

The Iridescent Rose

By Bill Pottle

It was the first time I had been so deep in the forest. I glanced once at my digital watch and then back at the path home. I had never been late for work before. I took a sharp breath in and then exhaled slowly, expunging my doubts. *Great rewards require great risk.* I remembered the faded white sign painted with black painstakingly-formed letters hanging outside of Luke's Taekwondo school.

Why was I being so dramatic? Perhaps I should have done acting in high school after all. I had now managed to turn a search for flowers for my daughter's birthday bouquet into a perilous quest for a great reward.

Fifteen different varieties colored the humble wrought-iron nightstand in my room. I had collected them the day before. Now only one flower was missing—the rarest one of them all. The iridescent rose.

I turned my arm and checked my watch once again to get the exact time. After a quick mental calculation, I resolved to continue on for seven minutes before turning back.

One minute passed. I saw many beautiful flowers, but not the one I was looking for.

Another minute. Nothing. I thought about turning back early. I was cutting it close. If only I would have turned back then, and never set foot in that forest again.

After two more minutes I found it. Stretching its leaves skyward, the silver flower glowed in the early morning mist. At last! I pumped my fist in the air and reached into my pocket for the shears. I held the stem between my left thumb and forefinger, pressing into the green flesh. I slid the scissors gently forward until the crook was firmly set against the shaft of the stem. My right hand squeezed the handle and the blades sliced cleanly through. The flower fell into my waiting left hand.

"CAUGHT!" screamed a voice. I looked around, but could see no one. Had I imagined the words?

"How do you think that makes them feel? So that's how you do it, hmmm? Without so much as a warning?" a small, bent man stepped from a tree. I started to rub my eyes and then stopped. Why did people who suspected their eyes of betrayal rub them with their fists and expect it to improve their function? The figure who had stepped from the tree was no man. I had heard tales of forest gnomes that dwelt in the few regions still undisturbed by humans. Whether they wished men good or ill was uncertain.

"Never seen a gnome before, eh?" the creature continued.

"I'm afraid I don't believe in gnomes."

Now it was the gnome's turn to be startled. "Really now? And just what *do* you believe in?"

"I'm a practicing Catholic."

The gnome clapped his hands. "Interesting. And does the existence of God depend on the beliefs of humans?"

I had wondered that same thing myself, but I shook my head.

"Well then," he smiled. "Neither does my existence depend on *your* beliefs."

I was speechless. The gnome continued. “Now then, back to my original question.” He could tell that I had either forgotten the question or not understood it in the first place. “The flowers, slow human! How do you think it makes them feel to be cut like that? You might just kill them right off, but no, not your kind. Once cut, you’ve started it off on a slow, inevitable death sentence. You just keep it to watch it bloom in its final days, but it has already started to die. Why not just take your daughter here to see the flower? Why must you kill it?”

My wonder at this strange creature only increased. All I could think to say was, “Flowers don’t have souls.”

“I see... I guess there’s no empathy for a human until he’s forcibly taught it.” He somehow found his chin through the fullness of his bushy silver beard and rubbed it thoughtfully. His face narrowed and his eyes hardened. “Very well— human, your stem is cut! Your days on this earth are numbered. The next time you go to sleep, you will die!”

It happened so suddenly, I didn’t have time to cry out before he stepped back into the tree and was gone. I looked down at the iridescent rose in my hand. Were its petals opening into a mocking smile? Had I imagined the whole thing?

Something about my legs felt different. I started walking back through the forest to my car.

I’m not sure when it happened or what small fact eventually nudged my mind into certitude. By the time I had reached into my pocket and closed my fingers around my keys, I knew I was dying.

I don’t mean that I knew I was dying in the way that we all know we’re dying since the moment of conception. I meant that I knew I was dying soon. I felt the shadow of death fall over the warmth of my heartbeat. I felt the cold stillness of eternity suck the wind from my lungs. I felt the sizzling activity of the neurons in my brain die down and fizzle into nothing.

I knew I was dying.

I sat in the car for a minute reeling from the news. I fished in my pocket, pulled out my phone, and pressed the little voice button on the side.

“Work.” I said slowly, taking pains to enunciate. What was I going to say? The phone found the network, searched through my address book, and dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Bob, it’s me. Listen, I don’t think I’m going to make it into work today.”

“What? We’ve got to get these new autoclaves validated. Manufacturing wants to start a production run by Thursday.”

“I’m just... not... well. Can’t someone else cover it?”

I could feel him soften on the other side. “You sure don’t sound yourself. When was the last time you took a sick day?”

“Last year I think.”

“Well— get some rest. You sound like you could use it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

I pressed the red END button and slipped the phone back into my pocket. Only then it occurred to me that I had told him I wouldn’t be in to work the next day. I couldn’t get used to the idea that I would never go into work again.

