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THE UNNAMED

Joshua Ferris



*by the author of
Then We Came To The End*

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by
Joshua Ferris

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THE FEET, MECHANICAL

It was the cruelest winter. The winds were rabid off the rivers. Ice came down like poisoned darts. Four blizzards in January alone, and the snowbanks froze into gray barricades as grim and impenetrable as anything in war. Tombstones were buried across the cemetery fields and cars parked curbside were swallowed undigested. The long-term debate about changing weather was put aside for immediate concern for the elderly and the shut-ins, while the children went weeks without school. Deliveries came to a halt and the warehouses clogged up on days the planes were approved to land. There were lines at the grocery store, short tempers, a grudging toward the burden of adjustment. Some clever public services addressed the civic concerns—heat shelters, volunteer home checks. The cold was mother of invention, a vengeful mother whose lessons were delivered at the end of a lash.

The ride home was slow going because of the snow and the traffic. He usually worked by eyelet light but this evening he brought no work home and sat in one quadrant of the car without file opened or pen in hand. They were waiting for him. They didn't know they were waiting for him. The driver had on 1010 WINS,

traffic and transit on the ones. Somewhere, out to sea or in the South, it might not be snowing. Here it slanted into the windshield like white ash from a starburst. The frostbite had returned to his fingers and toes. He unbuckled the seat belt and leaned over, stretching his long torso across the backseat, and what the driver thought he didn't care. The sound of the radio faded as one ear was sealed up by the distressed leather and he put a hand on the floor mat and ran his tingling fingertips over the fiber-trapped pebbles. He hadn't called to tell them. He had lost his phone. They were waiting for him, but they didn't know it.

The driver woke him when they reached the house.

He was going to lose the house and everything in it. The rare pleasure of a bath, the copper pots hanging above the kitchen island, his family—again he would lose his family. He stood just inside the door and took stock. Everything in it had been taken for granted. How had that happened again? He had promised himself not to take anything for granted and now he couldn't recall the moment that promise had given way to the everyday. It was not likely one single moment. He set his keys on the table below the mirror and uncharacteristically took his shoes off on the long Persian runner, which he and Jane had bought in Turkey. They had spent a week in Turkey and a week in Egypt. They always had a trip in the works. Their next trip was a Kenyan safari but it would have to be postponed now. He walked through the house in his socks. Inside the kitchen he ran his hand along the dimly lit countertop. He loved his kitchen, the antique cupboard doors, the Moroccan tile backsplash. He walked through the dining room, where they hosted dinner parties for his firm. The long table sat twelve. He reached the stairs and put his hand on the oak newel and took one step after another. Family photographs made the ascent with him. The

sound of the grandfather clock ticking away in the living room gave way to the television laughter issuing softly from the bedroom down the hall.

Jane was still beautiful. She was wearing a pair of reading glasses that had a Pop Art zaniness of character, teardrop frames polka-dotted with drops of primary color. Spaghetti straps revealed her slender arms and the nightgown held her firm breasts in place just below a freckled slate and an articulated clavicle. She was doing the crossword. Whenever she got stuck, she glanced up at the late show on the flat screen mounted to the wall and drummed the pen between upper and lower teeth, as if to waken her brain. She looked at him as he entered, surprised to see him home so early. "Hello, banana," she said. He took off his suit coat as if it were a T-shirt, thrusting the back over his head and turning his sleeves inside out. Then he found himself grabbing the hem, a hand on each half of the parted tail, and ripping the thing in two. Hard to break the seam at first, but once the first thread snapped, it went. Jane opened her mouth but nothing came out. He dropped the tattered coat and climbed onto the bed and hunkered down on his hands and knees like a man waiting for an explosion. "What is it?" she said. "Tim, what is it?" His head was lost inside his sheltering arms. "Tim?" She moved over to him and put her arms around him, hugging him from above as if they were about to engage in a wrestling match. "Tim?"

He told her that he had been forced out of the building and into the street. At 43rd and Broadway he hailed a cab, which he hoped would take him back to the office. After getting the cab to pull over, he reached out and opened the back door. But then he walked on. The driver, a Sikh in a pink turban, honked the horn, staring at him through the rearview mirror. Why would someone hail a cab and open the door only to keep walking?

Near Union Square he had tried to call an ambulance, a recourse they had envisioned during his last recurrence. He was on the line with a dispatcher trying to explain the situation when he slipped on a patch of ice coming off a curb and lost his grip. “My phone!” he cried out as he regained his balance. “Somebody! My phone!” He walked on with a tweaked back. “Please get my phone!” Everyone ignored him. His BlackBerry had landed in the middle of the street where it lay defenseless against oncoming cars. He kept moving forward. He told her of all the city scaffolding he walked under, the manic traffic he managed to avoid, the parade of oblivious people he passed. He told her that he had turned tired in the old way by the time he reached a bench, somewhere near the East River, where his body gave out. How he had crumpled up his suit coat for a pillow and taken off his tie, sweating despite the cold. How he woke up in horror an hour later.

