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The Waking

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PROLOGUE

The future enters into us, in order to transform us, long before it happens.

RAINER MARIA RILKE (1875–1926)

The best prophet of the future is the past.

LORD BYRON (1788–1824)

Death is the dark backing a mirror needs if we are to see anything.

SAUL BELLOW (1915–2005)

LOS ANGELES / 2006

1

In the moments before his death, Dr Nate Sheehan was able to see clearly how the shooting had unfolded. He was driving home with his wife Mary when they turned on to La Brea, a shabby, wide-berthed boulevard that ran from Hollywood down to the tar pits and beyond. Nate idly took in the crazy debris washed up on the forecourts of the retro furniture stores: the lime-green sofa in the shape of a pair of lips, the eight-foot-high stainless-steel palm tree from some 1980s' night-club and the tawdry electric organs from long-closed lounge bars. Thinking back on it, as he lay in a pool of his own blood, if only he'd been more tolerant. Mary had made him angry. If he hadn't been angry, he might have seen what was coming.

'Do you know what, Nate – if you don't tell me stuff – how can you expect us to be intimate? You did Psychology 101. You know the score,' she said, looking out of the tinted window. Mary was in her bullying mode, a mode reserved for getting things done. It was what made her effective at work, but if she ever turned it on him, it got him riled.

Mary was quizzing him, as she often did, about his involvement with Doctors for Justice, a radical support group set up to help patients fight the medical establishment when the court system had failed them. Right now, Nate was extremely nervous. He was sitting on a piece of information that would be dynamite to any news organization and he wasn't quite sure what to do with it. The information was almost too big for the media to handle, and what was more, he couldn't tell his wife. He glanced sideways. Mary was giving him one of those looks.

'I can smell trouble,' she said.

'Look, we talked about this before and we agreed, the less you know about what I'm working on, the better.'

'OK, Capo,' she said, and saluted him, which irritated him even more. She wasn't taking him seriously.

'Hey, look at that!' she exclaimed as they sped past another fenced-off parking lot called Nicky Metropolis. 'It's a Zulu warrior's shield. We could hang it in the stairwell.'

'We don't need a Zulu warrior's shield,' he muttered darkly, and accelerated.

Shopping was another minefield between them. Mary had a habit of dawdling in shops and becoming hypnotically oblivious to his impatience as she sifted through endless piles of junk. Nate was an A to B man, charging along the shortest route from departure to destination with no stopping in between. There just weren't enough hours in the day.

'OK – but we do need cilantro,' she said. 'There's a Trader Joe's up here on the right.'

Nate saw this latest need to stop as another diversion designed to test his patience to the limit. He yanked the wheel of their SUV into the car park and braked.

'Go ahead,' he said.

'Are you staying in the car?'

'Yes, I'm staying in the car.'

Mary sat back, folded her arms, crossed her legs and banged her shin against the dashboard. He could see her gold anklet, her little token of sartorial rebellion, looped over her red suede trainers.

'How long are we going to be on this earth together?' she said, searching his face with her intelligent hazel eyes.

He picked at the bottle-opener on his key ring.

'I'm asking a serious question. Don't hold out on me.'

'It's *not* a serious question.' His voice sounded petty and mean.

'Yes it is. We've got maybe forty years, fifty years – tops. We need to *eat*, Nate.'

He said nothing. He didn't want to get into it.

'So every time I want to shop for something like *food* I have to placate you? Because that just isn't going to work.'

She scraped her thick dark hair back as though she was about to tie it in a ponytail, then let it drop back over her face.

'It's just this constant need to *browse*!'

She looked at him, one eyebrow raised. 'You better watch those glucocorticoids.'

'If I'm producing more stress hormones it's because you're always in my face!'

So this wasn't going to be a serious argument after all, but a kind of facsimile of an argument that could so easily go either way. Sometimes, Nate saw the pair of them as a couple of seals on a beach, lazily slapping each other with their flippers. Sparring. That's what they did a lot of the time. They sparred – just for the hell of it. But sometimes it got nasty and that's when the damage got done.