There were so many things that I had already done for the last time. I'd taken my last visit to Paris, lying on the rough stone ground and looking up into the twisted mess of the Eiffel Tower. I'd never again stand at the top of a Fourteener in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and gaze at the peaks breaking the plain of the clouds below me. I had already seen the setting of the last summer sun on an afternoon sitting on the porch swing, licking popsicles and gulping lemonade with my son.

I knew I was dying.

At least I had done all that, though. What hurt deeper was the realization that there were so many things that I'd never get to see. The face of my daughter on her wedding day was forever hidden behind the veil of the forbidden future. I would never know the contentment of raising grandchildren. These deep, life-defining events crowded my thoughts, but more mundane worries soon chased them out. I had always imagined walking down South Street when the Eagles finally managed to win the Super Bowl. My dad took me to the Vet whenever he could afford a pair of tickets—I saw two games before we moved when I was eighteen. I would never see the Eagles win the Super Bowl.

I depressed the clutch and cranked the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life and I turned out into the street.

Where would you go if it was your last day alive?

As odd as it sounds, I couldn't think of anywhere to go. Rather, I thought of everywhere at once. I knew that it could be the last time I visited each place, and I had to get things right. The car rolled forward in the direction of town.

I settled on taking care of the legal issues first. I think I was still in denial at that point. As I told myself, it's only prudent for any man to see to his last will and testament periodically throughout his life. So, if by some chance I didn't end up dying, there was no harm done. It's like how I always backed up my computer before I installed new hardware. It wasn't that I thought anything was going to happen to my data, but it was more of an excuse to do a backup than anything.

I pulled into the parking lot of the esteemed law firm of Sotelo, Tsai, and Mathur. Walking in the door, I felt the satisfying beep-bip of my car's alarm system engaging. The receptionist wore fashionable black, thick rimmed glasses that were too heavy for her face.

"Hello, sir. How may I help you today?" She looked down at me from her window and her glasses slid down the bridge of her nose. She sent them back with a quick push from her left index finger.

"I need to see my lawyer. Mr. XXXX"

"Certainly," she said. She pushed the glasses back again. "And what time is your appointment?"

"Well, I don't have one. But it will really only take a second."

Her brow furrowed as she considered my request. Ridges sprouted on her thick forehead and momentarily trapped her glasses in place. She didn't understand why she was annoyed with life, but I saw it. It was a lifetime of wearing shoes that were too small, jeans that were too tight, and a plastered makeup face that sealed her away from the beauty of the natural world. "Have a seat over there. I'll try to fit you in when he has a free moment."

I took a seat and stared at the magazines on the table next to me. It was unsettling to think what I would miss. Even things that I thought would make me happy now made

me feel empty. A day ago, if you would have told me I'd never have to see another *Cosmo*, I'd have been overjoyed. I looked back on the times that I wished would just finish— studying for finals, healing my broken femur in eighth grade, or the countless times I glanced up at the impossibly slow clock over my cubicle. I had wanted time to speed up then, never looking ahead to the time when I would wish with all my might to slow it down. I could not speed it up then any more than I could slow it now. The last few hours of my life were slowly ticking away.

I was spending them in a lawyer's waiting room.

I couldn't demand that the receptionist let me in and I didn't dare leave. I was the guy who never sent food back in a restaurant. I wasn't a coward, there was no question of that. I was just courteous to a fault. There was no way that the receptionist or my lawyer was going to believe some story about a doomed rose. They didn't feel their blood running cold.

I don't know how long I could have waited, sitting there and doing nothing. I jammed my hand in my pocket and brought out the phone. I hit the autodial for Jamie and then hung up before it sent. I couldn't tell her. Not now. I would tell her later. No matter what, I had to tell her.

There was someone else I had to call.

I hadn't spoken to him for nearly ten years. I had the number, though. I Googled him every few months just to check up on him. I even sent his wife money, once. He never would have accepted it if he knew it was from me. It was such a simple thing, dialing his number. How could something I had done thousands of times before seem so foreign? I closed my eyes and hit SEND.

An annoyed voice answered from the other line. He was probably late for something. "Hello?"

"Jim, it's me."

"Is this...?" He sounded guarded and hopeful at the same time.

"Would anyone else call you KegUp?" It was an affectionate nickname he had earned in college. He was the only one in our frat who could perform an act so difficult and random that we had to give it a name. He would do a handstand on the keg and stick the spout in his mouth, clamping down on the handle with his lips. Then, he would proceed to do pushups, going from handstand to headstand repeatedly. It was amazing what a bunch of cocky drunk guys could think of. He never fell off.

"Only a few. But why are you calling me? I always had a better memory than you."

"I haven't forgotten. I just want to apologize. No blame, no fighting. Just sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry that I didn't care about your happiness. I'm sorry that I didn't forgive you then."

I could tell my blanket apology caught him off guard. I continued. "I'm sorry that we wasted our lives."

"Not our lives," he gave a deep rumbling chuckle. "Just fifteen years!"

