

“But Swedenborg was nuts,” Jeremy said, shaking his head. “Or if not nuts, he was just a guy making stuff up to make sense of what was happening to him. Just like everyone else. It was all about his head. Just like everyone else.” He continued shaking his head, even after he stopped talking.

Jeremy wasn’t talking to anyone. There was no one but he present in the small living room where he was standing, looking out the window at an especially resplendent spring morning. The kind that used to bring tears to his eyes. But that was a long time ago. He was long past feeling much of anything. He squinted his eyes and tried to remember the last time he cried. Blank.

He stared out the window, remembering a time when he thought he could see the foliage turning green as he observed it. He did not know if this was ever objectively true, but it was such a captivating notion in his mind, he couldn’t help believing it was true. He used to love the earth, and this was one of the secret beliefs he had about his lover. Sometimes he wondered what kind of beliefs the earth had about him. He chuckled humorlessly at what now seemed just a stray, lunatic thought from his past. He turned away from the window. He had to go to work.

When he wasn’t grappling with the mysteries of existence, a habit he could not break despite being alive for more decades than he cared to say aloud, Jeremy spent his time working at a job that kept him fed and clothed, a craft that he began right after his aimless college career and which he found, for the most part, unobjectionable. He did not love his work as a carpenter, but it seemed to him a satisfactory way to absorb his attention and to manage the financial part of his life without undue stress; it also gave him time to pursue other interests in his life in an unhurried way, which was just how he preferred it.

Work on this particular morning meant traveling across town to a new development far from the city neighborhood where he lived. He did not really like the suburbs, but that’s where the action was for a carpenter of his experience and maturity. City work was spotty and had a boom-and-bust cycle to it. Suburban sprawl, on the other hand, was relentless in its creeping outward motion and provided work on a much more stable basis. It did not seem affected by weather, recession, or inflation. The homes got larger and more expensive over time, but that did not seem to deter the thousands of families eager for the latest and greatest in home construction. And, Jeremy speculated, for the fresh air and safety that supposedly correlated with distance from the urban core.

In Jeremy’s mind, he pictured a map of the metropolitan area with fire slowly emanating from the center, consuming farms and small rural communities. He guessed that at some point in the future, there would be no more farms and small rural towns; just one huge megalopolis, such as was beginning to be seen on the eastern seaboard where he lived.

These thoughts did not concern him overmuch. He looked at the calendar on the wall above the small desk that held his computer. He noted the large X on today’s date, March 31. He nodded to the calendar before he left his apartment and took the elevator down to the garage, where his Ford F-150 awaited him. This was a handy vehicle for someone in his line of work, and most of the carpenters he knew owned a Ford truck or a similar vehicle. But it was clear to Jeremy that, if he were not a craftsman, he would be mortified to be seen driving around in this black behemoth. His dream was to drive around town in a small sedan, perhaps a hybrid; or, even better, not to own a car at all and make it around on public transportation. Unfortunately, the public sector had some catching up to do for that dream to be realized.

But today was just another workday, although it was Friday, which was Jeremy’s favorite day of the week. He knew he could knock off work early and then turn his attention to the luxury of almost two and a half days off. He cherished his time off, even if he did not have anything special planned, which was most of the time. He just liked not having to answer to anyone or have his attention focused by someone else. He liked to do solitary things: read, daydream, sleep. Simple pleasures. Sometimes he would hang out with his friends, although, since his last divorce, his supply of companions had dwindled precipitously: most of his ‘friends’ had been people that he and his wife had known together. They were now either her friends or friends of neither of them. He grimaced at this thought. It wasn’t that he wanted to resurrect those relationships. They had been an artifact of his last, moderately long marriage of four years, accoutrements that pertained to a style

of life of which he was no longer a part. He thought grimly to himself that he would probably not have chosen to spend any time with the individuals who made up the couples with whom he and his ex-wife shared time.

On the long drive to the front line of urban expansion, Jeremy thought absently about Emmanuel Swedenborg, whose works he had been perusing online earlier in the morning, trying to make sense of them. As with many of his attempts to plumb mystic writers from the past, he was unsuccessful. Jeremy longed to believe in something beyond the immediate world in which he lived, but throughout his life, beliefs that entered his awareness lasted only a short time before exiting just as quickly, usually to be dismissed as superstitious and wishful thinking. Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century scientist-turned-mystic, seemed no exception. His legacy was celebrated by the church which took his name, the perversely labeled 'Swedenborgians', and dismissed by those who thought that Emmanuel had simply become mentally ill in his mid-fifties. Obsessive-compulsive disorder perhaps; or maybe even bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, although the late onset argued against those. Who knows? Jeremy thought to himself.

Jeremy was completely absorbed in these thoughts when he noticed that traffic on the interstate on which he was traveling was slowing to a crawl; then to a stop. He shook his head to focus on the twenty-first century reality of his life and peered over the roofs and hoods of the less imposing vehicles in front of him. He could not see what the obstruction was; all he saw was a very long line of cars, trucks, and SUVs carrying no doubt frustrated occupants. He flipped on the radio to see if there was a news report of an accident.

