

Recovery

Remember, said the other voice, our first meeting. It was not a request, and was not a command he had the option of refusing. Remember, he was told, but it was merely a warning of what was about to be done for him.

Passively, Thomas felt his consciousness being unsmoothed, the surface of a pond disturbed by the brush of a finger; when the rippling subsided, he found himself staring into memory.

The expressway spread itself thinly out before and behind him, and he had maintained a relatively slow pace compared to the cars streaking past. That day, he recalled, he had been in no hurry, letting the highway carry him past his exit and loop him around the city.

You'll probably have to relinquish your license, the doctor had told him just fifteen minutes previously, adding hastily (lest he should appear fatalistic), but that's not for a long time, maybe never. He reeled against the implications as the words rang in his mind. Without realizing he did it, he began fiddling with the heater knob to squelch a tiny murmuring that had appeared from somewhere.

As the sound intensified, it became recognizable as the sound of a voice, metronomically counting off numbers.
"32N1375...94J1974..."

The counting was sporadic, and it took him several minutes to realize the numbers corresponded to the license plates of surrounding cars.

"64E14991...32B1848..."

As for the voice doing the counting, it was clear that it did not come from the radio. He pressed one hand up to his ear, and smothered the other ear with his shoulder, but the voice was just as loud. Strange, Thomas had thought, I've just been doomed by medical science to spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair, if I'm lucky, and what do I do? I think about license plates.

The voice paused momentarily in its counting. "Work against restraint," it informed him.

"What?"

"Work against restraint, against the fear of some kamakazi bastard, Satan is some Gremlin, aching to grind you down on the freeway. Amazing how it works. Memorize license plates before they hit you, before your face is in the defroster, and you do not fear because you know who they are, and now they fear you for that knowledge."

The thoughts ou think during times of trauma, Thomas reflected, realizing he was carrying on a conversation with himself. What good does that do, since the cars are already past when their plates come into view?

The voice grew quiet.

Don't worry if you start talking to yourself, Thomas remembered thinking, only if you start answering. He then put the incident out of his mind, worrying instead at the sudden tingling that erupted along the underside of his left arm.

The next memory flowed smoothly, and just as uncontrollably, from the first. A week had passed since the day on the freeway. He had been lulled to sleep by a lazy Saturday afternoon, when he was jarred awake, terrified, by a scream that splintered the air. Bolting from the sofa, he tried to follow the sound, to track down the source, but got no closer no matter which direction he went. Upstairs, the kitchen, outside, it was everywhere... Then he stopped, and so did the shrieking, as he realized from where it had originated. The other voice panted hysterically in his mind.

Thomas felt his left arm twinge and numb completely, and his heart began to pound.

Linen shrouds wound around for burial, howled the second voice, tied down with darkness and boy did it suck!

Thomas tried to remember the words the doctor had said the previous week, something about how he should not be surprised if he found that he was doing unusual things, sleep-walking and such. It was normal for patients in your condition, he had said. It will pass as you accept it.

Too shaken to fall back asleep, Thomas returned inside and picked up the blanket he must have kicked across the room while he slept. As he touched it, the other voice blazed to life again, "Shrouds, burial clothes, encasing movement restricted

for so long..."

For three days following, he was unable to sleep—he would continually start to drift off, only to be torn awake by the screaming of the other voice. Finally, driven to the point of exhaustion, he went to bed on the fourth day, determined to sleep, screaming or no screaming. He slept.

He awoke at four the next morning, shivering against a bare mattress. From somewhere downstairs, there floated up to him a gruff rumbling. Instantly, he was on his feet and down in the kitchen.

The dirty mound of dishes that had been rising in the sink over the past week had been strewn, chipped and fragmented across the counter and floor. His sheets, blankets, mattress cover, pillowcases, had been ripped into thin strips, which were knotted together into one long strand. Uncoiling from the pile on the floor, the strand snaked slowly up into the sink drain as the garbage disposal clutched and gathered it in.

I did this in my sleep? Thomas wondered incredulously.