Silence hung over the line. Finally, he spoke. "I'm sorry too. Back then... Now, I know what losing Lucia would be like."

I felt the tension evaporate as our common bond was felt. Jim wasn't a man who expressed his emotions well. Hearing him on the line now made him seem like a whole new person.

"I'm late for a meeting now. Maybe if you're in town sometime you could come over for dinner? I'm sure she'd like to see you again."

"I'd like that. Goodbye, Jim."

After the phone beeped END I realized that I had just said my final farewell to the man who was my best friend for over half of my life.

"Please take good care of her, Jim," I whispered into the mouthpiece.

Lucia Melendez was the first girl I ever fell in love with. A raven-haired, olive-skinned beauty whose parents owned a Sunflower farm outside Toledo, Spain, I met her during freshmen orientation. I was just one of the things swallowed up by her tiny hazel eyes. Three years we were together...

"Mr. XXX will see you now." I got up from my chair and walked through the door to his office. I took a seat across from him at his desk. He did not look up.

"I'd like to review my will."

"Certainly, my secretary just brought in a copy of the paperwork." He quickly glanced at the page and then gave me a smile. "You have one of the simpler wills here. When you die, all of your property will pass on to your wife."

I didn't like how he said "when" instead of "if."

"When you both die, your estate will be divided into two pieces, and held in trust funds for your children until they are of legal age. I am currently set to be the executor of this will."

I nodded slowly. I couldn't think about Jamie dying right now. She could handle those details later.

"Is there anything else I can help you with? You have a \$10,000 life insurance policy with us to cover the funeral expenses. Would you be interested in purchasing more?"

I had a half million dollar policy through work. The thought crossed my mind about buying more, but something seemed wrong about it. It wasn't so much that I'd be cheating the insurance company, but more that if I bought it I'd have to put into writing the fact that I knew I was dying. I wasn't ready to do that yet.

I thanked the attorney and quickly left the office. The church was only five minutes away, and I knew if I hurried I could catch 10:00 a.m. mass.

I never liked weekday mass. I found solitude when the pews contained only a spattering of old women and those in need of a particular favor. But mass was supposed to be a celebration—a feast! I could get all the solitude I wanted visiting the church after mass was over.

This mass didn't have a cantor. The service lasted barely half an hour. The crowd began to disperse soon afterwards, and I barely caught the priest before he had exited the sacristy. He was just packing up his belongings to head out.

"Excuse me, Father. Could I trouble you to hear the confession of a poor sinner?"

"Certainly, my son. There is always time to reconcile with God." His eyes softened and he beckoned to the open confessional booth.

I walked in slowly, hands in my pockets. I had never liked going to confession. Something about it just seemed so unnecessary, speaking about my deepest failings to a

stranger. Speaking them brought forth abstract thoughts though, gave them existence in the world beyond my soul. I knew that if it weren't for confession, the thoughts would stay buried forever.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been... many years since my last confession."

As I knelt before him in the small, windowless room pouring everything out, I felt a cleansing river flood over my grey soul, washing inequity away. I didn't have any mortal sins to confess, but once I started talking, small anecdotes kept flowing out like tears. For the first time ever I came to grips with my life. I saw the good mixed with the bad, and in a rush of empathy felt the pain that I had caused others. I don't know how it happened, but when he raised his hand in absolution, I saw myself with astounding lucidity. Even covered in sin, the divine spark did not fade.

After the final Amen, he lingered.

"Father, if I may ask a favor..."

He nodded his acquiescence.

"I wish to receive last rites."

The deepening lines in his face betrayed his concern. "Are you ill?" was all he said.

"I know I don't look like I am dying..."

"My son, the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is no longer only for those close to being called home. I will anoint you."

He went to the sacristy and returned with some oil. He said the blessing and made the sign of the cross on my forehead. How appropriate, I thought. How had Jesus felt once He knew He was going to die? He had seen His cross, and carried it willingly, even as His mother watched. Despite the sword piercing her heart, He had continued on. I wonder if He ever looked back. I wonder if He ever *really* considered coming down from that cross. In His position, I know I would have. But I did not have the power to alter my fate.

"Something seems to be troubling you." The priest's statement was not a question. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

I smiled for the first time since coming upon the rose in the forest. "Thank you Father, you have already done all that you can."

I left the church and drove off. There were three things that I needed.

I found the first two in the grocery store— Mountain Dew and Red Bull. The gnome had said that I would live until I fell asleep, and I was planning on delaying the moment of rest as long as possible. I had eternity to sleep.

I had to drive around a bit before I found the next thing. I thought about stopping for lunch as it was now past noon, but I wasn't hungry. I could eat that night with my family. If I only had a day left to live, wasting an hour eating lunch was like throwing away 4% of my life. And the minutes kept ticking.

I walked out of the mall carrying my brand new digital camcorder. It was top-of-the-line, rich with many features I would never use. Luke would be able to figure them out, though. He was already better than me at that kind of thing.

