

Thereafter

By Anthony Schmitz

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I.

Chapter One

The dead, of course, know what you think. Allow me an example.

Over there, the artist staring out the window. A brush dangles from her fingers, forgotten. Tubes of paint lay scattered on a smeared table. She's a bit waifish, don't you think, and more than slightly pale. The Sleeping Beauty type, with the same weakness for a questionable deal. She pushes back her black hair, an idle habit that reveals a strong nose and pale blue eyes.

What's going on inside her head? Not a *single* thought, no, it's never that. More like a gang of drunks, stumbling down an ill-marked path. One runs ahead, some lurch behind, others plunge off the cliff and are never missed. A mess, a mess, always a mess. That anything ever gets done in this world is a perpetual wonder.

She considers what she might make for supper, and whether that avocado in the refrigerator is still good, and why she has to cook anyway since she has neither the talent nor the desire. And she wouldn't cook, not any more than necessary, except that it's part of her arrangement with her husband, Wald, who, in all fairness, marches off to work every day, thus earning the money to pay the bills, which in turn allows her at this very moment to stare so purposelessly out the window. Except — this is self-justifying, she admits to herself, but also possibly true — except that an artist must do a certain amount of daydreaming. It's like opening the window to freshen up a stuffy room. An appealing picture; lace curtains ruffled by the breeze. She smiles slightly at the charming cliché. The brush falls from her hand. She barely notices.

Let's return now to our band of drunks. Assume there is one among them who, unlike his fellows, has a vague idea of why they set out in the first place, and where they might be headed. He leads the way, though none of his brothers would admit as much. They watch from the corners of their eyes and follow to the extent they are able. Each of us has such a thought. Each of us, living or dead.

So it is with our artist, whose name, by the way, is Mag. Short for Magdelaine, the name insisted upon by her eccentric mother, whose case we will also take up in due time. Like all the rest of us, Mag has an organizing thought that plays inside her head. Sometimes she's aware of it, sometimes she is not. It's like the hum from a refrigerator, which might be all you can hear on one day and less than background noise on another. She would hardly admit that this is the reason why she is staring out the window at this exact moment, that this is why she is wearing a baggy man's white shirt covered with drips of paint, that this is why she is married to Wald, who is something less than a perfect match.

Well. There's no need to explain it all now. I have all the time in the world. All the time in the world and then some. Hurry and I have no truck with each other, to use one of my mother's expressions. You'll meet her, too, for as you'll see, this is a family story. As if there were any other.

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Who, why, how and all of that: you must have a million questions. Are you...? Can you...? Et cetera, et cetera. So, for the record:

Yes, I am.

Yes, I did.

After the first jolt, I felt next to nothing.

Not a tunnel of light. A general dimness, the gray of limbo, of the neither here nor there, which leads then — sorry — to darkness. Just as well, considering the immensity of the change. As the light slowly increased, I found myself in a place, or perhaps within the idea of a place, that might have been the Mongolian steppes, or the Dakota prairie. A vastness, big enough for all of us who are or will ever be, assuming that we required space. A teacup would do just as well, I suppose, though I am grateful for the sense of grandeur.

Neither pearly nor golden. The notion, is my experience, is entirely mistaken. How or even whether the wheat is separated from the chaff I have no idea.

If He does, I have not seen Him. In heaven as it is on Earth.

Which is not to say... (The lawyers among us suggest that I add this clause.)

Ditto. My experience with my peers is not of good or of evil, but of a simple desire to understand how we were (are!) made. Evil may be elsewhere. Or it may be that the base impulses are overwhelmed by the possibilities offered to us in this state. The formerly evil might now have better things to do.

No, neither like Casper nor Marley nor Carrie, nor whatever else you have in mind. No passing through walls, no translucence. Lighter than a breeze. Thought freed from that faulty vessel, the brain, and the corpus that dragged it hither and thither.

Anywhere, but not everywhere. I pick and choose, as each of us must, lest the din of thought overwhelm us.

The past: yes.

The present: certainly.

The future: no. I know nothing more about how the story comes out than you. There, I think, is your definition of hell; to know how the story ends and to be forced, nonetheless, to watch it.

Invasion? That's not how I see it at all. I find the idea stingy. How else do you suppose I should pass the time? Would you ask Pavarotti not to sing, or Picasso not to paint? I have my abilities, which want for expression. And really, what skin comes off your nose if I help myself to your thoughts? At most my visits leave you with the vague sense that someone or something is watching you. So you were right all along. You are being watched. Congratulations. You're less alone in the world than you imagined. And, better still, I know you as well as you know yourself. Somewhat better than you know yourself, actually, since I have a sense of proportion and perspective that the living generally lack.

Isn't this what everyone says they want? Someone who truly understands?

Not everyone is so lucky, you know. There are those who hold no interest. Those whose only thoughts are material, to name just one example. Money, cars, houses, boats, clothes, objects of one kind or another. You might as well flip through the pages of a catalogue.

Which is to say nothing of the angry schemers, the fearful little haters and the sexually obsessed, to name three more among the many such categories. Not everyone is beautiful in his or her own way. Some minds are like garbage cans, maggots inside and flies buzzing around the lid.

Eternal? Hard to say. My peers occasionally disappear. Where they go is a mystery. There are no billboards here that explain the rules. If you find ambiguity intolerable, this is not the

place for you. Whether there are other places is not, however, a question I can answer. Again, sorry.

Now I must be excused. I know I should say more. After all, what are all the world's temples and shrines and cathedrals about, except to fill in blanks concerning what comes next?