Enclosed, entombed—these words, not his own, came from the back of his thoughts—Sleep is coma again, having to itch, to stretch, but cannot...having to clear the throat, but being unable, throat sealing up with mucus, clouding lungs...Get up, prevent restraint, begin to move...

The garbage disposal buzzed, jammed.

I didn't do this at all, he knew, and for the first time was afraid.

The doctor, as usual, had been good at offering facts that were hollow of hope. "I know it's hard to grasp, and I know we've been over this before, but bear with me. Try to look at this objectively. You have the most severe form of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis known. Period. Most cases of your type end with at least partial paralysis. Now, I'm not suggesting you'll end up that way, but you have to come to terms with it. No matter how hard you fight, there will be some loss of movement."

"But in my whole arm? Already? I can't move it whatsoever," he had said. He was not about to mention the voice. What could he have said?

"Granted, that is unusual so early on. But I don't know what else to tell you besides stick with your therapy...would you like

me to link you up with a support group?"

"Sure, about as much as I'd like you to fist me for prostate cancer again," the second voice blurted out of Thomas' larynx, adding that hell was particularly nice this time of year, and he should really take some Wednesday off to visit. Thomas clanged the receiver down.

"What in the hell...?" he muttered.

He was depressing anyway, the second voice countered.

A series of loud crashes woke him the next morning, and Thomas found himself standing in the bathroom, ankle deep in water, his left hand pummeling the toilet with the stone statuette that used to be displayed beside the sink. Try as he might, he was unable to stop the arm he had been unable to move for the past week and a half. After the statue was reduced to powder, his arm dropped it, and waved to him in the mirror.

"Morning," announced the second voice.

Thomas looked toward the rubble, the water bleeding from the chinks and fissures in the toilet, then back up at his reflection.

His left arm motioned for him to walk out into the living room.

All over the house, plants, of which he had many, were uprooted, leaning in bowls with the soil poured out.

Might take them awhile to get used to their new freedom, the voice said. I'll be damned if they weren't resistant. Some of 'em I had to throw against the wall four or five times before all the dirt came off.

Pictures had been punched from the empty frames that still hung on the wall.

Got tired of looking at the same thing in that frame. Couldn't change the channel. But with the new and improved model, I can do this. The left hand, much as Thomas tried to hold it down, gripped a nearby can of spraypaint and wisked its contents across the wall within the frame. Isn't this great? Look, just move the sucker, and you can do it again, as many times as makes you happy.

Where there had once been statues, figurines, there were now piles of dust and fragments.

Paralysis cured, the voice told him.

Two more days passed, and Thomas felt his legs slipping outside of his control.

By the week's end, he could only move his right arm. The other voice plopped his body down in front of the television whenever it could wrest the remote control from him.

The left hand stabbed at the channel numbers as fast as it could. Hours at a time went by in such fashion, Thomas unable to divert his eyes from the blurring images on the screen.

"Inquiring minds like mine want to know, Tommy, want to know, want to have and want now, and this blunderbuss of a remote can't keep the pace," the other voice whispered, since it no longer had to shout. "Can't this damn thing go any faster?"

Thomas remained silent, partly because it took too great of an effort to speak anymore, but mostly because he was intent on gripping and ungripping the upholstery on the couch, trying his best to fight off the numbing feeling that started creeping up his right arm.

The memories slowly dissipated, and Thomas was again in the present. Through eyes not under his control, he was able to see the road unscrolling as his car raced down it; his hands moved independent of him on the steering wheel. He did not even try to move any part of his body, knowing full well from past attempts that it was futile.

He could not move, he could not speak, and, lately, he noticed that he could no longer feel sensations through his skin. All he was able to do was to think, to wonder, to remember, and now the other voice was infringing upon that as well.

Perhaps the most amazing thing was what the doctor had just told the other voice, thinking it to be Thomas: apparently, all traces of the disease had vanished from the body, and the threat of immobility or paralysis was no longer a concern. He heard the other voice slowly repeat aloud the license numbers of the passing cars.