I got to the park and realized that there was nowhere to plug in the recorder and I hadn't charged the battery. Surprisingly, I wasn't that angry, because I still hadn't

thought of what to say. I plugged the battery into the car charger and left the car on accessory power while I took a short walk around the park to collect my thoughts.

It seemed odd to me that I had spent so much time preparing for unimportant things, and now that I was about to give the most important speech of my life, I had no idea what to say. I had already decided to give one private recording each to Luke, Esperanza, and Jamie, and one to all of them. Then, I would make one more recording for everyone else. I silently thanked God for digital technology. I had memories of my parents, photos of my grandparents, and only a written record of anyone before that.

All of those records became faded and distorted over time.

Digital technology was different, though. As long as my descendants took care of it, the ones and zeros would never change to 0.1s and 1.2s. The lines of worry etched upon my face, the one tuft of hair remaining on my head, and the fear behind my eyes would be just as vivid a thousand years in the future. Luke's Taekwondo instructor once said that video tape was the worst invention ever for martial artists. People sure were a lot faster, taller, and more dominant when stories of their matches were told around the metaphorical campfire. So although future generations might look at me and see an extra twenty pounds of beer-gut, they would be seeing the truth.

That's what I wanted, wasn't it?

The choice between an unpalatable truth and a logically unlikely fiction was one of the most important choices humans had to make. Or was it? What if believing in God helped a person get up every morning, helped them be a better person during the day, and helped them stave off the isolation that came with the blackness of night? Did it really matter if He existed or not?

For me, a few hours away from death, it was just about the only thing that did matter.

Something about the way death was always open to everyone made it sacred. No matter what they took from you, no matter how bad life got, you always had an option. I wasn't talking about suicide—that was a coward's way out. I was talking about fighting to the death. I always found the whole 'over my dead body' comment odd, though. People were basically embracing failure. It was almost if you tried your best and gave your life, then no matter what happened you could accept it. I would rather cry out 'over my dead body with my relentless ghost clinging to your heels.' Still, sometimes I thought doing your best was all life really was about. Who could ask more than that? Either God exists or He doesn't, but few religions could logically argue with the idea that if a man did his best and treated others as they wished to be treated, he should be rewarded in the afterlife.

I had devoured sacred texts of most of the major religions, visiting sites like EdenUnearthed.com, looking for commonalities. It a concept was common to a majority of the world's religions, that said to me that it was either a part of the divine that was so universal everyone recognized it, or such a fundamental part of human nature to as to require invention of an explanation.

The world's religions seemed to be divided evenly between the 'one shot' Jerusalem-based religions of Christianity and Islam, and the Indian-based reincarnation religions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. I never did get a clear picture from scripture of what the Jewish people thought, and I guess that's why the Pharisees and

Sadducees were always arguing. Then, there were many other religions that didn't really say much of anything about the afterlife, almost as if it wasn't important.

Although I doubted my wager would ever become as famous as Pascal's, looking at things from a gambler's perspective produces a clear winner. If you take the one-shot religions and you're right, you're set—straight into heaven. But if you're wrong, then you just get to be reincarnated and try again. If you always have this attitude then your soul will just keep being reborn—not a bad outcome. On the other side, if you take the reincarnation view and you're right, you achieve some sort of state of perpetual bliss, but if you're wrong—there's always the chance of going to Hell.

Of course, I didn't base my belief on logical tests, and this reasoning couldn't tell me *which* one-shot religion was right, but it did help ease my mind.

What I was really worried about was that there was no afterlife. The existence of a soul would be the most pleasant of all human fictions. If I was nothing more than a 'biological robot' living in a deterministic universe, then I would simply cease to exist.

That was what really scared me.

When I was a kid I tried to 'remember' events that happened before I was born. I would lay awake at night in my bed and close my eyes, trying to see how Columbus's ships looked when he sailed the Atlantic. I figured that if my soul was immortal, it should be able to know what happened before I had achieved my current state of consciousness. Similarly, I worried about things happening after I died. My mind wrapped itself around the possibility of not existing for eternity. I never missed the time I spent asleep, so why should I miss the time I was dead? Eternity was the real problem, though. I couldn't imagine it any more than I could imagine how big the universe was. It didn't mean I didn't try—I would think of the entire world, and then zoom out to the solar system, and then to the galaxy, and zoom out impossibly farther than that. But no matter how far I went, the entire thing would collapse into a bright speck in the eye of a maiden in some far off planet, and the zooming out process would continue again. It's like how any fraction with infinity in the denominator is always zero. You could be oblivious for a million, or billion, or trillion years, and you've only completed 0% of your time.