“It’s back,” he said.

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First thing, she had to dress him. She knew he didn’t want to dress. He wanted to shower, crawl into bed, fall asleep—whatever action preserved the routine. Brush his teeth, reach for the light. He was still on top of the bed, frozen in the soldier’s huddled field position, his rear up and his arms encircling his head as if

to shield it from flying shrapnel. His hair—he still had a full head of dark hair, one of his most distinguished features, he was a handsome, healthy man, ridiculously horse-healthy and aging with the grace of a matinee idol—was disheveled. “Tim,” she said, looking over his arm into his one visible and glazed-over eye, “you have to get dressed.”

He didn’t move. She got off the bed, walked into the bathroom and threw a black waffle-weave robe over her silk nightgown. She was startled by the complacency of the lotions, soaps, creams and deodorants arrayed on their bathroom sink, suddenly insulted by the rosy promises of common beauty products. She took an inventory in her head of all the things she needed and began collecting them from the places in the house where they could be found: his base layer of thermal long underwear and form-fitting insulator pants from the dresser; a sweatshirt and fleece from the walk-in; his heavy down coat; his hat, gloves and scarf. She placed his ski mask in one of the coat pockets along with several disposable heat packs she hoped hadn’t reached some unmarked expiration date. She reminded herself to buy more. She almost broke into tears by the washer-dryer. She brought up the GPS and the alpine pack from the basement. She filled the pack quickly: a rain poncho, eyedrops, dry-skin lotion, an inflatable pillow, a first-aid kit. And then from the cupboard, trail mix and energy bars and a Nalgene bottle of electrolyte water. She included matches for no specific reason. Then she zipped the pack and walked upstairs.

She went to the bed and began to move him physically as if he were a child. She turned him over and undid his belt and removed his pants and boxers and unbuttoned his shirt, all with little help from him. He was soon lying on the bed naked. She applied a coat of Vaseline to his face and neck and then to his

genitals because Vaseline helped with both the chafing and the cold. Then she began to dress him in what she had collected, finishing with the wicking socks and his waterproof boots. She placed the alpine pack in the doorway where it could be grabbed easily on his way out and then she crawled onto the bed beside him.

“No Bagdasarian this time,” he said. “No doctors of any kind.”

“Okay,” she said.

“I mean it,” he said. “I got off that gerbil wheel and I’m not getting back on.”

“Okay, Tim.”

She reached out for the remote and turned off the late show.

“Have I taken you for granted again, Jane?”

A powerful silence settled over them. He lay on his back as overdressed as a child ready for the winter snow. She watched him from her pillow. His eyes were not as wide and his breathing had calmed.

“Let’s not do this,” she said.

“Do what?”

“Start in with the guilt and the regrets.”

He turned to her. “Have I taken you for granted?”

“Everyone takes everyone for granted,” she said. “It’s a clause in the contract.”

“How do you take me for granted?”

“How? In so many ways, Tim.”

“Name one.”

“I can’t even begin,” she said. “Okay, for one. The best vacation we ever took and for the life of me I can’t remember the name of the island.”

He began to smile. “Scrub Island,” he said.

"I depend on you for that."

"That's different than taking me for granted."

"Scrub Island," she said. "It was such a clean place, the name makes perfect sense. But I can never remember."

"Wouldn't you like to go back?" he asked.

"I thought Africa was next."

They both knew there was no next, not now, not any time soon, and the silence returned.

"We should buy a place on Scrub Island," he said. "There was such delicious food there. And do you remember the little girl walking the streets in a wedding dress?"

"She'd be grown by now."

"And the ostriches. That man herding them with a bull-whip. Don't you want to go back?"

"Yes," she said. "When you're well again, we'll go back."

"I'm hot," he said.

She got off the bed and opened both windows. The winter's crisp, shocking reality blew in. She turned back toward the bed. Then she remembered the handcuffs.

She walked over to his nightstand and removed them from the drawer. "What about these?" she asked, standing over him at bedside.

He pulled his stare from the unfocused void into which he had lost himself. He looked at the cuffs mournfully, as if they belonged to someone whose death had come on suddenly, and now he was taking stock, with great reluctance, of what to keep and what to throw away. He pursed his lips and shook his head and resumed looking at the ceiling. She put the cuffs back in the drawer.