

**Flicker**

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February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006



A universe I don't understand. An ocean full of problems. Wave after wave after wave after ... crashing down on me. I stare into the waters. The words still climbing to the forefront of my thoughts – still scratching in my ears, still scraping in my stomach, still wrenching in my bowels:

“Coward!” They say!

I twist myself in knots. I scream and a stabbing pain clings to the roof of my mouth - the back of my throat. I cry out and howl at the moon and the stars. The words shake within me and then rip out of me like an angry colony of bats and soar off into the night.

“Failure!” They cry!

The cold waters slap me in the face. The salt reaches into my eyes and digs into my corneas. My tears mix with the vast black waters surrounding me and suddenly they speak to me.

“End it!” They shriek!

I make the choice: death – finally something to succeed in.

I close my eyes.

“Coward!” They say!

I remember.

“Failure!” They cry!

My legs start to buckle.

“End it!” They shriek!

I can feel myself sinking.

“Hello,” she says.

I open my eyes.

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Cold. Wet. I cough. Hacking. She tosses me a blanket. Flick. Her face. Flick-flick. Her wings. She breathes in. Nothing. Coughing. Choking. I've never felt so calm. So cold. So cough, cough, cough. Everything around me is dark. Everything is a failure. I grip the blanket tightly. Pull my feet in. I'm shaking. Flick. Her face. Flick-flick. Her wings.

I sit still and I wait for her to say something. I wrap the blanket tighter – the sun set hours ago and I can feel the cold wind reach out and wrap its icy arms around me as it grips its fingers into my lungs. The stars look like poked holes in black construction paper.

I look over at her, joint in one hand, broken lighter in the other, and in a flash of light I think I see her wings again.

She finally turns to me. “Paper’s too wet.” She fumbles to unroll the joint and empties it into a pipe from her purse. “I saw you out there,” she says as she massages the fine green slivers into the pipe. The lighter flickers, I can just make out her face, she sucks in and breathes the smoke. “What the fuck were you doing?”

“I don’t know.”

Her silhouette tilts its head.

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

And after a long silence she exhales her next question.

“So you weren’t trying to kill yourself then?”

I don’t know how to answer, so I don’t. Maybe that was what I was doing. It’s not important anymore. Not *as* important anyway. Besides, what difference does it make to her?

She mumbles something.

“What?” I ask.

“Every ship is a romantic object, except that we sail in...” she quotes, “Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is a reality that will not dodge us.”

“I don’t know. Yeah...I guess I was. Trying to kill myself, I mean.” Why I’m telling her this, I’ll never know. The lighter flickers again. She sucks in as her wings gently flutter behind her. She tilts her head back and blows the smoke towards the stars. She smiles.

“Mmm. That’s better. See? Why do people lie? Why not just say it? If you’re going to go through all that trouble to kill yourself, why cover it up? Did you think I’d try to stop you?”

“Didn’t you?” I ask.

“Nope. You stopped yourself.” She taps the pipe a few times and then bites the lighter. For a moment she seems to have all the sensibilities of a baby.

“I guess.” I say. The sound of the waves crashing fills my ears like static on a TV screen. She quits playing with the lighter and scoots a little closer to me.

“So why were you going to do it?”

“I don’t know. I’m screwed up I guess.”

She pats me on the back the way a high school principal would. “That’s a nice, simple, straightforward answer.”

“What?”

“Nothing is black and white,” she says, “What’s the real reason?”

“You’re right, that’s not the real answer. *That’s* why I’m on medication, because I’m fine.”

She sighs and leans back on her elbows. “That’s just man’s foolishness all over again,” she says, “The crucial contradiction about suicide viewed as an illness whose treatment is a *medical* responsibility is that suicide is an action, but it’s being treated as if it were happening.”

“I guess I just don’t feel like anyone understands me anymore.” Suddenly the lighter flickers again. Still broken. “So much for the ‘foolishness of medicine.’”

I can feel her annoyed stare through the darkness. She puts the lighter and the pipe down. “Understanding is never a collective phenomenon,” she says, “You can’t expect people who don’t participate in your life to understand how that life makes you feel. Understanding is dependent upon a communication of souls.”

“My doctor knows me. My doctor is my friend.”