I imagined what would happen to my body after I died, boredom never distracting me. I saw my coffin lying there, stained mahogany preserving my body for decades as the world turned above, oblivious to my passing save for the occasional stranger who came by to pay heed. Time went on, and the joints that held the wood together slowly gave in to the assaults of the worms and bacteria around them. The bugs slowly ate through the plush white velvet, and start to consume my body. People visit less and less as what's left of me slowly starts to decay. I'm oblivious to the fantastic discoveries going on above ground, but I'm safe from the pain of the world as well. Only the occasional genealogist comes to visit me now, coming to jot down some notes at the tombstone of the somber man they see in the recordings.

Somehow, my body never completely decomposes. Half of a skull, a few shards that once formed a rib, and a femur remain. They are all that is there as time sweeps away the face of the world, making it something wholly unrecognizable. Empires rise and fall, the ravenous sun feeds off the energy of the earth, growing bloated until it fills up the sky. Humans have ceased to exist. Yet even this passes, as my skull stares up at the devastation with one gaping eye socket and I have not gotten any closer to eternity...

Panting, I pushed the thought from my mind. Just as the gnome reminded me, there was nothing I could do to make God exist or not exist. All I could do was my best with the short time I had left. I wanted to be mad, but I simply had no time for it. It surprised me inside— I had always been good at compartmentalizing my feelings, but this was ridiculous.

By this time the camera battery was fully charged, so I set it up on old picnic table. I brushed off the chips of bleached-green paint and cursed as a splinter dug into my index finger. I held the finger up to my face, squeezing the plump digit with my other hand. The pink color in my skin oozed out, concentrating into a droplet of bright red blood. I used my fingernails as tweezers and the splinter slid free, as if I was uncorking a treasured bottle of burgundy. Bringing my finger to my lips and sucking on the remaining metallic-tasting liquid I was reminded of the inappropriateness of the metaphor. Only one man turned wine to blood.

I leveled the camera between the boards flipped the switch to 'REC.' I waved to the camera, hit stop and went back and checked that it played well. The image of me waving happily appeared on the LCD.

I had no time for mistakes.

I talked then, spending the afternoon recounting everything I had to say to them. There was no script, no organization. I just talked about how I loved them, how much they all meant to me. I talked about their futures, how Luke really could make it to the Olympics if he wanted to, how Jamie could open up that restaurant, and how Esperanza gave hope to us all. I told them to dream big and then work to make their dreams come true. But I reminded them of the need for balance, the danger of getting so caught up in their dreams that they failed to appreciate the beauty that was in ordinary waking life.

It was growing towards evening by the time I finished, so I gathered up the discs, wiped a few last tears, and drove home.

Jamie met me as I walked in the door. "You wouldn't *believe* my day," she said, giving me an absent-minded peck on the lips as I entered. "Well, I was waiting for the plumber who didn't even come until noon, and then I was off to the dry cleaners who had somehow managed to lose three of your shirts. By the time I made it to school, I was already late for the meeting with Luke's teacher. I had to rush to the grocery store and only made it home a few minutes before you did."

I was about to tell her right then and there, but she was in such a hurry. "Oh, here's the salmon," she said, handing me a plate with six fleshy pink fillets darkened with her trademark honey lime soy sauce. "Es is outside so be careful around the grill."

I slid open the screen door and set the plate down on the side panel. I opened the knob to LIGHT and punched the short red ignition button. A whoosh of flame came up to warm the blackened grate. I flipped the fish onto the grill and took in the tangy smell of limes mixed with soy. Lowering the cover, I was met with the sound of something whizzing through the air and then the smack of a hollow leather object hitting the fence.

"And Mia Hamm scores again! The crowd goes wild!"

"You did not, that hit the post!"

"You're just mad because you're too slow."

"Of course I'm too slow to get the ball that goes outside of the goal. Who do you think I am, Gumby?"

“Let’s see how you do against some real competition,” I said, charging into the yard.

She shrieked as I ran towards her, then deftly flipped the ball between my legs and cut around me to retrieve it. My inertia carried me forward to where she no longer was, and she aimed her body to kick for the upper left corner, flicking the ball to the lower right after Luke had already left the ground. There was no disputing the goal this time.

She retrieved the rebound and dribbled it between her feet, taunting me. Not bad for a nine year old. It was a good thing I didn’t have to play by the rules.

“You might beat dad, but let’s see how you do against the TICKLE MONSTER!” I caught her then, tackling her and launching into a flurry of tickles next to the now-forgotten ball. I felt her stomach tighten as her whole body fought off the inevitable. “Daddy, no, that’s cheating! Hey! RED CARD.” I was so engrossed that I didn’t notice Luke shaking his head and taking off for practice. When Esperanza was gasping for breath, I got up, reclaimed the ball, and shot off five quick goals.

“The winner!” I said, thrusting my hands in the air as she flashed me a look dripping poison. It soon changed to a smile. Esperanza could never stay mad for long. The smile drained from my face too. For the briefest moment I had forgotten the gnome’s curse, and had enjoyed the pure pleasure of spending time with my daughter. I had expended energy, energy that could not be replenished without sleep.

It was worth it.