Nothing. He tried to redirect his mind to the topic of Swedish mysticism, but he had to pay too much attention to the traffic situation in which he found himself. Nothing transcendent about this, he thought. Then he disappeared.

2.

Jeremy Walker did not exactly dematerialize that lovely spring morning. He was still physically present in his loathsome Ford F-150, at least for a time. From the moment he came to a complete stop in the traffic jam, however, only a few minutes elapsed before he opened the huge black door, got out of the vehicle, closed the door, and walked away, leaving the motor of the big black vehicle running. He walked across several lanes of standstill traffic and onto the grassy patch on the north side of the interstate. He walked down the embankment to a street that was filling with cars getting off the highway and looking for a faster way to get to wherever they were going. He walked past houses and trees and a few idle pedestrians.

He did not appear to be fully conscious. If someone had said something to him, he probably would not have responded. He may not even have noticed. What he felt internally was a sudden warming of his body and an evacuation of his mind. It was not an unpleasant sensation, but it was one he had never had before. It was akin to alcohol intoxication or to a marijuana high, yet it was also different and more intense. He did not feel sick; nor did he question the access he had to the movement of his limbs. He did not know where he was going; nor did he care. He just kept walking.

His mind was empty, but his physical self seemed to be functioning normally. He did not recognize for a while that he was walking back in the direction from which he had driven, back toward the city where he lived. The journey looked so much different on foot: he had never noticed the buildings he was passing or the way the air smelled or felt or any of the features that his climate-controlled vehicle routinely filtered out. He began to breathe more deeply, partly because of this burgeoning awareness and partly because of the exercise involved in covering territory on foot. His body was taking in oxygen, which he guessed it did every moment of his life, but today he felt it consciously, deliberately, as if it were a choice. This appealed to him in a distant sort of way.

It must have been three or four hours later that he stopped to rest on the limestone balustrade that served as a railing for the steps into a large stone church. He hoisted himself onto the warm stone and leaned against a column that was higher than the railing on which he was sitting. He continued breathing deeply. At one point, he felt a little light-headed, as if his brain was taking in a surfeit of the substance that sustained it. Overdosing on air? he thought absently to himself. Not likely, he responded. He did not move from this spot—indeed, he almost did not move at all—until evening began to fall around him.

Sometime before darkness fell completely, a middle-aged man dressed in black appeared in front of him and said something. Jeremy looked at the man, but he did not hear anything right away. He noticed after a time

that the man's lips were moving, and he was waving his hands around in front of his body. All of a sudden, as if unmuting a television, he suddenly heard words come out of this man's mouth.

“. . .and if you need help,” the man was saying in too loud a voice, “there is a shelter a couple miles from here. Can you hear me?” Getting no response, he repeated himself, much like an American tourist in Europe. “Do you understand me?”

Jeremy looked at the man but made no response. Why would I need a shelter? he thought to himself. Why would I need help? He cocked his head sideways and looked at the man, who appeared to be associated with the church building on which he was sitting.

As he was pondering these things, he noticed that he was hungry. He looked at the man, whose brow was getting noticeably more furrowed, and said simply, “I am hungry.” He heard himself say the words, but in his mind they sounded only vaguely the way he thought he sounded when he spoke. The man did not respond. He looked at Jeremy with a deeply cratered expression on his face, as if he in fact could be no help at all.

At length, the man turned and walked away slowly. Jeremy watched him take his leave, and, as soon as he was out of sight, scooted down from the balustrade and onto the pavement. He headed in the same direction he had been traveling earlier.

A few blocks later, Jeremy came to a small diner that was open and almost filled with people. He walked in, found a small empty table, and sat down. Menus were neatly stacked to one side of the table he had chosen, and he picked one up and began reading it. Typical diner fare, he saw immediately.

A server came over: a thin, wrinkly, middle-aged woman in a uniform that was too tight. “What can I get you, honey?” she asked.

Jeremy ordered a hamburger and fries and coffee. It felt right; it was something he knew.

As he waited for his food to arrive, he looked absently around the small restaurant. There was a greasy texture in the air, part smell and part pollution; Jeremy did not like it, but he had encountered it before, he was sure.

After a while, the thin, wrinkly, middle-aged woman in the too tight uniform returned with his meal. “Here you go, honey,” she said as if she knew him.

Jeremy did not speak. He looked down at the bun and the meat and the potatoes and the lettuce and the tomato and the pickle. A tear rolled down his face. And then he began screaming.

3.

Jeremy had no recollection of what happened next. He did not notice the police enter the diner and had no memory of being manhandled into the back of their car. He thought he had some recollection of the bright lights in the emergency room, but that was a fleeting image and may not have been real.

