

The Beloved Departed

a story by C. P. Boyko

“Wretched are the poor in spirit, for under they earth they will be as they are on earth.”

— Borges

Claude said: “It’s not nostalgia. I’m not stuck in the past. In fact I hardly even think about the times we had together. I don’t want to rewind. I want the future to hold her. I just want to see her again. Everything has become tainted with her absence. Everything—a ringing telephone, a lampshade, the economy, lima beans, plumbing, lions, capitalism, Brahms, hydrogen, clairvoyance, grammar, James Joyce, circular logic, shoelaces, Yugoslavia, public transit, algebra, ballet, sodomy, Episcopalianism, architecture, evolution, oakum, loose change, dentistry, taupe, the immune system, hot jazz, cotton, spelling bees—everything is permeated with not-herness. I just want to see her again.”

Dr. Mayer-Edelmann said: “The trajectory of your mourning-arc is shallower than I quite frankly would like. Your grief index is falling at what I feel compelled to describe as a less than wholly satisfactory velocity. Your SSHQ—the Stanford Standardized Heartache Questionnaire—scores are manifesting an erraticness that professional propriety demands I consider to be not altogether reassuring. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’m going to refer you to Dr. Grohmuller, a very good oneirologist. She should be able to see you sometime in early autumn.”

Dr. Grohmuller said: “Keeping in mind that this is all a gross oversimplification, the neocortex has two distinct modules which, roughly speaking, are localized in complementary hemispheres in the majority of individuals. In general terms, one could say that the first of these modules specializes in what Grohmuller (1989), Grohmuller (1994), and Grohmuller and Kandinsky (1999) have referred to as *narrative* or *seriatim* consciousness, while the second module operates in what the same authors have called an *iconic* or *parallel* fashion. Others (Grohmuller & Fitch-Bass, 2003) have posited that the iconic consciousness is, broadly speaking, most intimately involved in the production of the REM dream state. Neurophysiological support for this theory has been steadily accumulating, and it is now believed by many that the recently synthesized chemical berylpotassiumdioxethylmonoamide—or ‘Vitamin G2’—is in fact a naturally occurring neurotransmitter which plays a central role in suppressing certain high-level functioning of the narrative consciousness at the onset of stage four sleep (Grohmuller, Davis, Fitch-Bass, Robins, Triptree-Loeb & Caton, in press). So-called G2 Blockers, which are believed to inhibit the reuptake of Vitamin G2 at dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex receptor sites, have lent support to this theory as a result of their observed effect in clinical trials—namely, the drastically increased triggering of lucid dreaming states.”

Claude said: “I think I’m getting déjà vu.”

Dr. Grohmuller said: “That’s because we’ve already had this conversation. It was earlier today. At the end of our consultation I gave you a prescription for a Vitamin G2 analogue, trade name Lukoxamine, commonly referred to as simply ‘Lukes.’ As I explained to you then, it is my belief that patients demonstrating irregularities in their bereavement behavior—or what Roberts and Reid-Ambrose (1974) have, rather puckishly, called ‘grief paralysis’—may benefit from short-term lucid dreaming treatment. In short, abreaction may be attainable if the patient can direct her or his dream to-

wards a reunion with the beloved departed.”

Claude said: “So this is a dream? I’m dreaming right now? But this looks exactly like your office, your real office.”

Dr. Grohmuller said: “What about that penguin?”

Claude said: “You just put that there.”

The penguin said: “It’s *your* dream, man.”

Claude said: “Then why am I dreaming this? Why aren’t I dreaming of Margaret? If this is my dream, why can’t I just make her appear?”

Dr. Grohmuller said: “The narrative consciousness has virtually no direct authority over the iconic consciousness. To anyone but a layperson it would be obvious that this arrangement is to the organism’s advantage. If the narrative consciousness could interfere with its world-creation, people would sit around daydreaming instead of getting any work done. They’d imagine they were well-fed instead of searching for food. They’d make believe they were good-looking and universally admired instead of writing scholarly articles for peer-reviewed journals (Grohmuller & Grohmuller, 2002).”

The penguin said: “Most of the dead *I* know live in the City of the Dead.”

Dr. Grohmuller said: “It’s a subterranean city. The dead don’t decay as quickly underground.”

Claude said: “So I’ve got to go to this City of the Dead if I want to see my Magpie?”