The salmon pieces were slightly burned by the time I brought them to the table inside. Jamie had baked biscuits and opened a frozen package of mixed vegetables. It only now occurred to me that I might be looking upon my last meal.

“It’s wonderful!” I said, drawing one of Jamie’s eyebrows upwards. “Sometimes we just need to be thankful for everything we have,” I answered. “Now, where is that bottle?”

I went to the wine rack and withdrew our best bottle of German Riesling. There was no use saving it for anything now. “Ah, yes. This will do nicely.” I uncorked the bottle and poured out a glass for Jamie and I. She was now looking down at her napkin, worried perhaps that some anniversary had inadvertently slipped her mind.

“Everyday is special,” I said.

Sitting there, breaking off flaky chunks of peach-colored fish, I wanted to tell them everything. But somehow it didn’t feel right without Luke there. I would tell Jamie privately, after dinner. We could tell the children later.

I ate my piece and half of another before I realized how hungry I was. The sweetness of the honey, the tanginess of the lime, and the soft dough of the bread saturated with butter all jumbled together in my mouth, and the cool apricot of the Riesling washed it all down.

We talked about their day, and Esperanza’s school project, a diorama depicting the life cycle of a butterfly.

I would tell her after dinner.

After dinner Esperanza raced off, leaving Jamie and I alone with the dishes.

She got up and started scrubbing at the sink, while I cleared the rest of the table and wrapped up the leftovers, leftovers that I would never eat.

I walked over to her, wrapping my arms around her slender waist. I parted her hair and gave a light, dry kiss to the side of her neck right under the point of her jaw. She squirmed in my arms and continued working above the forceful stream of ejected water. I just held her then, letting her body sag tiredly into mine, feeling the warmth of the blood coursing through her flesh, the energy liberated from previous meals transferring irreversibly to heat. The heat sustained us, but slowly set our universe on a course for homogeneity. Or so the scientists believed.

I gave her a stronger peck, lower down by her shoulder, this time tasting the salty twinge of her skin and the unique flavor that distinguished her from everyone else.

She spun in my arms to face me, soapy foam dripping from her hands like whipped cream. The suds were warm on my cheeks as she slid her hands up to my jaw and drew me down towards her. She kissed me full on the mouth, and I could still notice the faint aftertaste of the Riesling.

“Hey now,” she said, giving me a playful slap with her delicate hand. “There’s time for that later. Right now there’s work to be done.”

Staring into her eyes, I really wanted to tell her. I swear I did. I just couldn’t do it right then. I could imagine the confusion in her eyes that would come when she still thought it was a joke, followed by the way her mouth would sag, at the corners first and then her lips would fall as the muscles in her face all went slack. The tears would start to come...

Suddenly, an idea forced itself into my mind. It was crazy, but it might be my only chance.

She turned back to the dishes and I stared at her back and the shimmering hair that hung limp from her head. If it only worked, then I wouldn’t have to tell her at all.

It was so simple I was surprised that I hadn’t thought of it before.

Somehow, the hours after dinner passed quickly and it was soon time for bed. Well, it was time for bed for the others. My last time for bed had passed already. But I was pitching all hope, the last wild hope of a condemned man, on my new plan.

I would return to the spot the next morning and bargain with the gnome.

Esperanza went to bed first. I tucked her into her *Beauty and the Beast* sheets and prayed with her.

“Daddy,” she said. “I don’t know if I want to be ten yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems like twice as old. Because I have to use two numbers now.”

“That’s true,” I said, a hidden tear pushing against the portal of my eye. “But growing up gives us new things also. You can’t be a professional soccer player when you’re nine. Even Freddy Adu was fourteen.”

“Oh,” she said, nodding. “That makes sense. Goodnight, daddy!”

“Goodnight,” I said, kissing her on the forehead. Everything was so simple for her.

Luke held onto his *Power Ranger* sheets even though he was too old for them. It’s hard to dissuade an athlete from something he considers lucky.

He was tucked in and ready to go. “How was practice?” I asked. It was his favorite question.

“Okay,” he grimaced. “I drew two people into my spin hook but Sabumnim kept getting me off the line and I couldn’t houjin.”

Amazingly enough, I almost understood what he was saying. It was a rare gift, I suppose, being able to understand the language of one's children. I had spent enough time in his school and he talked about the sport so much, I knew most of the lingo, even if I couldn't speak it myself. It was not unlike immigrant children who grew up understanding their native language but were not comfortable speaking it.

I smiled and looked at him. "You're going to be great." I know I was looking through a father's eyes, but I believed it. I really did.

"Thanks," he shrugged. "But I need a lot of work. And rest." He finished his hint with a genuine yawn.

I got up and left him, smoothing the sheets in my wake.

When one is confronted with the last day of one's life, one usually thinks of the big things. But it's the details that force their way in out of habit. It's the minutiae that make up the majority of our everyday lives. There's no rational reason why I should have bothered to brush my teeth, but for some reason I did. Maybe I just didn't want Jamie to be suspicious. The minty toothpaste helped chase away the burst of heart-stopping citrus that lurked inside of the can of Red Bull I had just chugged.