She laughs a little at this, but catches herself quickly. “Your doctor analyzes you, he’s a scientist at heart – he wants to explain you. Diagnose you. Not understand you.”

“So what do I do?”

She takes a deep breath. And then for a while all I can hear is the ocean, for a moment it's like she disappeared.

“Live.” She says it so simply; like she's some great philosopher with all the answers.

“Just go out there and live it up, huh? Well in case you haven't noticed, I don't exactly fit in.”

“Not a part of the crowd?” she asks.

“No. Not at all.”

“Good.”

“What? How is that good?” I ask.

“Why be categorized?”

“Because that's the way life works. We all have a role to play. We all belong to a group, a profession, a tier of the social structure.”

“Only one attains the goal,” she says.

“What does that mean?”

She breathes deep and sits up. For a moment, she seems to debate whether or not she wants to start this conversation. Then the decision is made.

“Kierkegaard says that ‘Where there is a multitude, a crowd, or where decisive significance is attached to the fact that there is a multitude, there it is sure that no one is working, living, striving for the highest aim, but only for one or another earthly aim.’ Only one attains the goal. To be single is to be unique, an individual. And to be an individual is to be akin to deity.”

For a moment I stare at her. Where did she come from? “You're weird,” I say.

“Thanks,” she reaches out and strokes my neck, “I like you.”

“Why?”

“I like a look of Agony, because I know it's true. Men do not sham convulsion, nor simulate, a throe. The eyes glaze once – and that is Death – impossible to feign. The beads upon the forehead by homely anguish strung.”

“That's pretty.”

“That’s Dickinson,” she strokes my neck again, “I like you. You’re pathetic.”

“I don’t think that’s a compliment.”

“All the same.”

The wind blows some sand up into my face and I cringe a bit at the sting.

“This is sad,” she says.

“What is?” I ask. “You mean because I tried to kill myself?”

“Well, more so because you didn’t.”

“I wanted to, I just... It’s not that I didn’t so much as I couldn’t.”

“The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is.”

“Sorry?”

“Don’t be. You’re just dwelling too much. You see, ‘Man postpones or remembers: he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future.’” She lays back down and stares up at the sky. “I suppose in your case, you settled for standing in the ocean and screaming...”

“Oh...” I say and for the moment even the waves seem embarrassed.

“Look, I don’t know. It’s like I said, I just couldn’t do it.”

“People cannot do anything that dreadful. They cannot do anything very dreadful at all. They cannot even remember tomorrow what seemed dreadful today.”

She doesn’t think I recognize it, but I do. “Yes,” I add, “And ‘no battle is ever won. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.’”

“Tit for tat,” she gives me a tiny shove, “Though *some* battles were definitely fought. You’re a Faulkner fan?”

“He makes a good point is all. He said that people turn to suicide not when they realize that nothing can help them – religion, pride, anything – but when they realize that they don’t need any help.”

As she rummages through her purse I start to think that maybe I’ve said too much. Then she speaks:

“I liked the part about Christ being ‘worn away by the minute clicking of little wheels.’”

“That seems like an odd perspective for someone of your occupation.”

“And what occupation is that?” she continues to rummage.

“You’re an angel,” once again I can feel her looking at me, “Aren’t you?” She’ll probably yell now or get up and leave – or both. Finally the lighter flickers and I can see on her face a look of both annoyance and despondence.

“Something like that,” she says.

“So don’t you revere Christ? His life was one of sacrifice, right?”

“If you say so,” she lights the pipe and takes another breath. Somehow she seems more desperate than she was before. I’ve shaken her. I can see now that the life has left her face.

“I don’t understand,” I say, “You’re depressed.”

“You don’t say.” She keeps flicking the lighter, but only achieving moments of sparks.

“But why? I thought you were all supposed to be confirmed in Grace. You know, ‘the most perfect image and likeness of God?’”

“It was people who were made in His image. People. People like you. Being a human, or to be human, is next to godliness. Do you even know what being an angel means?”

“You’re supposed to be superior to men. You’re conduits to God.”

“I don’t believe in God.”

“You what? How can you say you don’t believe in someone you’ve me-”

She rolls up her sleeves and through the darkness I can see slivers of light shining off of her arms. There are several heavy slices in them – some are fresher than others. The waves crash, and then they crash again. I lose count of how many times they’ve hit.