The penguin said: “Yeah, but they won’t let you in unless you’ve got a pass.”

Dr. Grohmuller said: “You can get a pass from your physician. Or your coroner.”

Dr. Aloy said: “You look terrible. Lift your shirt. You’ve put on weight. No, don’t say anything, I don’t want to hear it. Hold your breath. No, breathe in first. *Now* hold it. Let it out. Just as I thought. You’ve been smoking again, haven’t you? Let’s see your tongue. Oh

my God. Ever heard of ‘halitosis’? Never mind. Hold out your arms. No, to the side. Not been getting any exercise, I see. Does it hurt when I do this? Well it should. How’s your diet? No, forget I asked. Look over my shoulder. My *other* shoulder. Can’t say I care for the rate of pupil contraction. Follow this pen with your eyes. *Without* moving your head. Just as I thought. We’d better schedule you for an MRI. I’d tell you not to panic but it might do you some good. I wish you could see yourself. If my patients saw what I see they’d take my advice instead of turning themselves into walking pastries. Here, feel this. Hard as a rock, isn’t it? That’s called a latissimus dorsi muscle. But then you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you? It breaks my heart to look at you. Or it would, if I didn’t run eight miles a day. I’ve got a heart like a freight engine. Put on this stethoscope. In your *ears*. You hear that? That’s not just pumping blood, that’s blasting it into orbit. Now listen to yours. It’s squeezing that blood out like a little girl handling somebody’s used hankie. It brings tears to my eyes. Tears as clean and clear as mountain spring water.”

Claude said: “I need a pass to the City of the Dead.”

Dr. Aloy said: “Can’t do it. You’re not dead. You *look* dead but you’re not. Not quite. What’s the hurry? You’re headed there soon enough.”

Claude said: “My girlfriend is there. I want to see her.”

Dr. Aloy said: “Sorry to hear that. But I could lose my license. You come back to me when you’re dead and I’ll see what I can do.”

Claude said: “This is all just a dream of mine anyway. Can’t you break the rules?”

Dr. Aloy said: “Now let me give you a piece of advice, free of charge. Don’t go around saying that this is all just a dream of yours, okay? People don’t like being told they’re a figment of somebody else’s imagination. Now if you’re serious about this pass, you go out

there and get yourself killed, come on back and I'll get you straightened away. Of course that's not my *professional* advice. Excuse me. Hello? Oh. It's for you."

Dr. Grohmuller said: "I wouldn't jump out Dr. Aloy's window if I were you. The fall might frighten you and the fear might wake you."

Claude said: "I wasn't going to jump. I have no desire to die in public. Of course I don't exactly want Gary or Lila to see my brains dripping down the bathroom walls or Helen slipping in a pool of my blood, either. Not that I own a gun. And I don't know anything about poison. I guess enough of anything toxic would do the trick, but I don't really relish the idea of writhing around in agony while bleach eats away my innards—even if this is just a dream. I've always thought freezing to death, curling up drunk in some snowbank, would be best. But of course it's summer. I suppose I could hang myself. There's that oak in our back yard. The kids won't be home from school for a few hours yet."

Lila said: "Mom, Dad's stuck in the tree out back."

Helen said: "Mommy knows, dear. Finish your roast beef and you can call the ambulance."

The ambulance driver said: "Stop your squirming back there or I'll have my partner strap you down until the trial."

Claude said: "What trial?"

The ambulance driver said: "You think with that welt around your neck they're not going to know it was suicide?"

Claude said: "Since when is suicide a crime?"

The ambulance driver said: "It's always been a crime. It's the one thing the living can't abide. You kill someone else, that shows a healthy respect for life. Shows you think it's the most valuable possession you can take away from them. But you off yourself? Oh boy. That's like being invited to a sumptuous banquet and shitting in the pâté de foie gras. You leave a note?"

Claude said: "I couldn't think of anything to say."

The ambulance driver said: "That's in your favor."

Claude said: "Anyway, I didn't really hang myself. I'm just trying to get a pass to visit my girlfriend in the City of the Dead."

The coroner said: "I can give you one just as soon as we're done with the autopsy. Can you hold on to this for a second?"

Claude said: "What is it?"

The coroner said: "Your stomach. Oh, that's just great. Right on the floor. Last time I ask you to hold anything. That reminds me. Did you fill out your organ donor card?"