It did not take the police long to associate Jeremy Walker with the abandoned truck that made a traffic mess even messier earlier in the day. The two cops who entered the diner took about a minute to arrest Jeremy's wallet, and within another two minutes they had nailed the connection. The two middle aged guys looked at each other and nodded, both pointing to Jeremy with their eyes as they wrestled him to the ground and put handcuffs on him for his own protection.

Being handcuffed and on the ground did nothing to quell the wailing. He screamed and moaned and wailed all the way out of the diner, into the police cruiser, through the streets of Baltimore, into the emergency room, and on and on until he fell into a drug-assisted sleep. The silence that fell in the emergency room was a great relief to all the personnel there. It's not that the medical staff wasn't accustomed to noise in the ER; it was by its nature a noisy place. But they were not so accustomed to the eerie, sustained, high-pitched wailing that issued from an otherwise normal looking carpenter who lived in the city.

4.

When the phone rang, Macy Walker was in her nightshirt preparing to bond with a book that would surely bring her sleep. She picked it precisely for its soporific qualities: she hated nineteenth century romances, but there was no substance on earth with which she was familiar that packed such a somnolent wallop.

She thought at first that perhaps she shouldn't answer the phone. After all, it was after eleven p.m. Who could possibly be calling at this late hour? Probably a wrong number. Then she thought it might be her parents or her daughter with an emergency, so she slowly picked up the receiver.

"Hello," she said softly.

"Mrs. Walker?" a middle aged, African-American male voice asked.

"Yes?" she replied.

"Mrs. Walker, this is Detective Aaron Randolph with the Baltimore Police Department. Are you familiar with a Jeremy Walker, a forty-nine year old white male who lives in Baltimore?"

Macy frowned. "My ex-husband's name is Jeremy," she said, realizing she had stopped breathing.

"Mrs. Walker," the detective continued, assuming a match, "Mr. Walker was taken to the hospital this evening. He is in the psychiatric unit at Bayview." There was a slight pause. "We thought you would like to know." Another pause. "The staff there also thought you might be able to provide some additional information that could shed some light on what happened."

There was silence on the phone for a full minute. Then Macy, no longer thinking sleep was likely, asked, "What happened?"

The detective let out a stream of air. As if her question compelled him to share something he hadn't been planning to tell the former Mrs. Jeremy Walker, such as why he was calling at this late hour.

"He abandoned his truck on the highway this morning and apparently starting walking back toward the city. He went into a diner and ordered something to eat. When it came, he started yelling."

Macy considered this information. It did not make sense to her right away. She wondered why a person would be hospitalized for yelling.

"Yelling?" she finally asked.

"Well, it was more than yelling," the detective said, a little defensively. "It was more like wailing. He wailed for several hours."

Jeremy? Macy thought. He rarely raised his voice. In the back of her mind she felt faint but simultaneous tinges of irritation and glee. She was irritated that now, months after their divorce was final, Jeremy decided or was compelled to have feelings. She was gleeful that it landed him in the loony bin. She wasn't really surprised; she always thought his quiet, withholding demeanor would turn out badly in the end. So it finally got to him.

"Where is he exactly, officer?" Macy asked, taking a pen and paper from the drawer in the nightstand.

She wrote down the information the detective gave her. He told her Jeremy would probably be asleep at least till morning. She noted this, assured him that she would go to the hospital in the morning, thanked him, and hung up the phone.

Macy was smiling. She took no delight in Jeremy's troubles, but she was glad that he finally gave some expression to his feelings. Silly thought, she chided herself, but she couldn't relinquish the smile. She was glad he was being taken care of, and she forced herself to hope he would be okay, but secretly she hoped his being okay would take some time.

Macy lay back on the top of her bed and started thinking about the thing that was never too far from her mind: her recently granted divorce from Jeremy, the end result of a process that took the better part of a year. It wasn't a complicated divorce: she and Jeremy had been together for four years, but they had no children with each other. Macy's daughter was from a previous marriage and was all but grown up: she would be graduating from her junior college program next Christmas.

She turned and looked out the window at the dark Baltimore night. The window to her third floor apartment was open, and she felt the spring breeze and heard the urban noises, the ones that never completely recede: the comings and goings, the doors opening and closing, the cars starting and stopping. And in the background: sirens, the occasional pop of either a gun or a dumpster lid. She was not unhappy to be thinking of Jeremy, but it triggered so many feelings inside her that she could almost not bear it. But just as the proverbial moth is drawn to the flame that can destroy it, Macy allowed herself to remember.

She should have known better. It took her months to stop thinking of Jeremy every moment. It wasn't just thinking about him; it was the outrage and betrayal that she felt every time she did. And the pain that rumbled through her body, invariably culminating in a torrent of tears she always fought not to allow. She knew she was on thin ice on this particular evening. She could feel the pull of the delicious conflict just over her psychic horizon: the love and warmth she felt for this man and the rage toward him for being so damned indifferent. Indifferent to her, to her daughter, to their life together. For a moment, she backed away, but her recent success worked against her, and she allowed herself to think of him full face: how they met, how they married, how they parted. It would be a long night.