I held her in bed. Her tired body melted into the mattress, her hair a mop on my chest. Her head bobbed up and down with my breathing.

I loved her so much. No matter what, I had to convince the gnome to let me have another chance. I would never be ready to say goodbye to her, but after a long life, it might be more palatable. Perhaps it was only because it was far in the future, but I could bear to imagine our withered bodies holding fast before a fire gently roaring in the hearth, sipping steaming tea and reminiscing on our lives and the lives of our grown children before slowly slipping into blackness together.

I got up from bed, muttering something about insomnia. She was drowsy enough to believe me, and I slipped from her embrace, gently substituting a pillow for where my chest had been.

It broke my heart that that pillow would be the only comfort she had for many cold years. Whether or not heaven existed, there was no doubt that after death I would be so far from her for so very long.

I turned on the computer and tried to find something about the gnome, some way to ensure that he appeared or to trick him into giving my life back. I kept the iridescent rose in water— maybe if he could reattach the stem he would reattach mine as well. Shortly after four a.m. I gave up. So much useless information existed on the internet, and the one vital piece was missing. In frustration, I took another Red Bull and did a hundred jumping jacks to get my blood flowing again.

I spent the rest of the night thumbing through our old picture albums, forgotten times locked forever in the past. I laughed scornfully at the bravado in my graduation picture. I thought that the world was mine for the taking. Fifteen years later, I certainly hadn't managed to take very much of it. I never really had the job that I wanted, or traveled to the places I wanted to visit, or even learned how to properly do a backflip. Yet, flipping through page after page of instantaneous memories set under their glossy plastic covers, I knew I had been blessed. When I looked into my newborn son's eyes, how could I question the existence of God? What further proof was there than knowing that my wife and I could each contribute a cell, and that was the beginning of the beautiful creature that was my daughter? Her cells divided, she grew rapidly inside of Jamie, was

born, soon learned to crawl, later learned to walk and then run, and now could dribble around me with her soccer ball! Sure, it was biology— but that didn't mean it wasn't a miracle too.

I had breakfast ready by the time they came downstairs. Eggs sizzled in the frying pan. They were the good kind, with potatoes and salsa and even a bit of the leftover salmon.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” Jamie said, pouring herself a cup of coffee. I had already had mine. The way that she pushed her eyebrows down into a point showed me that she was once again considering the possibility that she had forgotten some special occasion.

“I had some trouble sleeping, so I decided I might as well make myself useful.”

She brought the plate to her nose and inhaled the aroma. “This day has already started off so much better than yesterday.”

I hoped she was right.

I had thought about spending the day with them. I was already tired, and I wasn't sure if I could stand another sleepless night. Even with my body overloaded on caffeine, the stress was getting to me, eating its way through my defenses like ravenous acid. But I had to bargain with the gnome. There was only one hope after that.

I said my goodbyes, certain that they wouldn't be the last ones. But I do confess that I held them all just a little tighter. I left quickly, bringing the engine to life and speeding down the street. If I stayed around Jamie much longer I was sure she would notice something was wrong.

I hurried down the path, unsure exactly where I had picked the forbidden rose. I did not know how to summon the gnome, but hoped that he would come upon seeing my desperation. The forest was empty. Even the animals could sense what my family only felt at the edge of their consciousness. They knew I was doomed and avoided me, only watching in curiosity from far away.

I was about to give up the futile search when I saw a lone green stem peaking through the ground. The faint silver mist had dissipated, but I knew I had found the spot. I reverently removed the rose from the inside of my jacket and touched it to the broken stem. I rotated the flower and the two pieces fit perfectly.

I'm not really sure what I expected to happen. Until the day before, I didn't even believe in gnomes. I guess I was hoping that when I put the stem back together the flower would burst back into life, and the little gnome would jump out and forgive me.

Maybe if I had sewn it together with microneedles, reconnecting the xylem and phloem tubes, it might have worked. I'm not sure how long I waited there, refusing to believe the inevitable.

I had tears in my eyes when I got up, tucked the rose back in my pocket, and set off.

There was one, final hope that I had. Perhaps the gnome's curse wasn't spiritual, but physical. Perhaps he has used tiny needles to inject some toxin in my blood, or added a bubble of air into my bloodstream. If the problem was physical, then a doctor could cure it— if he could find it in time.

I headed off to my physician, Dr. Cho. After waiting while 'more serious' cases went through, I finally got to see him. He looked me over completely, and took some

blood for analysis. He went outside to confer with his associates, and then entered, looking cheerful.

My spirits fell as his rose. I would have rejoiced if he told me that I had suddenly acquired AIDS, or cancer, or something that gave me 'only' years to live. I knew I was approaching my last hours, and that would have multiplied my lifespan a thousand fold.