'You're such a dud,' she said as she opened her door and hopped down from her seat.

Nate watched Mary walk towards the entrance of Trader Joe's, taking long, purposeful strides, her hands dug deep in the pockets of her linen shirt.

At that moment, he realized how much he loved her. He loved her for many reasons, but right now he loved her because she was never intimidated by his temper. As he watched her wrestle with the cart and disappear into the store, he wondered what her lean, almost boyish body would look like six months from now. She was the physical type that wouldn't put on much weight, except around the belly. And he couldn't wait to feel that belly taut like a football and their baby somersaulting inside. He knew Mary felt agnostic about motherhood. But she had decided to go through with it anyway, for his sake. Maybe that's why she was leaning on him about Doctors for Justice. She was frightened of his involvement in anything risky. All these thoughts sent another great surge of love through him. But he could never tell her, not when he was supposed to be in the middle of a funk.

Nate followed Mary inside the store and sure enough, she found dozens of reasons to dawdle. The cilantro, the original purpose for the trip, soon disappeared under mounds of herbs, vegetables and fresh pasta. She became a little dreamy by the meat counter, unable to decide if they needed Italian herb sausages or rib-eye steak, so he grabbed both, threw them into the basket and marched off towards the checkout. If only he'd let her linger. Then someone else could have taken the bullet.

The kid was no more than fourteen. He was running towards them across the parking lot. Nate saw him out of the corner of his

eye, noticed it when he realized it was the wrong kind of run. It was a sidle, and if the kid kept it up he was going to crash right into them. Nate half turned to brace himself for a collision, but the kid stopped just short of them and hovered. Nate saw the gun then, a decrepit little thing with a distended barrel and a brown plastic handle. The kid was holding it in both his filthy, tremulous hands.

'Dinero, dinero.'

The kid had a high hook to his Mayan nose and his nostrils were flaring as he breathed in and out. His rapid heartbeat was almost visible through his ragged T-shirt and there was a bluish tinge to his lips. Nate could tell, just by looking at him, that he was probably suffering from some kind of congenital heart disease. He decided to use it to bargain with the boy.

'Pienso que estas infermo. Soy un doctore – tengo un clinica para los povres en Huntington Park. Venga com migo. Permita me ayudar te.'

'What are you saying?' said Mary, swallowing. Her mouth was dry, her voice high and reedy.

'I'm telling him about the clinic,' said Nate, still looking at the boy. 'I'm asking him to come with us – so we can take a look at him. I think he's got mitral stenosis.'

The boy shook his head and motioned to Nate's pockets.

'Soy un doctore. Permita me ayudar te,' Nate repeated. 'Let me help you.' He held out his hand, but the boy shied away and wielded the gun to let them know how deadly it was.

'Dinero, dinero.'

Nate wanted Mary to run but couldn't take his eyes off the kid. Forgetting his Spanish, he ploughed on. 'Don't hurt us – OK? Our family needs us. They depend on us. Just like your family will depend on you some day. *Dinero*? I'm just putting my hands in my pockets to get it out.' Nate fumbled around, trying to be casual. 'I'm not doing anything else – OK?'

Mary, still frozen to the spot, was clutching the bags of groceries to her chest as though they were her brood of imaginary children.

A little way off, a cart rattled across uneven concrete and the kid's eyes darted. An old couple in ice cream-coloured casuals were heading

towards their car. Nate seized the moment and tried to grab the weapon.

A 'parp' sounded like the retort of a toy gun, but so close, it flung Nate back against the SUV. The kid staggered back and tripped, letting off another round into the sky. It was so unexpected that Nate laughed, thinking it wasn't for real, then he saw Mary looking blankly at his chest. His legs buckled and he slithered down the side of the car.

Mary dropped the groceries and in a terrifying fit of rage wrenched the gun from the kid's hand and started pounding his head with it. Nate's own head was slackening on its pivot, but he tried to raise an arm to stop her.

'Don't, baby,' he whispered.