Thousands of years' worth of questions and what have I offered but a few short notes? *Mea culpa*. But consider the ratio of quantity to quality. At least I know what I'm talking about.

My suggestion for the moment is that we set aside the big questions. Come with me on my rounds. I have my own business, to which I must attend. People imagine they'll sleep when they're dead, but the truth is, we all have our obligations.

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If the truth were told, my mother has never cared for animals in the home. Having been raised on a farm, she is of the opinion that animals should serve her, not that she should serve them. And yet there is my father's dog beside the door, watching her every move, whimpering now and then, as if the walk that the creature expects will be the most remarkable novelty, not merely a repeat of every previous walk they have ever taken together.

"Are you almost ready?" she calls to my father, James. "Your dog is about to explode."

"There's a surprise."

Hearing his voice, the dog bangs its tail more violently against the door.

My father's heels scuff against the steps. The dog, beside itself now with joy, begins to yowl. My father steps lightly into the kitchen — lightly, always lightly; he seems to float through his life — and gives my mother a peck on the cheek. "How are my girls?" he asks.

"Your dog is insane and your wife is impatient," says my mother, Audrey. She plays her part willingly in this bit of domestic theater. She sets her coffee cup in the drainer and pulls the stopper on the sink. She then hangs her apron on its peg as my father fusses with the dog's leash. She has to admit they make a handsome pair, James and his fool of a dog.

"Here, Trixie, yes girl," he says. The dog yodels and paws at the linoleum, the entirety of its body wagging along with its tail. The dog is a Labrador, thickly muscled, its gleaming fur as black as a grave, its brown eyes alarmingly expressive. My mother sometimes catches the dog watching her, its broad head tilted, one ear raised and an eye cocked, struggling, apparently, to arrive at a final judgment regarding her suitability. In the dog's view she never quite measures up.

As my father stoops to fasten the leash, the dog licks his freshly shaved cheek. James, normally so fastidious, chuckles as he wiped away the slobber. The dog sits at his side, satisfied now that the day is settling into its predictable routine. James stands up, straightens his tie and flattens the pleat of his trousers.

I happen to know that my parents love each other as much as possible. They have struggled through a huge darkness together; they have arrived at the other side. They have learned something about each other that has left them here on this day, still arm in arm, playing at exasperation, playing at impatience, but none of that a match for the tenderness between them. If I had eyes I would weep as I watch them walking walk down the street again.

Upon their return my father will neatly fold his coat over his forearm and carry it to his Oldsmobile. Having blown her a kiss and thrown the dog a treat, he will drive off to work. The dog will carry its treat to the shade of an apple tree at the edge of their lot and nibble at it almost

delicately. My mother will make herself a cup of tea. Together, my mother and the dog will spend the day waiting for James' return, the difference between them being that the dog, had it been able, would have admitted as much, while my mother would never have demeaned herself so.

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Audrey, James and the dog each know their job exactly. Through the gate. Turn right. Down the sidewalk sheltered by the overwhelming elms, their branches intertwined so high above. Up the hill, then down toward the park. The grass is still weighted by dew. A touch of morning chill hangs in the air. Audrey hooks her arm around James'. The dog steps out in front, its head held high.

What do they talk about? Later, of course, she will try to remember, searching for a sign that the future has the decency to reveal itself, even if we lack the means to comprehend. But their conversation is nothing except predictable, as lulling as the sound of waves slapping a beach. What she would cook for supper; when he would replace the rotting step on the basement stair. What did he think of the color of those roses, blood red in the long morning shadow?

They make their way around the empty park, pausing as the dog investigates the invisible messages left on the trees and hydrants. James squeezes Audrey's shoulder. He brushes back a strand of her hair.

Four decades after their wedding and he remains attentive, appealing. He's kept his hair, though it is much more steel than auburn now. He is slender and still nicely muscled beneath his pressed white shirt and trousers. They are an attractive couple. To look at them you would never guess that a breeze had ever messed a hair on either head.

When they return, James gathers up his suit coat, tosses the dog its biscuit and backs slowly out the drive. The dog watches the car disappear, then sighs and heads across the yard. My mother makes herself a cup of tea and takes it to the kitchen table. She notices that the dog is not in its usual place in the shade beneath the apple tree. Having observed that much she does not trouble herself to wonder why, nor to ask where the animal might be.

The phone rings a few minutes after two. Audrey is slicing onions to add to the roast. My father often calls to ask if she needs anything from the store, a pleasant break in the day for both of them. Audrey wipes her hands on a dishtowel and grabs the receiver.

Certainly she has stopped now and then to consider that this day will come. Women live longer than men; everyone knows that. She has every reason to suspect it will be she, not my father, who will answer a version of this call. On those rare occasions when she entertains these thoughts, she assumes the time will not come for a decade or two. That is, a time sufficiently distant that it cannot be imagined with any accuracy, and therefore is hardly worth thinking about at all. But now James' secretary is on the phone, papering over the cataclysmic with the banal. "I thought he just put his head down and fell asleep," she repeats. "I thought, let the poor man rest."

The dog picks that day to disappear, though it has never previously failed to greet James as he pulls up the drive in his car. The animal shows up again a few days after the funeral, clotted with mud and smelling as if it has rolled in a sea of dead fish. One of its canines is broken. There seems to Audrey an accusation in the way the dog looks at her. Her solution is to ring a friend of James'. "Anything you need, Audrey, you just call," he had said at the wake.

She asks him to take the dog away.

This is in the summer of 1960. My mother has just turned sixty-five.