“Okay?” she asks shakily. This whole night has been a confusing mess.

“What... are you?” I ask. She sighs and tries to light the pipe again. The lighter flickers, and she finally gets a flame, but nothing catches.

“Shit,” she says, “This is cashed.” She digs in her purse and eventually comes up with a pack of cigarettes, she takes one out, lights it and takes a drag. “Want one?” she asks.

“No thanks. I hear they’re bad for you.”

“What the Hell do you care?” she asks, “You were ready to freeze to death in the ocean a second ago.”

“Are angels *allowed* to smoke pot? I thought you couldn’t sin.”

“Stop acting like you know anything about what you’re talking about.”

She’s right. I went to church as a boy, but they tended to stick to the simple verses. Nothing that might breed dissent or individual thought.

“Explain it to me then.”

It’s clear that she doesn’t enjoy talking about it. She gets that annoyed look on her face, but she starts explaining anyway. “The word ‘angel’ – the job – has *nothing* to do with being nice or graceful or helpful or happy all the time, okay?”

“Okay.”

“As a matter of fact about all the word ‘angel’ means is ‘one who is sent.’ The designation is not one of demeanor or nature, but simply of occupation.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she says, “Really.” She takes a couple drags off her cigarette and adds, “And when I said that I don’t believe in God. It wasn’t that I don’t believe that He exists; it’s that I don’t believe *in* Him. A long time ago there was a huge fight between God and Lucifer.”

“Right,” I say. This much I know. “And Lucifer was cast down into Hell.”

“That’s correct, but did you know that the angels were fighting as well?”

“No.”

“Sure, you’re right, all of the angels at their creation were united to God by some supposed ‘sanctifying grace,’ but they were not as yet *confirmed* in that union.”

“So what happened?”

“The belief is that about a third of the angels aligned themselves with Lucifer. In their pride they wished to be independent of God. When they lost,

they became God's enemies. The angels were filled with pride. Envy. All sin came from them. They lost the gifts of the Holy Ghost and the knowledge of things supernatural which flows from them. Their minds were darkened." She takes another drag – this one seems to go on forever, it practically finishes the cigarette, "They were demons after that."

She puts out her cigarette. And for a while there is a deep silence. Then it occurs to me.

"They," I say.

"What?" she asks.

"You keep saying 'they' or 'them.' You never said 'we.' What are you? You talk about demons. And angels – which is it?" She inches away, but I inch closer. "If you're an angel, if you're *my* angel, then where the fuck have you been? Why wait until now to show up and finally save me? And if you're some God awful demon whose goal is to turn my soul away from God, then why not just let me commit suicide and join the rest of the darkened souls in Hell? What's the point of making me come out of the water? What's the point of this conversation?" I grab her hard by her shoulders, "Angel or Demon? What are you!"

I try to shake her, but, suddenly, beams of light burst from her shoulders burning my fingertips. A sharp eardrum piercing melody plays all around me and I can't hold on any longer. I release my grip and go to cover my ears, but it's stopped.

"I'm neither," she whispers.

"You're what?" I rub my ears and examine my hands. I'm fine.

"The world is not simple. What have I been telling you? The world is not black or white, light or dark, good or evil."

"But you said that the Bible –"

"The Bible states that we were divided neatly into two groups. Some of us were not divided."

"What does that make you?"

"Lost. What else?"

"So you're like me then."

“Am I?” I can see her now, looking at me. The sun is starting to peak up over the horizon. She’s more beautiful in the light. “I suppose I am.” She moves in and begins kissing me. We roll around together on the sand in a tangled embrace. Her hands glide up and down my back as I gently caress her neck. She breathes deeply into me.

Just then, she breaks the kiss and grips my shoulders. I stare into her eyes, those dead pools of brown. “Do you want to have sex?” she asks. Her breath comes in quick gasps. Her fingers are tense at my sides. Her wings quiver.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline,” I reply. Her grip relaxes, and her posture slumps. The light from her eyes has slightly dimmed.

“That’s okay,” she says reluctantly, “I don’t think we’re supposed to do that anyway.”

“Yeah,” I say stroking her hair, “probably not.” I reach down and take her hand. “So what happens now?”

As the sky turns a crystal clear blue, the waters seem to settle. They sound out a calming “hush” which breezes over my shoulder. “Now?” she breathes...