"Well, we'll have to wait a few days for your bloodwork to come in, but aside from some symptoms of caffeine overdose, you seem to be in perfect health."

I raised my eyebrows skeptically. "If there any way to hurry up the bloodwork? Are you sure there is nothing else wrong?"

He took a deep breath in and let it out his nose. "Have you ever heard of a condition called hypochondria?"

"You think this is all in my head?" My eyes bored into him. "You don't know how much I hope you're right, doctor."

There was going to be no help here. I pushed past him and hurriedly scribbled a check to the receptionist before heading out the door.

"It's good to see you again, my son." Although he tried to maintain his face a mask of tranquility, I could tell the priest was concerned for me. We lived in an age where people rationalized away everything, forcing 'God's Will' to confirm whatever they wanted to do. It had been quite some time since he had seen a man come in for confession two days in a row.

My confession was short, for how much could a man sin in only one day? It wasn't actually a question I wanted an answer to. Sometimes I wondered why God didn't give us more empathy. Surely the wallets of the rich would be opened if they but felt the emptiness in the bellies of the poor! But, sadly enough I knew the answer. The mind of man was not capable of understanding the suffering of fellow man because to do so would drive it insane. Sometimes I wondered how there could be one world with so much simultaneous beauty and pain. I always thought that only in heaven would I get to know the Truth—the "whole story."

With any luck I would know within a few hours.

The priest's absolution washed over me again, and I thanked him and left. I had wasted so much time in the doctor's office that soon the day was drawing to a close. I guzzled a Mountain Dew and greeted my family.

Call me a coward for not telling them. I couldn't really disagree. I wanted to tell them—the yearning burst forth from my heart but was always stopped before it made it out the fortress of my lips. The tip of my tongue must have been the most pleasant oratorical spot for miles, as several groups of words all remained there simultaneously.

In contrast to last night's dinner, this one was tasteless. I couldn't even tell you what we had. Maybe all the words hanging out on the tip of my tongue stripped the flavor from the food, or maybe it was the caffeine, or maybe it was the fact that I just couldn't stop staring in Jamie's eyes. When it really came down to it, it was only about her. Somehow the night passed quickly, my body just going through the motions as I had done for so many nights of my life.

Perhaps the greatest human tragedy was that we could not learn from the mistakes of others. We always had to stick our own hand in the beehive, no matter how many others we saw stung. I had calendars, stationery, and boxes full of motivational posters telling me to "Make Every Day Count."

I had never really understood that statement until yesterday.

The exhaustion was close to claiming me. I knew that it was now only a matter of time. I was strapped into the chair, and the executioner was putting on his black hood. I couldn't even say goodnight to my children. I waited until they fell asleep, and then silently strode in and stole kisses off their moonlit foreheads. Luke had been too old to kiss for some time now.

The iridescent rose was now showing signs of withering. I had forgotten to take it out of my jacket before, but now I removed it and reverently completed the bouquet. I put it in Esperanza's room, setting it so that the morning sunlight would hit the petals as it streamed through her window.

I brushed my teeth again, slipping off my clothes and into some black silk pajamas. I didn't want them to find me in my boxers. I caressed Jamie, kissing her softly.

"Goodnight, Honey." I squinted my eyes, trying to catch and hold her words as they lingered in the air. She closed her eyes and sank into her pillow.

I stroked her hair. "Jamie?"

She looked up, connecting with me at last. "No matter what, remember that I will always love you."

"Of course dear. You know I'd never forget that. 'Til death do us part, remember?"

I smiled and nodded. Her eyelids fell once more, and I whispered my words in her ear.

"No, my dear. Much longer than that."

I wasn't going to go yet. My breathing was haggard, my pulse racing. The flight or fight reflex was fully engaged and useless—neither would aid my survival.

I was sure that "I" as a person was about to disappear forever. Once the nerves in my brain stopped firing, I was never coming back, and silence was all I would know. My entire existence was finished. I would never wake again. If the gnome was just something I had made up in my head, or real and unable to kill me but was just trying to teach me a lesson, then I would wake up safe in my bed. If the gnome was real and was able to do what he said, then that meant science couldn't presently understand our world, and there might be things like souls and God. I might wake up in heaven. But either way, somehow going was easier than I thought it would be. Or maybe it was just that I was weaker than I had always given myself credit for. I was not the fittest that fought for survival. But maybe it was that I had finally made peace with myself, and with the world. I came into the world without enemies or grudges or anger, and I was leaving it the same way.

I started praying the Hail Mary prayer then, over and over. The two times of "Now and at the hour of our death" were converging into one. Of all the times I had prayed in my life, I was asking Mary's intercession with the Father for this one moment.

The haze came in, slowly dragging down my racing heart. I started fighting it from the sides first, and then it washed over the middle of my consciousness, a black poisonous cloud of sweet blessed sleep, forcing its way in and draining away my life.

I finally let go, and went spiraling into the void of unconsciousness.

The next waking was the best of my life.