The kid scrambled to his feet and raced off down the street. Then everything went slow. There seemed to be an inexorable destiny about the shooting: his impatience, his arrogance, his foolishness for thinking he could get the gun from the kid. And here he was, unable to speak, trying to get his wife to press down on his aorta which he knew was bleeding out. Mary yelling for help and pressing down, her fist pressing against the tiny, deadly hole in his chest. Her teeth chattering in shock. People running and shouting. His legs getting colder.

'I love this street,' said Mary as they turned on to La Brea.

'We don't have time,' said Nate. He knew that hungry look.

Mary reached across the front seat and ran her fingers through his hair. Now you give me a kiss, he thought to himself, and in the routine of their affection she leant her face towards him and kissed him on the side of his mouth.

'Keep your eyes on the road,' she said. 'So what is the latest thing you're working on that's making you so tense?'

And all he could hear now was the deafening pump of his own blood leaking out. Blue lights flashing. A siren and an ambulance coming to a halt. People rushing over – a black guy – huge – lumbering. And Nate was floating like a piece of driftwood on a calm, black sea. Mary

– Mary. It wasn't a voice, only a thought, a useless strand of a thought. He could feel no particular pain, wet numbness, but very little pain. Maybe it was too great for him to register.

So this is how it feels, he thought, over and over. *This is how it feels.*

Someone was shouting, 'Stay with us, Dr Sheehan!' and now the big guy, his charcoal angel, was wheezing and lifting Nate on to a gurney and delivering him into the ambulance like a big, wet fish being propelled down a chute . . . only it felt like levitation . . . weightlessness, and Nate was high, high up over the scene. Mary was leaning across him now and there was blood all over her face. A mask going on.

'Yes, I am a doctor – at UCLA. Christ! Don't use the defibrillators – you'll give him a reperfusion injury. We need to drop the temperature. Do you have any cooling packs?'

It didn't sound like Mary but a choked-up, ugly voice. 'Hang on, Nate, just hang on for me, baby.'

Mary . . . my Mary . . . flashing blue . . . keep breathing . . . cold creeping up . . . keep breathing . . . so cold . . . a cool rush like ice water down the side of a glass . . . glacial blue . . . like the time we caught the Amtrak train across the Glacier National Park in Washington State . . . do you remember, Mary? . . . screwing like frenzied adulterers against the toilet wall . . . only it was our fifth wedding anniversary . . .

There was no chance of saying that he loved her now . . . and he'd been so horrible . . . that short fuse of his . . . he hoped she would understand. A soft pillow . . . that's all he wanted . . . a beautiful white, cotton pillow like a cool hand on his cheek . . . her hand moments ago . . . her hands were always cold . . . like the tip of her nose. So tired. Sorry, Mary . . . I know it's wrong but you just have to let me sleep . . .

2

'Are you guys carrying Alcius catheters or anything like it?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Medivance cold packs?' Mary was screaming.

'We don't carry anything like that,' said the black guy, ' – yet.'

'I've got to give him a – I've got to get him to—' Mary couldn't find the words. Her thoughts were stumbling. 'I need microparticulate ice slurry. Do you know about that?'

'Excuse me?'

'His temperature needs to be cooled, right now, to preserve the tissue.'

The crew looked at each other. It was the kind of look that said she was cuckoo.

'Ma'am – your husband is dead,' said the paramedic slowly, 'and now, we need to hand the body over to the police. Do you understand? This is a crime scene now. They will want to examine the body to see what happened here.'

'No! We can save him.'

'No we can't, ma'am. He's dead and this is a crime scene and the medical examiner is coming. Do you understand?'

'You called him already? Who called him?'

'My partner.'

The paramedic was good at calming people, but this was no time to be nice. Mary had less than eight minutes. She flicked open her cell and with shaking fingers found the number.

'Greg. Are you at work? Thank God. Do you have an ambulance? Nate's just been shot! I've only got the cryoprotectant. I don't know. Do they have the hydrogen sulphide on site yet? Where am I?' She looked around. She couldn't remember. 'In the parking lot at Trader Joe's on La Brea. Can you come?' Mary turned to look at Nate. His eyes were still open but unseeing and glassy. 'I think he's dead.'

The emergency crew began to lever the body back down into the car park.