Claude said: "It's in my wallet."

The coroner said: "Won't be needing this back then, will you? Or this. Or this. Or this."

Claude said: "What do you need that for?"

The coroner said: "A colleague of mine is writing a dissertation on the effects of defenestration on the exsanguinated human kidney."

Claude said: "What are you going to do with *that*?"

The coroner said: "My brother's a chef. Alright, here's your pass. Take that to your funeral director. And here's a sewing kit. Good luck."

The funeral director said: "Dear friends and family of the dearly departed Claude R. Talleurien. I'm not sure what the 'R' stands for but it is always a sad occasion when someone we know dies. It is less sad for those of us—such as myself, today—who did not know the dead person in question. But it is still sad. It is always sad. For whom the bell tolls and all that. The fact of the matter is, no one knows a whole hell of a lot about it. Death, I mean. I can't possibly imagine what it's like, and neither can you. Oh, you've got your ideas, and so have I. For me, I suppose it's a sort of infinite succession of intense and always novel joys; an endless concatenation of unbearable euphorias, each one obliterating the last with its

impossible brilliance, until my soul is suffused with a pure and unadulterated beatitude that would make falling in love or heroin high or being fellated by a circle of dancing pixies for all eternity seem like excruciating agony in comparison. But maybe that's just me. Now, since we're running a bit late, I will limit myself to only one or two items of parish business. As many of you know, we usually hold a Bingo For Charity night on Fridays at seven, but for reasons that I will not elaborate upon at the moment because I do not know what they are, that function has been moved ahead an hour, to six p.m. If you would like to write that down, here is a pen that I will pass around, starting at this end and proceeding counter-clockwise. If you do not have a piece of paper, you might want to write on the back of your hand, assuming of course that you are not allergic to blue ink. Now, would anyone like to stand up and say a few words by which to remember our dear friend and father and brother and son and nephew and coworker, Claude?"

Claude's father said: "Truth to tell, I never really wanted no kids. Guessat's why I up'n left town when Claude here was borned. Came back for a visit once. Claude here wanted to know where I'd been at all them years, kept askin' why I wasn't around when he was a-growin' up. 'Well hell,' I says, 'fair is fair. You wasn't around when I was a kid, was you?' Left town again pretty soon after that. Couldn't hack it, I guess. Some just isn't cut out to be dads is all. Ain't nobody's fault."

Wendy said: "I didn't know Claude very well, but what I did know of him I liked a lot. I don't know what kind of a father he was, or husband, or friend, or employee, but he used to come into the store maybe once or twice a week and I could tell he was an alright person. He was always polite. One thing I remember is he often had exact change. He may not have done anything noteworthy or particularly memorable but I will always remember him. And so, in a small way, I guess he'll live on in my memory. And maybe someday

I'll tell my children, if I ever have children, though God knows the way things are going ... Or I'll tell someone else about him, and then he'll live on a little bit in their memory, but not very much, I guess, because I probably won't be able to explain what it was about Claude that made him special or unique or whatever. But at least I will remember him, and so he'll live on, at least until I die. And then Claude will die too. But if you look at it another way, he's already dead, so what's the difference."

Jack said: "Claude was a valuable asset around the office. Now that he's dead I've got Collier breathing down my neck for his Moss-Maple folio, plus the Werner-Fellinger article that Claude was supposed to have on Gernwald's desk Monday has fallen into my lap, and my guys are doing the work on the Horace-Witt summary that his guys were supposed to be doing for the big Thurington-Levy merger presentation on Friday but none of them can do anything without that Kimberley-Woodrow file that Claude was appending to Jenkins' Ruprecht-Smith file but no one knows where it is and his office is a disaster area let me tell you and we were a man short for the interoffice league game last night and that's our third forfeit and one more and we're out of the semis so yeah, he'll be missed."

Helen said: "Claude was a good father, I guess. But he always left the discipline to me, so I always ended up looking like the bad guy. And he was an alright husband. Neither the best nor the worst I've had. As for performance in bed, I'd say he was somewhere in the thirtieth, thirty-fifth percentile. Also while we're here I might as well announce that Jack and I were having an affair and now that Claude is dead we can get married and you're all invited to the wedding which is tomorrow and as far as gifts go, considering the short notice, cash is just super."

Gary said: "He was a nice dud. I mean dead. I mean dad. But he never let us stay up late or watch rated-R movies. I hated him."

