drugs, making it difficult to take his criticism seriously.

When Dwayne and Debi died, I lost my only remaining relatives—from my mother's side, anyway; my father's side was nothing more than a question mark. I was placed in a group home called Second Chance House, which only made me wonder when I had had my first chance. It was while in Second Chance that I obtained most of my government-sponsored instruction. I went to high school classes fairly regularly, even though I found them boring, and acquired the basics in math and the sciences. All my hours in the library were

not wasted. Long before anyone tried to teach me anything, I had already taught myself how to learn.

With the help of the other kids at Second Chance, I soon discovered a variety of drugs with which to experiment. Although disgusted by crystal meth, I was intrigued by marijuana and hashish. In fact, I'd received early encouragement towards these substances from my aunt and uncle who, not realizing that people could actually survive without chemical assistance, were trying to protect me from anything harder.

I also discovered a third hobby to go with libraries and narcotics: the miracle of making the sheets sing. It began by trading exploratory blowjobs with my new best friend, Eddie. This is the sort of thing that teenage boys do: they dare the other to kiss *it* and then call him a fag when he does. The next night, the same thing. I liked sex but homosexuality was not my flavor, so I soon progressed to some of the young female occupants—in particular, one girl named Chastity who was blissfully unaware of her name's meaning. She was, in fact, unaware of a great many things. The first time that Chastity heard the phrase "oral sex" she thought it somehow involved the ear. Aural sex, one supposes.

By seventeen, I'd moved on to indulging my sexual curiosity with one of the counselors. Being a ward of the government was not without its advantages. Sarah was a troubled adult if ever there was one: an alcoholic in her mid-thirties with a cheating husband and an early midlife crisis. I provided her with consolation and excitement, and she provided me with sex. It did not hurt that my handsomeness, which hitherto had been little more than chubby-faced cuteness, had bloomed. My cheeks had acquired striking angles, my hair had curled pleasantly, and my body had made the transition to graceful muscularity.

When it came time for my discharge at eighteen, I had two talents. One was smoking drugs, the other was fucking my counselor, and I needed to convert one of these abilities into food and shelter. It did not seem that consuming drugs would be a well-paid occupation,

but it was easy to find some work posing nude for \$50, as the world is not short of middle-aged men who will pay boys to stand naked in their living rooms. I had no moral judgment about it; I was too busy calculating how many hamburgers fifty bucks could buy. From there it was a short jump to \$150 for photos involving sexual activity and—since you're already posing for stills, anyway—it makes a lot of sense to double or triple your income by acting in videos. Besides, who doesn't want to be a movie star? Each shoot took, at most, a couple of days; more often, simply a few hours. That's good money for an eighteen-year-old with no skills and, as simple as that, my career in pornography had started.