'Wait, wait,' said Mary, trying to pull herself together. 'I'm taking his body for organ donorship.'

The ambulance men looked at Nate's chest.

'He won't be much use.'

'Yes he will. The corneas. Brain tissue. Pituitary. There's a lot we can save. But I have to do it now! An ambulance will be here in a couple of minutes.'

She felt like a madwoman. Totally insane.

'You can't take a body from a crime scene.'

'I can and I will.'

'This will get you into a lot of trouble.'

'I know the medical examiner. He'll understand.'

The big guy squared up to her. 'Do you have his donor card? And your doctor's licence?'

'You cannot be *serious*!' She couldn't believe he was thinking of procedure at a time like this.

'If you want to break the law, go right ahead, but we got to release liability.'

Shaking like a leaf, Mary rummaged around in her car. Miraculously, she found both cards.

'OK – but you got to sign for him,' said the guy, shaking his head.

Mary signed with a wild signature, getting blood all over the paper. She heard a siren. She looked up and saw Greg's ambulance turning out of 3rd Street. A miracle. He made it before the police. Greg looked completely unmoved as he swung his long, gangly body out of the driver's seat.

'OK, Mary,' he said calmly. 'What do you want to do?'

'Let's go to Pasadena.'

A crowd was gathering now. The checkout girls from Trader Joe's were screaming and the security guard, who'd missed the entire shooting, was running around and shouting. The manager pushed through the crowd.

'Help me,' hissed Mary, and the three of them heaved Nate's floppy corpse into the second ambulance, then Mary turned to face the throng.

'You're all witnesses to this crime. My husband was shot by a young boy who ran down that street. My husband's name is Dr Nate Sheehan and I'm his wife – Dr Mary Sheehan. I'm taking my husband's body for organ donorship.'

Her hands were still trembling as she wrote down their names and handed the slip of paper to the manager. 'Tell the police that I've taken the body and will hand it over as soon as we've farmed it for what we need.'

The manager took the paper, utterly bewildered. Mary leapt into

the back of the ambulance and held Nate's limp hand while Greg hit the accelerator. They raced through the streets, sirens blaring.

'Greg, stop!'

'I thought we were going to Pasadena.'

'It's been ten minutes – stop!'

Greg pulled over to the side of the road. She looked at him.

'We can't do it here,' he said.

'Yes we can.'

'This is demented,' protested Greg, turning off the siren. 'What if the cops find us?'

Her look silenced him. He jumped out and slammed the door. Mary took one last glance at Nate.

'I'll see you again,' she said as she finally closed his eyes and kissed his bloody lips.

Greg joined her in the back. 'What do you think?' he said.

'I think the head is the only thing we can save,' she said.

Greg prepared the instruments while Mary positioned the body. She leant against it to stop her hands from trembling as she cut neatly below his Adam's apple, then made a clean incision through the neck to the spinal column, leaving the top two vertebrae in place. Greg turned into the master of calm, as she'd seen him do many times before, delicately attaching tubes to the carotid arteries in the neck, closing off the other blood vessels and checking the ice slurry as it pumped through the vessels and into the brain cavity. It was gruesome, messy work, but the routine of the procedure was holding Mary together, making sure she did a good job of it.

'It's a shame we're not working with hydrogen sulphide,' Greg said sadly.

'This is good enough for all the technology that's coming,' she said quietly.

Within five minutes they were able to start dropping the temperature of the head. Another couple of minutes and they would be able to put it in the dewar and carry on to Pasadena. Mary knew she was about to be in deep trouble for taking her husband's body, especially as the ambulance crew would confirm that Nate was already dead. But she didn't care. She'd seen too many times what happened to murder victims once the crime scene investigators arrived. She

remembered with horror the aerial shots of the Santa Monica farmers' market when an old man ploughed through the stalls in the heat of midsummer, killing ten people. The corpses had been left out on the road for most of the day while forensics did their work. She didn't want her husband decomposing under a tarpaulin while helicopters buzzed overhead. If that happened, she would lose the one chance she had of ever seeing her husband alive again.