The gravedigger said: “How you doing down there? Need anything? Hungry? Thirsty? How’s your bladder? Any last words? No? Here we go then. Hope you aren’t claustrophobic. That’s a little joke.”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “And this is the fourth circle, where the people who left refrigerator doors open stay. And this is the fifth circle, where the people who amended STOP signs with the word ‘Driving’ stay.”

Claude said: “That doesn’t seem so bad.”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “It’s ambiguous. Is their purpose politico-environmental—do they want you to start biking to work?—or are they just being waggishly pedantic? And this is the sixth circle, where Larry stays. Larry was the guy who called escalators ‘escalators,’ even though they also go down. Hi Larry.”

Larry said: “What was I supposed to call them, ‘de-escalators’?”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “And this is the seventh circle, where Hank stays. Hi Hank.”

Hank said: “What was I supposed to call them, ‘de-elevators’?”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “And this is the eighth circle, where the people who ran crooked lemonade stands stay. Hi there, Gwenda.”

Claude said: “Well aren’t you adorable. How much is lemonade?”

Gwenda said: “For a quarter you get one chance to win a glass, or three chances for fifty cents.”

Claude said: “Here’s a quarter.”

Gwenda said: “Sorry. Please try again.”

Claude said: “I didn’t win?”

Gwenda said: “Sorry. Please try again.”

Claude said: “Here’s a dollar.”

Gwenda said: “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Please try again.”

Claude said: “That’s only five.”

Gwenda said: “You win!”

Claude said: “I won a lemonade?”

Gwenda said: “You won a free play!”

Claude said: “Well, did that one win?”

Gwenda said: “Sorry. Please try again.”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “And this is the ninth circle, where all the people who make things worse by trying to make them better stay. And this is the gate to the City of the Dead, where everyone else stays. You’ve got your pass, right?”

Claude said: “Where’s Maggie?”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “Check the telephone directory.”

Claude said: “She’s not in it.”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “Then she’s not here.”

Claude said: “But she’s dead.”

Claude’s Uncle Wilbert said: “You should talk to Mr. Rogobo. He’s the mayor.”

Mr. Rogobo said: “She’s not here.”

Claude said: “But she’s dead.”

Mr. Rogobo said: “She’s not on the books. If she’s not on the books, she’s not dead.”

Claude said: “The books must be wrong. I went to her funeral. I watched them lower her coffin into the ground.”

Mr. Rogobo said: “The books are not wrong. The books are never wrong. At least the books are *very very rarely* wrong. To my knowledge, and my knowledge is comprehensive, the books have only been wrong on seven occasions. But the bookkeepers learn from these errors. So, as you can imagine, the art of keeping the books is much more advanced now than it was in the golden age of book-

keeping, before the books ever went wrong, so that now the books are, in effect, never wrong. For all intents and purposes, the books are perfectly all right.”

Claude said: “But the books were wrong seven times in the past. Maybe they’re wrong now.”

Mr. Rogobo said: “No. With each new error the books become ever more right. With each wrongness the overall rightness becomes more certain. So the chances of the books being wrong are infinitesimal. Ergo, your girlfriend is not dead.”

Claude said: “Then where is she?”

Mr. Rogobo said: “Still above-ground, I’d imagine. But no one is ever allowed to go back above-ground. Never has anyone gone back. At least *almost never ever* has anyone gone back. To my knowledge only six people have ever gone back and in all of those cases with the exception of one it was due to errors of bookkeeping and as you know that never happens. The other I permitted to go back because he thought his girlfriend had died and so he killed himself but it turned out that she was living after all and the guy felt like a real schmuck as you can imagine so I let him go back but only on the condition that he would never be allowed to return to the City of the Dead again unless he brought his girlfriend with him. Now before you go I’ll need to take that pass back.”

The bailiff said: “All rise. The honorable Sharon T. Smith presiding, in case number FDS-276-5854, *The People v. Claude R. Talleurien*, alleged suicide and revenant. Court is now in session.”

The people said: “We are born with brains not yet wired for memory. None of us remembers being a baby, being born, coming into existence. Each of us finds himself *in media res*, an amnesiac, an unmoved mover. We therefore possess at every age a full sense of a past, one which seems all the richer for fading gradually into obscurity. Whether eight or eighty, we feel ourselves to be without origin. And from this feeling we fashion, when we are young, the comple-

mentary one: that we must surely live forever. But as we age, and watch others cease to exist, we arrive at the inevitable induction: all men are mortal. And though we still feel every bit as beginningless as we did when children, we become disabused of the notion of our endlessness. Life, as a result, seems tragically short. And yet death is, at least, democratic. In depriving us not of a spectral and uncertain future but of an unfathomable past, it takes from each of us the same priceless possession, a treasure that is literally invaluable, because none of us can know its scope. Death takes from us our story. Claude Talleurien has, in trying to write the conclusion to his own story, acted as death's accomplice. What is worse, he has, in returning to this world, blurred the boundary between life and death. We put people in the ground to forget about them—to forget, to the best of our ability, about death itself. What else do we put in the ground? Garbage. And if garbage were to one day emerge from its appointed resting place we would not hesitate to rise up in retaliation, to crush it beneath the full weight of our legal system, to send it back to hell where it belongs. Let us show no more pity for this man.”

The inexpensive lawyer said: “Good gosh, that was nice. I don't know how I'm going to follow that. I guess I could call somebody to the what's it called, the *stand*—incidentally, why is it called that, I wonder, if you *sit* in it? I would like to call to the stand, well, basically anyone who might be able to say something nice about my client, the guy defending himself, Mr. ... this guy here that I'm pointing at. Anybody? Your honor, I would like to request a recess on the grounds that I am having a panic attack. I left my medication in my locker at the Y. Oh God, I'm seeing lights.”

The expensive lawyer said: “Mr. Talleurien? I saw you on television and you look much more emaciated in person. I'd like to represent you but unfortunately I'm very expensive and you don't look like someone who can afford me. However your case is getting a lot of media attention and my heart goes out to you so I'll tell you

what I'll do. For five thousand dollars down I'll give you financing on my legal services at only 11.9% interest compounded biweekly with minimum monthly payments of let's say one thousand one hundred and fifty-five dollars."

The private investigator said: "Sure, I can find her. I can find anyone. I once found a man who'd done a runner on his wife. He took his kids, their kids, *and* her kids from a previous marriage. There were seventeen of them altogether, ages from two-and-a-half to thirty-one years old, sleeping in a six-by-ten-foot roach-infested motel room in Yagé, Mexico. The thirty-one-year-old was a podiatrist in Baltimore. He'd never even met his step-father. Figured he was being held for some kind of ransom. So he called his mom and asked her what the hell was going on and what did she do? She sent me down there to ship them all home. Another time I found a woman who'd skipped out on her husband twenty years before. They were still married. She still had the ring somewhere, she said. So while she slept I crept into the next room and called one of my assistants at directory assistance and in no time flat I'd tracked down the phone number of the husband. Once the old guy figured out who I was talking about he *claimed* he wasn't even looking for her, but I was able to convince him to buy her latest address and phone number for twenty bucks. Not that the cheque ever came through, mind you, but you know what the postal service is like. So yeah, I can find your girlie. I'll need about eleven hunnies up front for my day-to-day expenses."

Jack said: "You can't stay here. We're on our honeymoon."

Helen said: "Go away. We're in love."

The landlady said: "I hope you don't have any heart or respiratory problems because this mold you see all over the walls and ceiling and along the floor there, it's called *stachybotrys atra* and it's toxic as hell, that's why I've got this breathing apparatus on, though to be honest I sometimes wear it around just for fun, but if you haven't got

like TB or Fragile Lung Syndrome it shouldn't pose too much of a problem, at least not in the short term, that reminds me, how long are you planning on staying, because I'll require an eighteen-month lease and six months rent up front plus of course the damage deposit and the security deposit and a lease-processing fee and a lease-processing-fee fee which is nonrefundable, I see you jumping out of the way of that caravan of bugs there, that's good to see, those are the bad bugs, you want to keep your distance from those suckers, but these ones over here, these are the good bugs, they're ugly as sin but they eat the bad bugs so I feed them chocolate and coffee to keep them vicious, but it also keeps them awake all night, so I'd recommend ear plugs and maybe some kind of mosquito netting over your bed, not that that will keep them out if they have half a mind to get in but it might give them pause, now you've got four appliances and two of them still work, the padlock on the fridge was put there by the municipal health authority so I don't have a key for that, and these bars on the windows are for your own protection, unless we're talking about a fire, in which case you're pretty much shit-O.L. if you know what I mean, and this here is Saul, Saul this is the guy who might be moving in, Saul's alright, as long as he gets fed he's happy, his favorite foods are Cheerios and tuna, but I'd recommend you just buy the Discount Honey-Nut O's which now come with U's and C's, the other day I was almost able to spell 'couch,' and instead of tuna I'd recommend you just get the Flakes of Negative Entropy in a Can, Saul can't tell the difference, he won't give you any trouble, he just sits there and watches TV, you might have to help him to the toilet a couple times a week, that's what this trolley here is for, the back wheel squeaks like crazy but basically it's structurally sound, I know you were looking for a suite to yourself but technically speaking he's not really a roommate since he's not paying rent, the fact is that after his lease ran out we couldn't get him out through the door, so I'll need you to provide me with post-dated certified cheques for

the duration of your lease, and the rent before utilities comes to eleven hundred and change which I know sounds like a lot considering the neighborhood and the size and condition of the place and the mold and the bugs and Saul here but I'll be honest with you since you seem like a nice guy, I'm gouging you unmercifully because you're dead and you'll never find a landlord in this city who'd do any different and that's a fact. So what do you say?"

The prosecutor said: "Objection, your honor. The defense is stroking your hand in what I can only describe as a lascivious manner, and furthermore I can only speculate as to what is going on behind the bench where my vision cannot penetrate."

The expensive lawyer said: "Counter-objection, your honor. Firstly, I am stroking your hand—as you yourself could attest, if you were not nibbling on the fingers of my other hand—in an expression of strictly professional admiration for your renowned jurisprudence; and secondly, what goes on behind this or any other bench between the lower moieties of two consenting adults is nobody's business but their own. Now, if that is the end of the prosecution's fatuous maunderings and pettifogging quibblings, I am prepared to outline the arguments I will present over the course of this trial; arguments which will prove, beyond a penumbra of a shadow of a doubt, my client's innocence of the outrageous charges laid against him."

The television said: "Oh, that's too bad. Not a single Q. Debbie, that means it's your spin. Come on big money, big money! Two thousand dollars. I'd like to buy a vowel. I'd like to buy a Y. I'm sorry, there aren't any Y's. Oh well. Also, Y is not a vowel. Oh that's right, I forgot. Excuse me, but isn't it sometimes a vowel? Not for the purposes of this game, no. Can I buy a different vowel then? No, I'm afraid not. Maurice, it's your spin. Come on big money! Five thousand dollars! What would you like to do? Are there any ... X's? No, I guess not. You're up, Bob. I'd like to solve the puzzle. I'm afraid you have to spin first, Bob. Oh right. Big money, big

money! Fifty thousand dollars! Are you still going to solve the puzzle? Is it 'Every Which Way To Go?' I'm sorry Bob, I think you're thinking of the puzzle we had before the break. Perhaps you'll have better luck if you wait until some letters appear on the board next time. Debbie, it's your go. Big money! Two hundred thousand dollars! Holy cow! For two hundred thousand dollars, Debbie, what are you going to do? Let's see ... Are there any sevens?"

Saul said: "Change the channel."

The television said: "These decorative plates are simply irresistible to the serious collector. Unlike other so-called handmade items, each one of these plates is completely unique and unlike any other in the collection. That's because we don't take an assembly-line approach to our craft. We believe individuality is the soul of art. With this maxim in mind, our plate designers are instructed from birth in the art of decorative plate design, and nothing but the art of decorative plate design—our state-of-the-art isolation facility ensures it. And to guarantee that your hand-crafted plate is a truly one-of-a-kind item, each of our dedicated plate designers is permitted to hand-craft only one plate—ever. That's right: your beautiful decorative plate is one person's unique life's work. Not only that, but once your plate is completed, and deemed to be up to our high standards of quality and aesthetic value, the designer of your plate is shot in the back of the head, execution-style, so as to ensure the perpetual uniqueness of your purchase."

Saul said: "Change the channel."

The private investigator said: "Well, I could tell you where she's *not*. She's not in the cafeteria downstairs. She's not in the third stall from the left in the men's washroom on the fourth floor. She's not in the lobby of my apartment building. She's not in the coffee shop across the street. She's not in the bar down the street from my ex-wife's place. She's not hiding behind the dumpster in the back alley outside my ex-girlfriend's place. She's not in the waiting room of

the VD clinic. She's not on the number 28 bus. She's not at my mechanic's. She's not under my desk. She's not in Baltimore. Okay, alright, she *might* be in Baltimore. I confess, I haven't had a chance to look into Baltimore yet, but I'll get on it right away. I've got a wedding to attend there this weekend anyway. So I'll need another thousand bucks for expenses. And I should probably give the newlyweds a little something, a card and maybe a hundred clams should do it. Will you need a receipt? There's a receipt fee of fifty-five bucks."

The expensive lawyer said: "Even if my client *did* kill himself, which I am by no means admitting, he cannot be held responsible for that or any other misdeed, however despicable, however heinous. Because whether our characters are the result of our experiences, our environment, our upbringing, or our genes, whether we are shaped by nature, nurture, or some combination of both, the fact remains that *we ourselves* do not choose what we become. Whether my client was abused as a child, mocked as a teenager, or simply inherited a wonky strand of DNA, he can no more be blamed for who he is, for what he has become, than the sun can be held accountable for shining or the river for flowing."

The woman on the phone said: "Hello, I'm calling on behalf of the local chapter of Mothers Against Death. You may have seen our commercial: 'We're MAD and we're not going to take it anymore'? I must say, Mr. Talleurien, that MAD strongly disapproves of the cavalier manner in which you have returned to the land of the living from that of the dead. We have taken pains over the millennia to impress upon the younger generation that death is a very serious business indeed, not something to be experimented with, and we cannot help but feel that the message you are implicitly sending our children is that death is not so bad after all. Why, just the other day one of our members found her thirteen-year-old son chewing razor-blades. His excuse was that supposedly no one at school liked him. But I think you and I both know the real reason for his deplorable

behavior: the glamorization of death by the liberal media today! And, Mr. Talleurien, we at MAD consider you to be one of the principal offenders. You serve, perhaps inadvertently, perhaps unwittingly, as a role model for all the impressionable children out there who don't know any better. That thirteen-year-old boy chewing razorblades looks *up to you*, Mr. Talleurien, even if he himself doesn't realize it, even if he claims to be unaware of your existence. It is our opinion that only you can undo the damage you have done, Mr. Talleurien. We think it would be in everyone's best interest if you were to visit the Moribund Ward at St. Anthony's this afternoon and say a few words to the children, a little something to restore their natural and healthy fear of that damnable scourge of precious human life, death."

Claude said: "What I don't like about death is not that it ends life, but spoils it. I'm not talking about awareness of your own mortality or the anxiety that causes. I'm talking about what being mortal does to what you do and who you are. The fact that you're born to die makes patience impossible, desire unquenchable, joy fleeting, creeping boredom the only status quo. Because you must die, you must hurry, must fight tooth and nail, must forever ask yourself, 'What now? What next?' Even at my happiest, in those tranquil moments alone with Maggie, I was restless. If it was morning I was thinking about what we'd do that afternoon; if it was afternoon, I'd be thinking about that evening. I was always looking forward to the *next* happiness, as though simply lying there, watching the heart-pulse in her warm neck, was a sort of sentence, something to be waited out, lived *through* instead of *in*. When you get on an elevator it feels, after you've moved a floor or two, like you're already slowing down; the end of the *increase* in velocity feels like a stop. We need to go faster and faster to not feel like we're standing still. Immortality would be insufferable as we are. But if we were immortal, we would not be as we are."

The MAD woman said: “Something a little more ... concrete, perhaps, for the children.”

Claude said: “Death seems to be a lot like living, only there’s less candy.”

The children said: “I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!”

The private investigator said: “Well, she’s not in a jail cell in a little backwater town outside of Atlantic City, I can tell you that much. How close are you to a Western Union?”

Saul said: “Somebody called for you. They said it was important and that you should call them back. They left their number but I wrote it on my hand and it came off when I was masturbating. They left their name but I forget what it was. I think they called a couple of days ago. Maybe Tuesday. The day had a Tuesday feel about it. Anyway, you should probably give them a ring.”

The expensive lawyer said: “And finally, your honor, I maintain that ‘Claude Talleurien’ cannot be punished for a crime that ‘he’ allegedly committed because ‘he’ does not exist—the concept of selfhood, personality, or individual identity being a pernicious myth perpetuated by lassitude, fuzzy thinking, habit, arrogance, and in the furtherance of inequality, discrimination, and organized team sport.”

Gary’s kindergarten teacher said: “Once upon a time, an unhappy man tied a rope around his neck. The other end he tied to the branch of a tree in his back yard. Then he knocked over the chair he was standing on. The man was unhappy because his girlfriend had died and he would never get to see her again. When people die, we usually put them in boxes called coffins and lower them down into holes dug in the ground. Then we cover them up with dirt and grass and try to forget about them. Sometimes when people die we burn them up in a hot furnace until they are nothing more than cinders and ashes. Then, after the ashes have cooled, we put them inside an urn. Sometimes we take the urn full of ashes and scatter the ashes in a scenic location—the sea shore, for example, or the heart of the for-

est. No one knows why we do these things. Sometimes we don't burn or bury a person at all. Sometimes we freeze them so that far in the future, when we believe we will know more than we do today, we (or whoever comes along to replace us) might be able to bring them back to life. Sometimes we give them to scientists who take them apart to try to understand how their bodies work. (This isn't often helpful because one thing that dead bodies don't do is work.) And sometimes we just let them rot. We only do this to people we dislike or disapprove of. You see, we consider burning, freezing, burial, and dissection to be signs of respect. The unhappy man had not turned his girlfriend into ashes. He had buried her beneath the ground. His girlfriend, whose name was Margaret, had died in a car crash. The back of her head had been crushed and her face had been torn by glass shards. It had cost the unhappy man \$1,155 to have his girlfriend's head and face fixed so that he could look at her one last time before putting her in the ground. His friends clasped his shoulder and said things like: Time heals all wounds, and This too shall pass. But the unhappy man did not want this too to pass. He did not want time to heal his wound. His grief was all that remained to remind him of Margaret, and losing it would feel like losing her all over again. For three months and three weeks he held on to his pain. In the fourth week of the third month after his girlfriend's death he went to a rather silly movie. He enjoyed himself. He laughed. And when he came out of the theatre he felt awful. He felt as though he had laughed at his girlfriend's death. He felt that he had joined the conspiracy to forget her. He realized that life is nothing but a protracted death, a plodding procession of little cessations. Maggie had died, and now his grief was dying too. Nothing, not even misery, was immortal. That's why he decided to get it over with. That's why he decided to get all his dying out of the way in one sweep."

Dr. Mayer-Edelmann said: "You feel guilty. That's not unusual. But Margaret's death was not your fault. Or wait. Yes it was.

Sorry, wrong file.”

The judge said: “Has the jury reached a verdict?”

The jury said: “We have, your honor. For the crimes of dying, of self-murder, of belated burial, of reckless resurrection, of polluting the minds of the youth, of egregious failure to pay his legal bills, of grief paralysis, of putrescence, of ingratitude, of boundary dissolution, of failure to achieve abreaction, of sluggish pupil dilation, of weakness of character, of—”

The prosecutor said: “One moment, your honor. I would like to call to the stand one Margaret Reynolds.”

Margaret said: “Claude was driving but it wasn’t his fault. It was raining. It was early in the morning. We’d been on the road all night. I asked if he wanted to rest. I should have insisted. I’m sure he only closed his eyes for a moment or two. There were no other vehicles. I think the car flipped six times but I’m not sure. My spine was broken in two places. My skull was crushed. It didn’t hurt. I continued to breathe for three or four minutes. No one came along the road for half an hour. He had a concussion and a sprained wrist. He was conscious but his mind wasn’t working. He was confused. It was raining lightly. The rain fell on his face through the shattered windshield. He felt free, light, unencumbered. He was thinking, for the first time in many months, nothing more than how good it felt to be alive. I think he forgot that I was in the car next to him. I’m sure it was delayed shock. I don’t blame him. It wasn’t his fault. I only wanted him to say my name. I wished he would say my name, just once, before I had to go.”

Claude said: “Margaret! Margaret! Margaret! Margaret! Margaret! Margaret!”

Dr. Mayer-Edelmann said: “I cannot without qualm say that I’m altogether in love with your mourning-arc. Though it pains me, I have no choice but to say that your latest grief index results show no trends that I can consider to be promising. And your SSHQ

scores are giving me what I think, in the name of scientific precision, I have no choice but to call the willies. But I'll tell you what I'll do.”